Midway through his courtship of the Malfenti family’s daughters, Zeno is asked by Signora Malfenti to refrain from visiting the Malfenti household. The reasons she offers him reveal to Zeno how his courtship of Ada has been misperceived as having been directed at August, and though he agrees to comply with Signora Malfenti’s wishes, he is thrown into inner turmoil once he does so, because he is terribly worried that his absence will be misunderstood -- that he will be misjudged -- and this is what moves him to action:

Trovai l’atto discreto e gentile e percio un po’ ironico col quale avrei segnata la mia volonta. Corsi da un fioraio e scelsi un magnifico mazzo di fiori che indirizzai alla Signora Malfenti accompagnato dal mio biglietto da visita sul quale non scrissi altro che la data. Non occorreva altro. Era una data che non avrei dimenticata piu e non l’avrebbero dimenticata forse neppure Ada e sua madre: 5 Maggio, l’anniversario della morte di Napoleone. ¹

The irony of which he speaks here can only be self-directed: there is no way for Signora Malfenti to comprehend the meaning, let alone the

¹ Italo Svevo, *La Coscienza di Zeno*, Dall’Oglio, 1976, p.118
Idiosyncratic significance, Zeno intends in this gesture that so perfectly mirrors his lifelong habit of recording dates for all his momentous decisions, from changing university departments to recording every “last cigarette.” Zeno cultivates an opacity of character while under the impression that he is making himself understood, and thus, he is regularly astonished at the target audience’s misreadings of him – as though the intensity of the intellectual and emotional effort he expends ought to render transparent the inner workings of his heart and mind. The only error of judgment on Zeno’s part is to have confused the identity of that target audience: himself.

This fundamental misunderstanding is perpetuated throughout the novel, and perpetually isolates Zeno even, or actually especially, during the most emotionally charged of social interactions. Zeno habitually misrepresents his thoughts and feelings – not only to his immediate family, but also to the book’s omnipresent medical doctors, with whom he often discusses personal matters while eschewing any mention of his addiction to smoking, on the principle that they ought to be able to see the structures superimposed by Zeno’s consciousness on his life and limbs, they ought, by their professional knowledge of the human organism, to be able to draw the connection between the interior and exterior characteristics of a man. Of course, the only doctor ever to decipher the link between any of Zeno’s
“malattie” and his smoking habit -- Dr. S. -- is the one doctor who completely fails to understand the role of smoking and the resolutions to quit as a means of responding to, building points of contact with, and willfully transforming the world into an aesthetic construct.

The thematics of a longed-for transparency of the self so crucial to the tradition of self-representation is comically inverted and undermined in *La Coscienza di Zeno*, where the act of confession is transformed into cryptic exclamations such as, “Povero Cosini!” and judgment is reserved for the protagonist alone. This disjuncture between Zeno’s interpretation of his experiences and ideas and everyone else’s interpretation of him is deliberately enforced by the fact that Zeno never discloses his opinions, let alone his mental re-workings of himself and others, except in the most cryptic of ways. So cryptic in fact, that often he – and we – are the only ones capable of appreciating the humor and irony which he liberally, but secretly nurtures throughout his daily life.

The “busta di buon proposito” that recurs throughout Chapter Six, and resurfaces almost by accident in the following chapter offers a material incarnation of Zeno’s ambivalence towards his desire for Carla. But this symbol, like so many of Zeno’s codes for his inner life, is elastic in its applicability: the ineffectuality of the same envelope filled with cash that
Zeno never uses for the original purpose it was designed to facilitate, namely, the termination of his extra-marital affair, echoes – inaudibly to all but Zeno – when it fails to fulfill the resolution in whose interests it is later conscripted: the attempt to save Guido, from financial ruin. This linking of Zeno’s ambivalence towards other prominent figures in his life is not just a literary device employed by Svevo, the novelist, trying to represent a character whose relationship to others is full of patterns he wants readers to discern, but of Zeno, the character, whose literary cast of mind so saturates his consciousness that he appropriates the technical devices of literature – imports them into his daily experience -- as a means of recording his own understanding of himself without needing to articulate explicitly the connections he has discerned in his own history.

