Hoaxes and humorists.
Svevo, laughter, and some nineteenth-century models

1. Svevo’s anthropology of laughter

Laughter, to be sure, plays a special role in Svevo’s works: not only as a spontaneous narrative effect, but mainly as a matter of reflection. In other words, the author’s primary aim is not to induce mirth, but rather to make us ponder on the hidden meanings of laughter itself. It couldn’t be otherwise, since we are dealing with a highly unreliable medium – one that needs to be deciphered, or even exposed: «il riso è un’espressione che cela invece che rivelare il pensiero» (Svevo 2004a, 893). Svevo constantly tries to unveil the mechanism of this complex and deceptive phenomenon: when he represents laughing and/or derided characters, for instance, it is often easy to sense the violence or the pettiness underlying seemingly funny situations. But the same strategy, albeit more subtle, is applied when the reader is implicitly invited to analyse the narrator’s own jokes, and to detect their more or less dubious motives.

Needless to say, scholars have massively answered the author’s call for inquiries into laughter: and indeed there is no lack of studies about the functions of irony and humour in Zeno, about the links between ineptitude and the comic, and so on. Nevertheless there is still much to be done, mainly with regard to character representation: to begin with, Svevo’s anthropology of the ridiculous hasn’t yet been systematically related to its nineteenth-century models. The “serious century” – and more precisely the formes sérieuses of realism – offered an articulate and multi-faceted stock of giggly, jeering and ludicrous figures, that was thoroughly absorbed and distorted by Svevo: despite being less visible, the influence exerted by this code is not less important than the well-known debts to other traditional patterns, such as the scheme of the Bildungsroman. This particular interest in jesters and fools, after all, points to a key problem in early twentieth-century fiction as a whole. All through the realist tradition, laughter has always been regarded as an important feature in ordinary social interactions: but the topic becomes all the more crucial at the time of Modernism, when the “seriousness of everyday life” definitely ceases to be an obvious concept.

How is a novelist supposed to depict reality, if experience is perceived as increasingly irrelevant or laughable? Not by chance, European modernist fiction is marked by a general overflow

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1 Among the large number of works concerning the forms of laughter in Svevo, suffice it to mention some recent (or relatively recent) studies, that also provide useful syntheses of previous debates: Brombert 1992; Contarini 1998; Musarra 1994; Serafini 2009; Vianello 2000.

2 In the preface to Germinie Lacerteux, the Goncourt brothers define the novel as «la grande forme sérieuse»; building on this famous definition, and on Auerbach’s Mimesis, Franco Moretti’s essay Il secolo serio examines some typical aspects of nineteenth-century realism (Moretti 2001).

3 I naturally refer to Auerbach (2003).
of ridiculous characters and grotesque situations\(^4\), that often constitute a paradoxical source of narrative interest: everyday life is ludicrous and farcical, but this is precisely why it deserves being represented and uncovered. Svevo’s *problematisation* of laughter\(^5\), along with his tendential overlap between social relations and travesty, perfectly fits this picture; so does his twisted and intense dialogue with the *ridiculous* elements of nineteenth-century realism. It might therefore be worthwhile to examine the way Svevo builds on an established taxonomy, in order to formulate a radical and peculiar reflection on laughter; my paper is chiefly intended as a partial and tentative effort in this direction. I will focus on two exemplary texts, and on three exemplary characters: our starting point will be *Una burla riuscita*, where the mocker (Enrico Gaia) and his victim (Mario Samigli) take part in a lucid apologue on hoax, meant as a symbol for the social value of derision (we are, more or less, in the area of the Bergsonian *comic*); we will then consider *Corto viaggio sentimentale*, whose protagonist Aghios is an ideal exponent of *humour* as defined by Svevo (and Freud) – a self-defensive, and self-centered, display of ironic detachment from events. In both cases, the analysis of a particularly tangled intertextual plot will allow us to underline Svevo’s disenchanted point of view on laughter, and its aftermath on the author’s dialogue with tradition.

