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Hamlet in the Life and Work of Italo Svevo

Ettore Schmitz read Hamlet for the first time, in German translation, when he was about fourteen years old. He memorized the play, and he thought about it so deeply, and for so long, that he lost sleep and began to look pale and sickly. This first experience of Hamlet, which was documented by his younger brother Elio (1997, 97)¹, was formative. Years later, when Ettore had acquired enough English, he would read Shakespeare again, in the original². Hamlet was certainly on his mind in 1897, when he wrote, in Chronache familiari, that his wife had “un’assoluta ed insplicabile gioia di vivere”, whereas he continued to live with his “dubbio perenne [...] sull’essere o non essere” (2004b, 714-15). In late 1912 and early 1913, James Joyce would give a series of lectures on Hamlet in Trieste. There is no proof that Svevo attended any of these lectures but it is quite possible that he did; indeed, he might even have arranged them³. By that time, the two writers had known each other for five years. That they discussed Shakespeare’s sonnets is certain⁴; the subject of Hamlet must surely have come up as well. In any case, as one reads through Svevo’s work, it becomes clear that this play was an enduring source of inspiration for him. Some of his most persistent themes—life as sickness, ineptitude as the modern human condition, the powers and limitations of language—are all contained in Hamlet. Here and there, especially in studies of Svevo’s early reading, the importance of this influence has been acknowledged, but so far it has inspired little more than passing

¹ All references to Elio Schmitz’s Diario will be from the edition edited by Luca De Angelis, which is the most reliable currently available; but in every case, quoted passages have been checked against the manuscript (which is housed in Trieste’s Museo Sveviano) and corrections have been made when necessary.

² Anna Herz, the headmaster’s niece, had given Ettore a collected Shakespeare in English as a parting gift when he completed his studies and left for Trieste. See Veneziani Svevo (1976, 16-17) and especially Gatt-Rutter, who provides a careful physical description of this volume: “Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, and Othello”, he says, “seem to have been most frequented” (1988, 31).

³ According to a written agreement dated 9 November 1912, and published in Erik Schneider’s important article (2004, 10-15), Joyce offered to give a series of ten lectures on Hamlet, in English, for the Minerva Society on Monday evenings. The dates were as follows: 11, 18 and 25 November 1912; 2, 9 and 16 December 1912; 13, 20 and 27 January 1913; and 3 February 1913. An article in Trieste’s Piccolo della Sera, however, stated that there were twelve lectures, and that the final one was given on 10 February 1913. Schneider believes that these lectures “were probably arranged by Roberto Prezioso and/or Italo Svevo”, and that there were “at least” eleven of them but that a twelfth “appears unlikely given that the second additional lecture would have had to have taken place on either December 23 or January 6” (2004, 10). No copies of these lectures survive. At the time, Svevo was living in Murano, where he oversaw the operations of the Veneziani paint factory from 1899 until 1914. From Murano he wrote to his wife Livia often, sometimes daily, and he made frequent trips back to Trieste. In the Epistolario there are no letters to her or to anyone else during November of 1912; two letters to Livia, dated 17 and 18 December 1912, suggest that he could not have attended the lecture on the 16th of that month, but in a third letter, addressed to Livia and their daughter Letizia, and dated 19 December 1912 (a Thursday), he says that he will be home that Saturday evening (1966, 625-27). Then there are no more letters until 10 March 1912. In short, Svevo could have attended most of Joyce’s lectures.

⁴ Svevo once asked Joyce to explain what Shakespeare meant in a line in Sonnet 64: “And brass eternal slave to mortal rage”. Joyce, according to his brother Stanislaus, said “that he did not know what it meant, but he supposed that Shakespeare was thinking of German bands” (1932, v).
references, some of them dismissive⁵. My purpose in the pages that follow is to examine the extent to which Svevo was indebted to *Hamlet* for one theme in particular: that of acting as a means to self-knowledge or *coscienza*. Ironically enough, signs of this influence appear less often in Svevo’s dramatic work than they do in his fiction; my emphasis therefore will be on the three novels. In some cases, Svevo seems to have particular passages from *Hamlet* in mind; in others there are only similarities in theme or imagery, but such similarities, which cannot serve as proof of direct influence, are nevertheless important to notice because they are suggestive of the way in which Svevo read this play. The influence of *Hamlet*, as I hope to show, is deeper than it might seem, and it extends not only across Svevo’s body of work but also into the writer’s daily existence.