Throughout La Coscienza di Zeno, Zeno does things that he views as resolutions – granting them admittance to the same category as his “ultime sigarette” – and which thereby take on a symbolic value for him, and him alone. Zeno confers significance and coherence on his experiences and registers the impact on him of others’ lives and of external events, linking them in a pattern that is independent of chronology, despite the fixation with dates that the habit seems to imply. His family does, in fact, consider Zeno to be preternaturally adept at remembering dates of all kinds: birthdays,
anniversaries, etc., but their impression is comically askew, since it is blind to the aestheticizing impulse responsible for Zeno’s apparently exceptional memory for family dates. Thus, though Zeno makes his life into literary material, he is its only “reader.” Indeed, with the exception of the “ultima sigaretta” motif, none of the rest of his driving idiosyncracies is ever perceived by any of the other characters in the book.

The never-ending struggle with particular “malattie” among which the most prominent, the disease of the “ultima sigaretta,” is credited with indirectly inspiring the creation of the manuscript of the novel, and the predilection for resolution-making exist to allow Zeno’s introspection to manifest itself in ways that can subsequently be analyzed by him. The act of writing and retrospective re-imagining is seen as a deliberate, systematic rival to the kind of scrutiny and narration championed by psychoanalysis, “the talking cure.”

At least since Rousseau’s Confessions, the strategy of creating sincerity through self-revelation has been regularly attempted with the paradoxical result, however, of having schooled modern readers to doubt every anecdotal event, every self-description that narrators like Rousseau and his many inheritors propose. Svevo’s appropriation of psychoanalysis as a framing device for La Coscienza di Zeno frees him of the obligation to
justify the revelations of self-representation that traditionally precede both autobiographical and fictionally autobiographical works. But it is to a fundamentally different attitude toward both the self and its representation that La Coscienza di Zeno adheres. Unlike Rousseau's Confessions, which depends as much on a thematic as a stylistic level on the compulsion to self-justification\(^2\), La Coscienza di Zeno rejects the need for anyone else's judgment. The text places the completely self-generated, self-stimulating aspects of Zeno's interiority into dialogue with itself rather than with any implicit or explicit audience.

In fact, Zeno's manuscript is a self-sufficient laboratory for the sifting of ideas, morality, and sensations -- his own at least as much as the experiences of others that he internalizes in order to write about them and thereby understand himself better. He uses the creation of a work of art out of his own "life" in a way that approximates the climactic theory of involuntary memory in À la recherche du temps perdu. If the process of

\(^2\) Implicit in Rousseau’s project of self-representation is the judgment of the reader, which is endowed by Rousseau from the outset in the “Avertissement” with the status of the second clause in a conditional statement: should Rousseau represent himself so fully, so completely, so correctly that he did “rendre [son] âme transparante aux yeux des lecteurs,” then they, the readers, will be able to judge Rousseau, and will, necessarily, judge him as he would judge himself. As he himself tells us, by maintaining his end of the contract (a strangely social contract, one which seems, early on, to contradict the statement that Rousseau is writing only for himself), he will bring it about “qu’il ne s’y passe pas un mouvement qu’il [le lecteur] n’aperçoive, afin qu’il puisse juger par lui-même du principe qui les produit.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, Gallimard, (p.198).
involuntary memory is the organic phenomenon whereby Marcel comes spontaneously to understand the connections among his experiences, the written form of involuntary memory is just as artificial as any other literary technique used by an author to portray a first-person narrator. The devices used in Svevo’s novel to make for a plausible and successful verisimilitude of self-understanding can be thought of as the inverse analog to Marcel’s three consecutive experiences of “involuntary memory” at the Geurmantes’ matinée that we are told led Marcel to become the writer for whom À la recherche du temps perdu represents the narration of an individual’s realization that he is going to be a writer, indeed needs to be one. Thus, while Proust’s device puts memory, and the self-understanding it can provide, in the service of writing, Svevo’s strategy puts writing in the service of memory. Zeno’s eccentricities of character can be seen then as themselves a function of Svevo’s stance towards the aesthetics of the representation of introspection.

Naomi Lebowitz, in her study of the formal and thematic consonances linking Svevo’s work to Michel de Montaigne’s, remarks that “the deemphasis on plot” in Zeno’s Conscience can be explained by viewing it as “an attribute of the desire for authenticity, [and it] is reinforced by the psychoanalytic structure by which spontaneous images and anecdotes,
uncushioned syntax, and transition come to have great value for the reflection of sincerity.”