2. Mockers

This is how the narrator of *Una burla riuscita* introduces Enrico Gaia, the cheater in the story:

> Non è mestiere da dilettante quello del commesso viaggiatore. Prima di tutto egli passa la vita lontano dal tavolo, l’unico posto ove si possa fare e versi e prosa; ma poi il commesso viaggiatore corre, viaggia e parla, soprattutto parla fino all’esaurimento. […] Tutta la sua vita aveva “fatte” le piccole città dell’Istria e della Dalmazia, e poteva vantarsi che quand’egli arrivava in una di quelle città, per una parte della popolazione (i suoi clienti) il ritmo monotono della vita di provinca si accelerava. Egli viaggiava accompagnato da una chiacchiera inesauribile, dall’appetito e dalla sete, insomma le tre qualità sociali per eccellenza. Adorava la burla come gli antichi toscani, ma pretendeva che la sua fosse una burla più amabile. (Svevo 2004b, 217)

Svevo begins by mentioning Gaia’s success as a travelling salesman, and his special knack for the so-called “*qualità sociali*”: appetite, thirst, and mostly an inexhaustible chattiness (“chiacchiera inesauribile”). Gaia’s rhetorical talent is also related to his passion for hoaxes, as implied in these very lines (“adorava la burla come gli antichi toscani”): in this respect, Svevo’s tale reveals some deep – and as yet undetected – similarities with a story by Balzac, *L’illustre Gaudissart* (1833). The protagonist, Félix Gaudissart, is actually a travelling salesman, and a lover of hoaxes as well:

> Il existe à Paris un incomparable Voyageur, le parangon de son espèce, un homme qui possède au plus haut degré toutes les conditions inhérentes à la nature de ses succès. *Dans sa parole se rencontre à la fois du vitriol et de la glu*: de la glu, pour appréhender, *entortiller sa victime* et se la rendre adhérente; du vitriol, pour en dissoudre les calculs les plus durs. […] Vous eussiez reconnu en lui l’homme aimable de la grisette […]

\(^4\) As for the “*dilagare novecentesco*” of the comic, and of laughter in general, cf. Ferroni 2005. In Godioli 2011 (175-89) I try to give a comparative overview on the status of laughter in some major modernist writers: particular attention is paid to Flaubert’s portrayals of human *bêtise*, to the parodic stances in *Ulysses*, to Musil’s thoughts on irony and stupidity, to Kafka’s mix between tragedy and grotesque, and finally to the the functions of humour, satire and irony in Italian fiction (Pirandello, Gadda, Svevo).

\(^5\) Brombert (1992, 300) talks about Svevo’s “*problematisation du comique*”, with regard to the ambiguity of Zeno’s humour; here I use the term in a broader sense, to indicate Svevo’s constant interest for the complexity and variety of laughter.
The narrator emphasises the “conditions” of the character’s success, that are quite close to Gaia’s “qualità sociali”: his convivial disposition (“he ruled at the table, and got the best bites”), along with a natural rhetorical ability – a talent in combining “vitriol and glue”, in order to “diddle his victim”. Just like in Svevo’s text, social qualities are closely linked with the bias towards practical jokes, as also suggested by onomastics:

Jamais nom ne fut plus en harmonie avec la tournure, les manières, la physionomie, la voix, le langage d’aucun homme. Tout souriait au voyageur et le voyageur souriait à tout. […] Calembours, gros rire, figure monacale, teint de cordelier, enveloppe rabelaisienne; vêtement, corps, esprit, figure s’accordaient pour mettre de la gaudisserie, de la gaudriole en toute sa personne. Rond en affaires, bon homme, rigoleur […]. (Balzac 1970, 7; italics mine)

The similarity with Svevo gets even stronger, given that “Enrico Gaia” is a speaking name as well: Gaia evokes the concept of gaietza, in the same way as Gaudissart alludes to gaudisserie.