It might be useful to begin with Svevo’s first surviving attempt at imaginative writing, *Ariosto governatore*, an unfinished play which would have passed into oblivion if Elio Schmitz had not thought it important enough to preserve in his diary. The fragment was written in 1880, during a period when the two brothers, as Elio’s diary entries show, were attending Trieste’s theaters with great assiduity. This fragment, a verse dialogue between Ariosto and Mario Equicola, would have leant itself well to the declamatory style of the period. Equicola says that his old friend should consider himself still young—“Ché il poeta mai invecchia ed è come la sua fama / Che o mai non nasce od al suo nascer muore / Ma che nata mantiene il giovanil ardore”—but when Equicola begins to praise the virtue of “poetica illusion” Ariosto interrupts him:

> Poetica illusione?
> Se il poeta l’avea, il vecchio nella tomba la pone
> Che dopo aver vissuto tanti anni colla gloria
> Sia pur; che dopo aver passato la lunga storia
> Che noi chiamiamo vita, sol per viver vissuto,
> E trovarsi la mente quasi morta e muto
> Il core, per l’influenza di tempo materiale
> Aver vissuto, vissuto tanto per conoscere il male
> Che è la vita; ed aver toccato e provato tutto
> Per poi trovar tutto freddo e più, sempre tutto,
> Fredda la gloria, fredda la vita, e freddo il cor
> Come il color del crin che cinge il mio capo ancor.
> La vita all’illusione il posto non concede
> E l’illusione della prima età mai più riede
> Ché l’ignoranza sola la permette (1997, 72).

Svevo’s Ariosto sounds very much like Hamlet:

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on’t, ah fie! ’tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely (I.i.133-38).

Such brooding monologues, in which the speaker rejects humanity as corrupt and the world as diseased—“a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (II.ii.302-03)—bear

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⁵ Eduardo Saccone, for example, says that Svevo’s “appassionamento” for *Hamlet* was the common experience of all young readers: “chi non l’ha avuto?” (1962, 491). Similarly, Giacinto Spagnoletti calls Svevo’s “romantico interesse per un personaggio come Amleto” one of the “segni generici di ogni giovinezza entusiasta” (1978, 20).
out the truth of the acute observation of Beno Weiss, who says that Shakespeare instilled in Svevo “a passion for inner drama” (1987, 3).

Ettore seems to have been discouraged from writing verse, however, by his brother-in-law, Samuele Salmona, whose response to Ariosto governatore was not favorable. As Elio wrote, on 27 February 1880, “Ettore domandò una opinione sulla sua commedia a Samuele ed ebbe la risposta. Perciò tralasciò di scrivere in versi martelliani e mi diede quel poco che aveva fatto che copio in netto” (1997, 71). Ettore himself, in Storia dei miei lavori, which he wrote in the pages of Elio’s diary, was perhaps even more critical of Ariosto governatore: “Non finii la Ia scena perché fu lì che riconobbi l’astrusità dell’idea e la bruttezza dei versi. Amen” (1997, 95). Sixteen years later, when he was engaged to Livia, she would give him a florid, decorated notebook in which to set down his amorous thoughts for her. What he wrote, however, in this Diario per la fidanzata, were grim meditations on jealousy, betrayal, hypocrisy, aging, sickness, death—all of his favorite preoccupations. If Livia had expected love poetry, what she got instead was “Poesia in prosaccia”, as he called the following entry: “La mia sposa è un bombon ed io spero che mangiandolo i miei denti marci risaneranno. La mia sposa è un fiore e il mio egoismo lo circonderà in modo che il suo olezzo non sarà destinato che al solo mio naso. La mia sposa è un frutto maturo che madre natura mi gettò in grembo e là stia”, and so on for several more lines (2004b, 686). The deliberate bluntness and repetitiveness of this recalls Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Doubt thou the stars are fire,} \\
\text{Doubt that the sun doth move,} \\
\text{Doubt truth to be a liar,} \\
\text{But never doubt I love.} \\
\text{O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans,} \\
\text{but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.} \\
\text{Thine evermore, most dear lady,} \\
\text{whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet (II.ii.116-24).}
\end{align*}
\]

This is not to say that Hamlet’s love letter inspired Svevo’s “Poesia in Prosaccia”, only that the impatient, often sarcastic temperament of Hamlet must have resonated in perfect sympathy with that of his Triestine admirer. In the character of Hamlet, Svevo would have found validation for his decision to abandon verse for prose. He would have appreciated Hamlet’s intolerance for poetic conventions which degraded one’s language and one’s sentiments. Moreover, in Hamlet’s mocking nature he would have discovered the power of acting to expose the truth and to bring one to a higher level of awareness.

The theater, as Livia Veneziani Svevo wrote, was her husband’s “amore segreto”, and it remained so all his life. “La forma delle forme”, he called it, “la sola dove la vita possa trasmettersi per vie dirette e precise” (1976, 151). The roles that were most in demand, in this romantic period in Italian theater, were the Learss and Macbeths, the Othellos and the Hamlets, and these characters, when interpreted by the best actors, soared above the confines of the script. For this reason, as Ferdinando Taviani says, “the ‘contemporary’ author” of Italian theater at this time was “neither Italian, nor a contemporary, nor a Romantic, but William Shakespeare” (2006, 214). The declamatory skill of these actors mesmerized the young Ettore Schmitz; they made him want to be an actor himself. In 1882, when he was nineteen years old, he introduced himself to the great actor, Tommaso
Salvini, who rejected him because of his inability to trill his r’s. What had inspired him to audition, however, was a performance of *Hamlet* in which Ernesto Rossi, one of the greatest Shakespearean actors of his day, had played the lead role (Ghidetti 1992, 70).

Such performances would still be ringing in the ears of Ettore Schmitz when, in 1892, he became Italo Svevo and published his first novel, *Una vita*. Here the influence of the declamatory actor can be seen in Alfonso Nitti, the main character. “Alfonso”, says the narrator, “credeva di avere dello spirito e ne aveva di fatto nei soliloqui” (2004a, 28). When he comes home tired from his work at the bank, he jots down “qualche concettino, qualche espansione romantica con se stesso e che nessun altro riceveva” (2004a, 70), but he indulges in this pleasure even while he is on the job, copying letters:

> Nella quiete assoluta il lavoro procedette più rapidamente. Non trovandoci altro più forte interesse, Alfonso, per legare l’attenzione al lavoro, usava quand’era solo di declamare ad alta voce la lettera, e quella si prestava alla declamazione essendo rimbombante di paroloni e di cifre enormi. Leggendo ad alta voce la frase e ripetendola nel trascriverla, scriveva con meno fatica perché bastava il ricordo del suono nell’orecchio per dirigere la penna (2004a, 16).

It is impossible to know with certainty, of course, whether Svevo was thinking here of the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, but there is reason to believe he was. In *Il dilettantismo*, a satirical essay he had published a few years before, in 1884, he had said that amateur actors might perform this *Hamlet* “gentilmente”, provided they had the help of “qualcuno che sfoga degl’istinti che rimangono insoddisfatti scrivendo lettere di Banca e via di seguito” (2004c, 1015).

Alfonso’s prudishness, his inability to love, and his aloof and brooding character recall the Hamlet who passes judgment on Elsinore as he looks down on it from the sentry’s platform. Claudius, soon after the death of old Hamlet, is already celebrating his marriage to Gertrude. He “takes to his rouse, / Keeps wassail”, and “drains his draughts of Rhenish down” says Hamlet, lamenting that this “is a custom” among the Danes (I.iv.8-10, 15). Similarly, for Alfonso women are to be adored as ideals, as goddesses; they are not to be embraced; and his city is a kind of Elsinore:

> Alfonso era venuto in città apportandovi un grande disprezzo per i suoi abitatori; per lui essere cittadino equivaleva ad essere fisicamente debole e moralmente rilasciato, e disprezzava quelle ch’egli riteneva fossero le loro abitudini sessuali, l’amore alla donna in genere e la facilità dell’amore. Credeva di non poter somigliare loro e si sentiva ed era per allora molto differente (2004a, 72).

And in *Una vita*, sickness is as inherent to humanity as it is in *Hamlet*. Alfonso and several of the other characters suffer from a variety of ailments. Fumigi, Alfonso’s rival in love, is stricken by a paralysis that begins in a quiet, subtle way: “Oh! un fatto tragico!”, says Prarchi, the doctor. “Il lavoro di tutta una vita perduto per qualche nervetto che si è corrotto” (2004a, 313). This seems to echo Hamlet’s meditation on that “vicious mole of nature”, that “stamp of one defect”, that “dram of ev’l” which causes one’s whole being to “take corruption” and perish (I.iv.24-38). If this passage found an

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6 Svevo knew that this was one of his weaknesses; according Livia he had subjected himself to “molti esercizi di pronuncia” in order to prepare for this moment (1976, 18). See also Camerino (1981, 24).

7 This remark, says Brian Moloney, suggests that Svevo himself was looking in art for “a satisfaction he fail[ed] to find in his profession” (1974, 10).
enduring life in Svevo’s memory, then perhaps it did so because it resounded so dreadfully in the diary of his ailing brother Elio: “I miei piani d’indefeso lavoro, le mie speranze sulla musica, i miei castelli in aria pell’avvenire, tutto finì per me con un debole allargamento della fibra renale” (1997, 129).