Further details confirm the kinship between the two salesmen⁶; anyway, it might be more interesting to provide a structural comparison of the stories as a whole. In both cases, in fact, we are dealing with mockers getting mocked: while Una burla riuscita notoriously ends with four slaps in Gaia’s face, Gaudissart is eventually outwitted by a sly countryman from Vouvray (Touraine), who forces him to sign a fraudulent contract. But precisely here lies the most important difference between our tales: Balzac describes the maker of the prank as “one of those mockers whose jokes aren’t offensive except for their own perfection”⁷, thus assuming the existence of a harmless and cheerful form of derision; more generally, the teasing nature of the Tourainese farmers is presented as a purely carnivalesque trait, in the likes of Rabelais’ Gargantua. According to Svevo, instead, mockery is quite unlikely to be innocent: “può anche essere che le altre burle del Gaia fossero più innocue di questa di cui qui si tratta […]; quella ch’egli fece a Mario fu invece intinta di vero odio” (Svevo 2004b, 217). Indeed, Una burla leaves no room for a cheerful perspective on hoaxes: as in the 1921 drama Inferiorità, where a supposedly harmless joke ends with the victim being murdered, the violence of laughter can only stand out as a symptom of a darker and deeper kind of violence. Altering the model of Gaudissart, Una burla riuscita upsets the long-time topos underlying Balzac’s text: namely the idea that the main motive for hoax might not be malice, but rather the will to pleasantly assert a more decent value – be it personal wit, common sense or even unaffected folk vitalism. Svevo questions this point with particular strength, although he is definitely not the first to do that (it wouldn’t be hard to find precedents even in the Tuscan tradition of the novella di beffa)⁸; however, this is merely the first half of a more complex picture.

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⁶ For instance, Gaia’s use of the verb fare (“Tutta la sua vita aveva ‘fatte’ le piccole città dell’Istria e della Dalmazia”: Svevo 2004b, 217) is quite similar to one of Gaudissart’s linguistic habits: “Je pars demain pour Amboise. Je ferai Amboise en deux jours, et t’écrirai maintenant de Tours” (Balzac 1970, 19; italics mine); “Comment, monstre d’homme, tu me parles tranquillement de faire des enfants, et tu crois que je te souffrirai ce genre-là?” – “Ah! ça, deviens-tu bête, ma Jenny?… C’est une manière de parler dans notre commerce” (Balzac 1970, 12).

⁷ “L’Illustre Gaudissart devait rencontrer là, dans Vouvray, l’un de ces railleurs indigènes dont les moqueries ne sont offensives que par la perfection même de la moquerie, et avec lequel il eut à soutenir une cruelle lutte. […] Gaudissart alla chez le malin de Vouvray, le boute-en-train du bourg, le loustic obligé par son rôle et par sa nature à maintenir son endroit en liesse” (Balzac 1970, 21-22).

⁸ In the Decameron, for instance, the narrators themselves expose the violent nature of many beffe. On this topic, see in particular Surdich 2001 (156-80) and Fontes-Baratto 1972 (esp. 19: “la cruauté et le cynisme inhérents à beaucoup de beffe, […] explosions d’une agressivité refoulée”).
3. Victims

If Svevo’s point of view on the mocker is ruthless, the mocked ones aren’t treated any more gently. Weak as he is, Mario doesn’t prove to be more noble-minded or pure-hearted than his antagonist: on the contrary, his seemingly innocent literary ambitions betray a repressed will to power⁹. The first symptom of the character’s frustration lies in his conceited and ridiculous dream of glory, where the unsuccessful writer imagines being prosecuted – and more importantly, read – by the authorities:

Allo scoppio della guerra italiana, Mario temette che il primo atto di persecuzione che l’I. e R. Polizia avrebbe esercitato a Trieste, sarebbe venuto a colpire lui – uno dei pochi letterati italiani restati in città – con un bel processo che forse l’avrebbe mandato a penzolare dalla forca. Fu un terrore e nello stesso tempo una speranza che lo agitò, facendolo ora esultare ed ora sbiancare dal terrore. Egli si figurava che i suoi giudici, tutto un consiglio di guerra composto dai rappresentanti di tutte le gerarchie militari, dal generale in giù, avrebbe dovuto leggere il suo romanzo, e – se ci doveva essere giustizia – studiarlo. Poi certamente sarebbe giunto un momento un po’ doloroso. […] [La polizia] però si dimostrò del tutto ignorante della letteratura paesana, e lasciò in pace, per il corso di tutta la guerra, il povero Mario disilluso e rassicurato. (Svevo 2004b, 202)