In Una vita, however, there is another, perhaps more concrete sign of the influence Hamlet. Alfonso comes to the city from the countryside armed with a set of maxims:

Aveva meditato molto sul modo di contenersi in società e s’era preparato alcune massime sicure sufficienti a tener luogo a qualunque altra lunga pratica. Bisognava parlare poco, concisamente e, se possibile, bene; bisognava lasciar parlare spesso gli altri, mai interrompere, infine essere disinvolto e senza che ne trapelasse sforzo. Voleva dimostrare che si può essere nato e vissuto in un villaggio e per naturale buon senso non aver bisogno di pratica per contenersi da cittadino e di spirito (2004a, 28).

How similar these are to the precepts that Polonius wants Laertes to “character” in his memory:

Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion’d thought his act.
Be thou familiar,
but by no means vulgar.

... Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice,
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment (I.iii.59-61, 68-69).

Svevo might have shared a fondness for this passage with Elio. The two of them had collected, for their own personal improvement, precisely such a set of maxims⁸. Common to Alfonso’s maxims and to those of Polonius is the theme of speech and its power to move, even to define, both the speaker and the listener. Polonius, who was an actor in his younger years and who does a good bit of acting during the play, knows this power well. And so did Svevo.

Senilità begins with this theme of acting. Emilio Brentani informs Angiolina that he wants to avoid “una relazione troppo seria”, but what he really means is this: “mi piaci molto, ma nella mia vita non potrai essere giamaia più importante di un giocattolo” (2004a, 403), a plaything. It is no wonder that Svevo had thought of calling this novel Il carnevale di Emilio⁹. Hamlet’s tirade against women stirs up images of the theater: “I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance” (III.i.142-46). Senilità is similarly rich in such theatricality: there is the posturing of Emilio and Balli; there is Angiolina’s posing, both as a model for Balli and in her love affairs; there is even the nicknaming, that is, the aggressive, not altogether playful misuse of proper names (Balli, for example, calling Angiolina “Giolona”). However, for the characters of Senilità—for Emilio, Balli, Angiolina and Amalia—toying with love, or playing at it, leads to real and disastrous consequences; and as the story of this quartet unfolds, one can hear echoes of the

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⁸ Elio mentions these in his diary (1997, 109-10). The small manuscript notebook in which he compiled them is in Trieste’s Museo Sveviano. They were published in Elio Schmitz’s Congiura a palazzo e altri scritti (1978, 13-14).

⁹ In a letter to his wife, dated 5 May 1897, he wrote: “Il mondo si schiarí e trovai il titolo del mio romanzo: Il carnevale di Emilio” (1966, 64). See also Marasco, who calls this “un titolo emblematico che metteva l’accento sul Carnevale che fa da sfondo alla narrazione come metafora del travestimento e dello smascheramento” (2009, 190).
unhappy story of Hamlet and Ophelia.

The similarity between Amalia and Ophelia is significant. Both women are reduced to a childlike babbling by their men. Ophelia is undone, of course, by Hamlet’s accidental killing of Polonius, her father; but she is also undone by Hamlet’s acting, and particularly his playing at love. After he accuses Ophelia of moral corruption, he turns against himself: “I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in”, and this, he says, is what “hath made me mad” (III.i.123-26, 146-47). If he is acting here, it is an utterly sincere kind of acting, the kind which leads to self-discovery, to conscience, an awareness, in this case, that he has the potential to take on all the vices he has listed. In her innocence, Ophelia cannot distinguish between potentiality and actuality; to her mind, the moment an idea is voiced it threatens to become real. “I did love you once”, says Hamlet, to which Ophelia responds: “Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so”. When he disabuses her—“I lov’d you not”—she concedes: “I was the more deceiv’d” (III.i.114-19, 119-20). It is as if she suddenly realizes that she has been watching a performance.

Echoes of this exchange can be heard in the story of Amalia’s frustrated love for Balli, who seduces her with similarly theatrical displays of verbal dexterity. Amalia “stava ad ascoltare le confidenze che le faceva lo scultore, e non s’ingannava: le erano fatte proprio per conquistarla ed ella infatti si sentiva tutta sua” (2004a, 465). In fact both Balli and Emilio compete for Amalia’s attention, seeing in her a harmless opportunity to rehearse for their real conquests. For Amalia, however, this is no game—“Come pendeva dalle labbra del Balli!” (2004a, 506)—and the incoherence to which she is reduced is described in terms that recall Ophelia: “Il balbettio continuava puerile e buono ed era straziante di udirla dichiararsi tanto lieta in mezzo a tante sofferenze” (2004a, 537).