Svevo presents this sin of hybris with cold irony, in a way that resembles Dostoevsky’s attitude towards the analogous fancies of Stepan Trofimovich (The Devils):

He fondly loved, for instance, his position as a “persecuted” man and, so to speak, an “exile”. […] All his life he sincerely believed that in certain spheres he was a constant cause of apprehension, that every step he took was watched and noted, and that each one of the three governors who succeeded one another during twenty years in our province came with special and uneasy ideas concerning him, which had, by higher powers, been impressed upon each before everything else, on receiving the appointment. Had anyone assured the honest man on the most irrefutable grounds that he had nothing to be afraid of, he would certainly have been offended. (Dostoevsky 2005, 5-6)

Mario, therefore, is probably descended from a nineteenth-century ancestor as well. That being said, it is worth noting that Svevo seconds the cruellest, purely satirical features of Dostoevsky’s laughter (not exactly the model’s usual trademark); even in this respect, the narrator strategically insists on the character’s pettiest features, basically defining his psychology as a mix between fear and dissimulated aggressiveness.

We can now grasp the overall meaning of the intertextual plot underpinning the story: on one hand Svevo distorts the paradigm of Gaudissart, in order to reject any irenic stereotype about mockery; on the other, he draws inspiration from Dostoevsky’s satirical imagery, with the result of subverting a different and complementary stereotype. Mario’s meanness, in fact, definitely contradicts some widespread assumptions about the purity and moral superiority of the mocked one over the mocker; a kind of myth that can easily be detected among the romantic interpretations of Don Quijote, and leaves visible traces in Dostoevsky as well (particularly in The Idiot)¹⁰. The


¹⁰ The characterization of Myshkin is deeply influenced by a typically romantic interpretation of Don Quijote, as declared by the author in a well-known letter to S.A. Ivanova: “Of all the good characters in Christian literature, Don Quixote stands as the most finished of all. But he is good solely because he is ludicrous at the same time. […] There is compassion for the good man who is laughed at and who does not know his own value – and so there appears sympathy in the reader too. This arousing of compassion is the secret of humour” (Dostoevsky 1930, 71; transl. and quoted in Fanger 1998, 231).
partial similarities with traditional models can only highlight the way *Una burla* develops an original – and radically pessimistic – apologue on communal laughter: while displaying the hidden violence of the social norm (and of its imposition through mockery), Svevo also prevents the reader from any idealization of the abnormal (namely the victims of the joke).

4. Humorists

According to *Una burla riuscita*, the anthropology of laughter is apparently split in two poles: at one extreme we find a brutal persecutor, at the other a weak and obtuse victim. The most likely alternative to this mean antinomy is clearly outlined in other works by the late Svevo: it actually lies in humour, as practised by Zeno and similar characters. Not even this attitude, however, seems to be immune from malice and pettiness: once again, Svevo’s disenchantment can be properly underlined through an intertextual comparison – this time concerning *Corto viaggio sentimentale*. As already stated, Aghios clearly bears the marks of the humorist: just like Zeno, he’s capable of laughing at himself, thus dissimulating his deep fear of being jeered at; this kind of self-irony makes him different from the “normal man”\(^\text{11}\); but it certainly does not vouch for his purity or holiness (as the name Aghios, instead, would suggest). Now, with regard to impurity, one of the most remarkable episodes is the protagonist’s dream of being carried away to Mars:

Insomma il signor Aghios era avviato verso il pianeta Marte, sdraiato su un carrello che si moveva traverso lo spazio come sulle rotaie. Egli vi era sdraiato bocconi e invece di pavimento il carrello aveva delle assi su cui, dolorante, poggiava il suo corpo. Una delle assi passava sul suo petto e rendeva più pesante la tasca che vi era. Sotto a lui c’era lo spazio infinito e al di sopra anche. La terra non si vedeva più e Marte non ancora. […]