Balli prevails of course at this dangerous game, for Emilio is a coward, as he says so himself. He tells Angiolina that he pities her for having fallen into the hands of a man such as himself, “povero di denaro e anche di qualche cosa d’altro, energia e coraggio”, and although he is speaking with “un’ironia di se stesso”, he is absolutely correct when he says, “Nelle strettuzze non saprei neppure amare” (2004a, 417). Balli has his own doubts and insecurities. The verbal displays he puts on for Amalia are “chiacchiere allegre in cui il Balli s’abbandonava tutto, svelando quanto più alto si tenesse di tutte le persone che lo contornavano, un’immmodestia tanto spudorata da non potersi mostrare che accanto a persone a lui devotissime, perché un’ironia qualunque in quei momenti gli avrebbe tolta la voce e il fiato” (2004a, 523). When he realizes what effect his monologues have had on Amalia, he puts a stop to them, refusing to get caught up in Amalia’s inner struggle or to look very deeply into his own self, his own “coscienza”. Balli, after all, is not introspective. Rather, he is a “radiant and social Fortinbras”, as Paolo Puppa has remarked, whereas “Emilio is a Hamlet tormented by doubt and neurosis” (1999, 64).

The model for Emilio was in part Svevo himself. While he was writing Senilità, he was engaged to Livia and also writing the Diario per la fidanzata10, in which, not

10 The Diario was written between January and March of 1896 (2004b, 1356); Senilità began to appear in the pages of L’Indipendente in June of 1898, but according to Nunzia Palmieri it had probably reached “una forma organica e compiuta” sometime between the summer of 1896, when Svevo read the first three chapters to Livia during their honeymoon, and May of 1897, when he wrote her the letter in which he mentions his idea for the title (Svevo 2004a, 1315; 1966, 64; see also Veneziani Svevo 1976, 42).
surprisingly, he expresses the same “doubt and neurosis” that characterize Emilio. He fears, for example, that he will be incompetent as a lover: “In fondo un individuo decadente come me non sa amare bene” (2004b, 690). In fact he is a great deal like the Hamlet who fears that he would do nothing but corrupt Ophelia. “Il bene lo succhierò sempre dalla tua bocca. Pur troppo, in compenso, vi cacerò dentro il male” (2004b, 688).

At times, as in the case of Hamlet, this fear turns into resentment and an irrational suspicion and desire to punish: “Ho un desiderio di fumare, di bere, di dedicarmi a tutti i vizi per punire te… che finora non hai colpa” (2004b, 680). At other times, he is reduced to a state of gloomy detachedness from a world that he fears is as illusory and ephemeral as a play: “La mia indifferenza per la vita sussiste sempre: Anche quando godo della vita a te da canto, mi resta nell’anima qualche cosa che non gode con me e che m’avverte: Bada, non è tutto come a te sembra e tutto resta comedia perché calerà poi il sipario” (2004b, 681).

In this entry, one can almost hear Hamlet saying, “I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth” (II.ii.295-96), or, as he questions the outward shows of mourning, saying, “I know not ‘seems’”, and “These indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play, / But I have that within which passes show” (I.ii.76, 83-85). Gabriella Còntini, in her edition of the Diario per la fidanzata, has quite appropriately called the voice of this most intimate work “questo personaggio amletico” (1987, XI).

A louder evocation of Hamlet can be heard in another of Emilio’s rivals, described as a “bel giovine, biondo e robusto, dal colorito di giovinetta su un organismo virile” (2004a, 494). This character, Leardi, bears a name that echoes that of Hamlet’s rival, Laertes, whose skill with a rapier is “a very riband in the cap of youth” (IV.vii.76). Svevo’s rivals strut and posture as Shakespeare’s do: “Il Brentani ed il Leardi appena appena si salutavano, tutt’e due molto superbi quantunque per ragioni molto differenti” (2004a, 494).

It would not be uncharacteristic of Svevo to allude to Hamlet by means of a slightly altered proper name. He would do so in Una burla riuscita, in which there is an explicit reference to Othello and a villain named Gaia, which is nearly an anagram of Iago. In Senilità, however, if Svevo was indeed alluding to Laertes, he might also have been alluding to Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Apprenticeship, which would have introduced Svevo to Shakespeare, and in which Goethe, who was himself under the spell of Shakespeare, had included a character named Laertes. The role of Goethe in this story of Shakespearean influence will be taken up below; here, however, it bears

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11 In Svevo’s play, Un marito, Federico has killed one wife for her disloyalty and suspects his second wife as well, but he forgives her after realizing that she had only been ready to betray him. About this moment, Puppa makes the following observation: “From a case of actual cuckoldry actually punished in the past, the script moves to one of hypothetical cuckoldry in the present, accepted by the victim with a resignation worthy of Hamlet” (2006, 316).

12 “Un lavoro delicato precede e accompagna la burla, e si capisce che una burla riuscita resti immortale. Vero è che se ne parla di più se la raccontò un uomo come Shakespeare, ma dicesi che anche prima di lui si parlasse molto di quella fatta da Jago” (2004b, 217).

13 The possibility of intermediary influences has been noticed by Arcangelo Leone de Castris, who says that Shakespeare might have come to Svevo either through Ivan Turgeniev or “attraverso la passione shakespeareana del primo Goethe (La missione teatrale di Wilhelm Meister)” (1959, 43-44). See also Ghidetti, who suggests that Svevo would have found his recurring type, the inetto, in the Hamlet described by Goethe’s Wilhelm (1992, 49-50). Hamlet, says Wilhelm, is “lacking the sensuous strength that makes a hero”, and he “collapses beneath a burden that he can neither bear nor throw off; all duty is sacred to him, but this obligation”—to avenge his father’s death—“is too heavy for him” (1977, 42).
mentioning that these modern versions of Shakespeare’s rivals compete not with swords but with modern weapons, the pen and the tongue. “Emilio di fronte a quel giovanotto elegante ricordava d’essere il letterato di una certa riputazione”, and Leardi is “discorsivo” as well (2004a, 495). The verbal fencing in Senilità, like the actual fencing between Hamlet and Laertes, dramatizes an inner, psychological struggle.

In La coscienza, Svevo introduced a pair of rivals who compete not only with the pen—Zeno and Guido challenge each other at writing fables—but with another modern weapon as well, one which was dear to Svevo’s heart. “The violin”, says Beno Weiss, “with its characteristic shape and symbolic meaning, becomes a duelling weapon for the two antagonists” (1987, 72). After Guido’s moving rendition of Bach’s Chaconne, Ada rejects Zeno while holding Guido’s violin tight. Weiss, who reads this scene in Freudian terms, notes that because the bow is not mentioned we are to assume that it remains with Guido. The violin, a kind of receptacle, is feminine, and the sexual symbolism of the bow is obvious (1987, 73). Would Svevo, who had read Freud by this time14, have had a similar understanding of the scene in which Hamlet fences with Laertes over Ophelia’s grave? It seems likely, in any case, that the verbal and musical duelling in La coscienza is informed by the real duelling in Hamlet15.

When Svevo called his third novel La coscienza di Zeno, it is possible that he was thinking of “conscience” not only in the Freudian sense but also in the Shakespearean sense, the sense intended here by Hamlet:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action (III.i.82-87).

Zeno, like all of Svevo’s anti-heroes, is precisely such a coward, incapable of action because he is introspective enough to understand its ultimate futility, a futility which, for both writers, is embodied in images of disease, of the body and of the mind16. Zeno is ever on the alert for disease, in himself and in others; this quality is an outward manifestation of his relentless inward gaze, his incapacitating awareness of human imperfection. For both writers, however, the final result of this heightened awareness is a redemption of sorts, arrived at through language, through the same kind of verbal performance that is so important in Una vita and Senilità. By adding “a speech of some dozen lines, or sixteen lines” to the play about the “Murther of Gonzago” (II.ii.54 1-42), Hamlet rewrites the fate of the illegitimate king; and by rewriting the king’s letters to the

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14 Svevo wrote, in Soggiorno londinese, that he had read Freud’s books in 1908, “se non sbaglio”, but as Federico Bertoni says, in his note to this remark, a more accurate date might be 1911 (2004c, 894, 1686). It was not until 1919, according to Fabio Vittorini, that Svevo would begin to write La coscienza (Svevo 2004a, 1536). On Svevo’s reading of Freud, see also Gatt-Rutter (1988, 246-51).

15 The first duel, however, between the two rivals in La coscienza occurs earlier. Marasco, who has studied how the drawing room serves as a stage in Svevo’s fiction, observes that the séance in the “salotto Malfenti” is where “per la prima volta duellano Zeno e Guido” (2009, 193).