Previde quel pianeta. Ebbene, egli lo avrebbe popolato di gente che avrebbe intesa la sua lingua, mentre egli non avrebbe intesa la loro. (Svevo 2004c, 597)

Aghios leaves, lying down in a wagon; as he gets lost in space, he starts picturing his encounter with the aliens, up to the detail of the translation problems. This sequence bears a strong resemblance to a short story by Dostoevsky, *The dream of a ridiculous man* (1877), whose protagonist exactly imagines travelling to another planet:

I have mentioned that I dropped asleep unaware and even seemed to be still reflecting on the same subjects. […] Suddenly another break and I was being carried in a closed coffin. […] I was caught up by some dark and unknown being and we found ourselves in space: […] we were flying through space far away from the earth. (Dostoevsky 2004, 7)

As in Svevo’s story, we find the dreamer lying flat on his back (in a coffin, this time), along with a precise description of outer space; elsewhere in the text other particulars remind us of Aghios’s

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\(^1\) More than once, Aghios is caught smiling at himself: “A tanta altezza si arrivava nella solitudine! Adesso sorrideva di se stesso”; “Nel pensiero solitario non c’era nulla di compromettente ed il signor Aghios con un sorriso continuò a vedersi nella veste di un malfattore liberato” (Svevo 2004c, 506 and 557). With regard to the character’s terror of derision, cf. the opening paragraph of the story: “Bisognava abbreviare quegli addii ridicoli se prolungati fra due vecchi coniugi. Ci si trovava bensì in uno di quei posti ove tutti hanno fretta e non hanno il tempo di guardare il vicino neppure per riderne, ma il signor Aghios sentiva costituirsi nell’animo proprio il vicino che ride” (Svevo 2004c, 501).

\(^2\) This is how Aghios scornfully defines his fellow traveller Borlini: “L’Aghios rimase ammirato. Quest’era la presentazione del vero *uomo normale!* Non gli era simpatico. L’uomo normale voleva che tutti pensassero a lui” (Svevo 2004c, 549; italics mine).
adventure, such as the quick mention of planet Mars and the incomprehensions with the alien people. In both episodes, the dream gives vent to a desire of escape from social boundaries: yet, the differences are glaring. Dostoevsky’s character is described as a good-hearted man, hence – according to a long-time pattern we have previously mentioned – “ridiculous” to the public eye; his evangelical purity is proved by the strong sympathy he feels for a helpless little girl, whom he accidentally meets at the beginning of the story. Compared to this model, Aghios’s sexual fantasies about the young girl Anna sound like a parodic twist, as well as preventing us from any idealized interpretation of the character:

E l’Agios si domandò: “Ma perché la mia figliuola ha da giacere così sotto a me? È il sesso? Io non la voglio”. E urlò: “Io sono il padre, il buon padre virtuoso”. Subito Anna fu seduta lontano da lui, ad un angolo del carrello, in grande pericolo di scivolarne nell’orrendo spazio e l’Agios gridò: “Ritorna, ritorna, si vede che su quest’ordigno non si può stare altrimenti”. E Anna obbediente ritornò a lui come prima, meglio di prima. (Svevo 2004c, 599)

No wonder that the two dreamers also have opposite relations with laughter. The ridiculous man doesn’t seem to know mirth: or rather he condemns it as he condemns every symptom of human malice, starting from the original sin – falsehood. Aghios, in turn, willingly practises irony as a form of self-defence, which goes hand in hand with an opportunistic point of view on falsehood: he is well aware that man is bound to lie, but his moral reaction is limited to a fleeting and superficial remorse.

Aghios’s behaviour, just like Mario’s, still betrays the signs of human malice – the solitude of the humorist, as well as that of the victim, is by no means a guarantee of moral superiority. Despite being heavily influenced by romantic realism, Una burla riuscita and Corto viaggio sentimentale move far beyond what Girard has called the “romantic lie”, as they preclude any sharp opposition between the unfairness of society and the purity of the outsider: while sticking to the former term (the negative one), Svevo denies the latter with a lucidity and a coherence that are probably unmatched in Italian modernist fiction. Assessing the importance of the nineteenth-

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13 “For instance, a strange reflection suddenly occurred to me, that if I had lived before on the moon or on Mars and there had committed the most disgraceful and dishonourable action [...], and if, finding myself afterwards on earth, I were able to retain the memory of what I had done on the other planet [...] - should I care or not? Should I feel shame for that action or not?” (Dostoevsky 2004, 6; italics mine). “Oh, these people did not persist in trying to make me understand them, they loved me without that, but I knew that they would never understand me, and so I hardly spoke to them about our earth” (Dostoevsky 2004, 11).

14 Dostoevsky’s hero is tragically aware of being contaminated by falsehood, which is somehow congenital to the human race. He therefore blames himself for the unintentional (and inevitable) corruption of the alien people: “Yes, yes, it ended in my corrupting them all! [...] They learnt to lie, grew fond of lying, and discovered the charm of falsehood” (Dostoevsky 2004, 14).

15 Aghios’s thoughts about lie are incomparably less anguished, and more self-indulgent, than those uttered by Dostoevsky’s character: “Menti una seconda volta asserendo, ma ne fu subito consapevole. Strano! Con gli sconosciuti si mentiva disordinatamente, senza un vero scopo. [...] Egli voleva traversare il mondo serio, serio, non falsificandolo con parole che somigliavano ai sassi che il monello gettava per il solo bisogno di moversi, senza preoccuparsi dove andava a finire, magari nell’occhio del prossimo. Era dunque più difficile di saper muoversi con dignità fra sconosciuti e a lui era toccato di sbagliare perché poco uso alla libertà, come quei cani di catena che appena liberi guastano il giardino” (Svevo 2004c, 532).

16 The romantic contrast between oppressive social norms and extraordinary individuals is analysed – with particular regard to the interpretation of Stendhal, Cervantes and Flaubert – in Girard 1966, 139-52.
century palimpsest, however, might be the best way to evaluate the author’s modernity, as indirectly – and metaphorically – suggested by the opening page of *Soggiorno londinese*:

Guardatevi in uno specchio ed avrete un’occasione unica di poter studiare come una fisionomia umana s’atteggi per date idee o impressioni [...] Guarda, guarda, quei grossi mustacchi! Darwin ne attribuiva la nascita al bisogno di certi roditori e molti altri mammiferi di essere avvisati quando i buchi in cui si muovono per celarsi o per aggredire si restringono. [...] Io rido all’idea di vedermi munito di un ordigno che m’addobba e non mi serve a niente e rido ancora allo scoprirmi un rudere di bestia che impomata l’ordigno oramai tanto inutile. (Svevo 2004a, 893)

A man at the mirror, laughing at himself while shaving, and at the same time meditating on his own laughter – a typically Svevian image, one might think. Yet, an almost identical situation was pictured by Flaubert in his *Correspondance*: “ce qui m’empêche de me prendre au sérieux, quoique j’aie l’esprit assez grave, c’est que je me trouve très ridicule, [...] de ce ridicule intrinsèque à la vie humaine elle-même et qui ressort de l’action la plus simple, ou du geste le plus ordinaire. Jamais par exemple je ne me fais la barbe sans rire, tant ça me paraît bête” (Flaubert 1980, I, 308; letter to Louise Colet, 21 August 1846). *Soggiorno londinese* takes the argument to another level, by questioning the epistemic value of laughter itself; still the concurrence – although probably accidental – is rather striking, and confirms that this watchful attitude towards laughter owes much to a long line of distinguished observers. It is only on such grounds that we can fully appreciate the originality of Svevo’s perspective.

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17 Not by chance, a very similar scene can be found in a key passage of *Corto viaggio sentimentale*: “Si analizzò accuratamente. [...] I mustacchi erano la prerogativa degli animali che s’annidano nei buchi (così aveva detto quella canaglia di suo figlio); dovevano servire ad avvisarli quando il buco si restringe e arrestarli dal pericolo di strangolarsi. ‘Ho io l’aspetto di bestia?’ si domandò il signor Aghios esaminando le proprie fattezze. E lui e la sua immagine si guardarono sospettosi” (Svevo 2004c, 525).
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