16 Victor Brombert makes a similar observation, saying that Svevo’s title does make “Hamlet’s words come to mind”. With regard to the “hyperactivity of the self-reflective consciousness”, which “leads to passivity, even paralysis”, Brombert notes that “Zeno becomes a caricature of such inhibition: having learned that at least fifty-five muscles enter into action each time we take a step, he can no longer walk without limping” (1999, 56).
English authorities, Hamlet rewrites his own fate and that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (V.ii.38-53). Similarly, by writing his memoirs Zeno Cosini rewrites the script of his life. Hamlet rewrites his fate in a highly excited state. As he says to Horatio, “in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep” (V.ii.4-5). This is the excitement of coming to awareness, of writing oneself into being. It is the excitement felt by the old man in Le confessioni del vegliardo, as he rereads his memoirs—“Come è viva quella vita e come è definitivamente morta la parte che non raccontai”—and hopes that one day everyone’s life might be “letteraturizzata” (2004a, 1116).

Such instances of writing in La coscienza and in Svevo’s other works are often inseparable from acting; and in Svevo, as in Shakespeare, acting is always likely to unearth the truth or even bring forth a reality. Like the play that exposes Claudius’s guilt, or like Hamlet’s feigned madness, which brings on Ophelia’s real madness, so Zeno, who calls himself “quel grande attore che in me è andato perduto” (2004a, 737), does a great deal of pretending, and this pretending shapes his destiny, albeit in unexpected ways. He pretends, for instance, that Ada is his wife—he actually calls this charade “la commedia” (2004a, 892)—in order to strengthen his ties to Carla, but Carla is so moved by Ada’s beauty and sadness that she breaks things off with Zeno for good. Elsewhere, the particular influence of Hamlet is suggested by verbal similarities which occur when Zeno tries to explain to Alberta, “la povera commediografa” (2004a, 866), what he means by a woman’s value fluctuating more than any stock on the market. He tells her that if she begins with a value of X, her value will go up by at least another X if she allows him to touch her foot with his, a liberty which he takes immediately, even as he speaks, in order to demonstrate his theory. “Accompagnai subito alle parole l’atto”, he says, and then, repeating this phrasing, he makes the following observation: “La parola aveva rilevato l’atto e l’atto la parola. Finché essa non si sposò ebbe per me un sorriso e un rossore, poi, invece, rossore ed ira. Le donne son fatte così” (2004a, 866). Svevo seems here to be putting to his own comic purposes the advice that Hamlet gives to the players: “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action”, for only thus can the actor “show virtue her feature […] and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (III.ii.17-18-19, 21-24). On the stage, what gives language its power to move one to “rossore ed ira” is, of course, this perfect agreement between utterance and action.

This aspect of Hamlet, like its more obvious Oedipal conflict, meant as much to Svevo’s art as it did to his daily existence, for Hamlet’s advice to the players applies not only to the stage but to life itself. It is essentially the same advice which Polonius gives to Reynaldo, who, in order to spy fruitfully on Laertes, must play a certain role. Polonius even supplies Reynaldo with a rough script: “Take you as ‘twere some distant knowledge of him, / As thus, ‘I know his father and his friends, / And in part him” (II.i.13-15). It is the doddering, inept Polonius—Svevo would have appreciated this irony—who, as he instructs Reynaldo, best articulates the power of acting: “See you now, / Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth, / And thus do we of wisdom and of reach, / With windlasses and with assays of bias, / By indirections find directions out” (II.i.59-63). Svevo seems to have understood this early on. The young Ettore Schmitz who grew pale and sickly upon reading Hamlet, and who spent sleepless nights meditating on “to be or not to be”, was already something of an actor at the age of fourteen. In his collected Goethe—which he read and annotated, and then sold in order to purchase his collected Shakespeare—one can see the young Triestine writer’s experience of Hamlet prefigured
in that of Wilhelm Meister:

We made up our minds to perform the play, and I had taken on the part of the Prince without knowing what I was doing; I thought I was studying it when I started memorizing the strongest passages, the soliloquies and those scenes where power of soul, elevation of mind and vitality have free play, and where a temperament that has been emotionally moved can exhibit itself in expressions of feeling.

I also thought I was penetrating truly into the spirit of the part if I took upon myself, so to speak, the burden of deep melancholy, and bearing the weight of this pressure, attempted to follow my model through the strange labyrinth of so many different moods and eccentricities. So I learnt by heart and rehearsed, and gradually believed that I was becoming identified with my hero (1977, 18).

After reading only a few of Shakespeare’s plays, says Wilhelm, he was so profoundly affected that he had to stop reading:

I don’t remember that a book, a person or any happening in life produced such great effects upon me as the wonderful plays which I have got to know [...]. They are not literary works! You believe that you are standing before the huge, open books of fate in which the high wind of life at its most agitated storms, turning the pages back and forth rapidly and with violence. I am so astonished and disconcerted by the strength and delicacy, the violence and calm, that I can only wait with longing for the time when I shall be in a position to be able to go on reading (1977, 165-66).

How similar this all is to Ettore Schmitz’s own experience, as described by his brother Elio:

Quando ebbe questo libro in mano rimase alzato tutta la notte e sempre curvato sull’Amleto passò molte notti insonni. Lo studiò a memoria, divenne pallido e la sua ciera divenne cattiva. Finito l’Amleto che sapeva a memoria voleva continuare col Re Lear ma ahimè! venne all’orecchie del sig[0] Spier questo fatto ed egli senza apporvi i sigilli sequestra i volumi. Ettore non lesse il Re Lear ma pensò tanto all’Amleto che non dormì per molte notti consecutive sempre pensando all’ “Essere o non essere” (1997, 97).

In pointing out this similarity, I do not mean to suggest that the young Schmitz’s response to Hamlet was merely a staged, imitative display of literary sensibility. He was an actor at heart, and even at this early age he must have understood the power of acting to bear out the truth. If he was to be a writer, then he must test himself by playing the part that had been written for him in Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Apprenticeship. If he discovered that he could read Hamlet feelingly and become its hero, then he would know that, like Goethe, or like Goethe’s Wilhelm, he too possessed the soul of a writer.

Svevo’s Shakespeare, then, seems to have come to him through the filter of German romanticism, and perhaps through Goethe in particular. Without this influence, Svevo might not have written about The Merchant of Venice as he did, in his very first publication, Shylock, which appeared in L’Indipendente in 1880, the same year that he

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17 In his Profilo autobiografico, Svevo makes no mention at all of Goethe. As John Gatt-Rutter has observed, this “seems odd, if not downright misleading” (1988, 27).

18 For this observation I am indebted to Brian Moloney. See also Weiss, who says that Svevo’s first attempts at drama, and Ariosto governatore in particular, “were inspired by the romantics and featured romantically Hamletic characters” (1987, 18).
wrote *Ariosto governatore*. Shakespeare, said Svevo, was kept from accepting the anti-Semitism of his day by his “genio superiore”, and Shylock he called “una figura colossale, ammirabile, umana!” (2004c, 969-70). Even here, however, in addition to the influence of romanticism, one can hear a faint echo of Hamlet: “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god!” (II.ii.303-07).

Also, it is important to note that, at this time, Svevo was reading the French realists and naturalists. As Elio notes in his diary, on 12 May 1881, “Ha ora cambiato alquanto partito in arte. È verista. Zola lo ha riconfermato nell’idea che lo scopo della commedia e l’interesse devono essere i caratteri e non l’azione” (1997, 104). This is why, in writing about *The Merchant of Venice*, Svevo is happily anachronistic in calling Shakespeare a “tragedo verista” and describes Shylock as a character who emerges pure and vivid “in tutta la sua verità” (2004c, 969-70). “In absolute terms”, says Weiss, “Svevo was not a realist, nor a romantic nor a naturalist, but a writer sui generis whose works were born out of his own experience” (1987, 18). He did not read like a literary historian; he read rather like a fellow artist in the making. One senses this when the young writer, in asserting the nobility of Shylock, addresses Shakespeare directly: “Oh! mio vecchio William! non è forse falsa l’idea che tu possa aver voluto ridere di questa figura?” (2004c, 970).

Svevo probably looked upon his old Goethe with the same familiarity. Goethe’s *Wilhelm*, inspired by his first readings of Shakespeare, expressed his theatrical ambition thus:

> These few glances that I have cast into Shakespeare’s world stimulate me more than anything else to make quicker progress in the real world, to mingle in the flood of destinies that are decreed for it, and at some future time, if I should succeed in this, to draw forth from the great sea of true nature a few cupfuls and bestow them from the stage upon the thirsting public of my native country (1977, 166).

Svevo, who had similar ambitions, never achieved great success in the theater; but it was there that he saw the most vivid demonstrations of the power and the very real consequences of acting. Those experiences left their marks on his narrative art and on his life. Once during Carnival time, Svevo blackened his face and appeared, along with his wife Livia, as Othello and Desdemona, as if to parody, and perhaps in that way to confront, his own obsessive jealousy (Gatt-Rutter 1988, 74). The lesson about acting and its ability to bring truth to light, a lesson he had learned from his experience of *Hamlet* so many years before, stayed with him all his life.

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19 In his note to this passage Bertoni observes that “il giovane Svevo attraversava in questi mesi un periodo di infatuazione verista, tanto che lo stesso Shakespeare, con un giudizio consapevolmente astorico, viene valutato attraverso i canoni della poetica del naturalismo” (2004c, 1782).
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