Sincerity, though, was never the primary motivation for the stylistic choices that govern Svevo's novel and the characterological peculiarities that define Zeno's personality. On the contrary: *La Coscienza di Zeno* even has at its foundation an aesthetics of the self that rejects the presupposition of confessional literature that knowledge of the contours of the self can only be accessed through sincerity. Critics such as Jean Starobinski have regularly discussed the anxieties surrounding the search for sincerity and the tension between sincerity and artifice in autobiography:

How can anyone who wants to express himself with good faith and offer himself naked to the eyes of the world avoid checking himself, how can he avoid the distortion...that inevitably comes from the self-conscious use of language? To look at oneself and communicate what one sees is not only to create oneself but also to change oneself in the act of describing. As soon as we define ourselves, we become our own work, and any work is artifice...  

Yet artifice in *La Coscienza di Zeno* is not merely a byproduct of the act of self-representation; it is itself the educational tool that underlies the protagonist's lifelong obsessions and the fascination that trying to understand those obsessions -- through their perpetual eradication and

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renewal -- exerts on him. Augusta’s indulgence of this obsession, and her admiration for her husband’s singular capacity for invention – which extends so far as to let her misconstrue sincerity for invention, as during Zeno’s courtship of Ada – is no doubt what leads Zeno to declare himself inadvertently perspicacious in having married a woman who shares the overarching values of the narrative as a whole.

The capacity to render judgment on oneself and communicate it without the coercion of an omniscient narrator mediating between a character’s past and present self-understanding or the singular perspective of an “unreliable” first-person narrator insisting on the objectivity of his conclusions is the technical achievement of *La Coscienza di Zeno* that most decisively differentiates its narrator from virtually every one of his predecessors in the autobiographical and confessional tradition. The closest analog to the philosophical and stylistic stance towards self-representation expressed through Zeno’s narrative decisions is that of Montaigne’s *Essays*, which contains no single epiphany of revelatory self-understanding. Instead, the structure for accessing the self which the *Essays* invents is cumulative and dialogic: Montaigne’s interest is in incorporating the events of the world and the ideas of his favored authors into the “body” of his text. By becoming the reader of his own text, he is
able to show the adjustments of attitude and experience separating his current from his former self, neither denying the validity of any earlier experience, nor imposing any single “true” self. In Zeno’s Conscience, the relationship of the elder Zeno to the opinions and justifications of the younger man who is the subject of the manuscript’s reflections initially seem deceptively straightforward. The sense of a dynamic “I,” whose changing contours can be discerned in the workings of the text is constantly exposed through Zeno’s habit of calling attention to his impressions at the time of the events he narrates, often using the past tense, the past conditional, and the imperfect of subjunctive verbs such as “to think,” “to feel,” “to seem,” and “to realize,” punctuated by reflections in the present tense that express a somewhat different point of view at the time of narration, such as “Today as I am writing this, it seems to me...” or “Now that I am older...” But these sorts of statements offer no more certainty than any of the mistaken impressions to which the young Zeno fell prey and which the elder Zeno seems to delight in reporting thirty years later.

The most authoritative judgments offered in La Coscienza di Zeno of the character who Zeno was and has now become, the most persuasive definition of the consonances and contrasts between the two, is the product
of a certain kind of authorial disappearing act, wherein the immersion in a first-person narration somehow generates an auxiliary, implicit narrator who is more reliable than any single voice in the text. Judgment withheld becomes the means of uniting the readers’ interpretation with the narrator's insights. If Zeno the character insulates himself from readability through comic over- and mis-statement, Zeno the narrator has discovered the most effective means of legibility in the stylistic understatement he regularly employs to represent his own failings.

For a sizeable section of the chapter “Wife and Mistress,” when Zeno has met Carla but has not yet made her his mistress, he struggles to dominate his taste for temptation, resulting in excessive displays alternating between passionate sensitivity and affection towards his wife, and an utter incapacity to see outside the dimensions of his own desire for new desires. Zeno’s anxiety over having kissed Carla for the first time provokes a rash of justifications for that action, and a silent remorsefulness whose unintended consequence is to inspire Augusta’s sympathy, which in turn provokes an act of generosity as-compensation (not to mention as an attempt to subjugate eroticism): Zeno suggests Augusta go ahead and build “la piccola lavanderia ch’essa tanto desiderava”\(^5\) and which she associates

\(^5\) Italo Svevo, *La Coscienza di Zeno*, Dall’Oglio, 1976, p.220
with having children. The gratitude Augusta lavishes on Zeno, who by this point in his marriage has come genuinely to adore his less-than-beautiful but thoroughly worshipful wife, sets up the conditions for Zeno-the-character’s subsequent obtuseness and Zeno-the-narrator’s retrospective acuity. Zeno tells us:

Segui un pomeriggio incantevole riempito dal nostro affetto. Nella solitudine la mia coscienza era più seccante. La parola e l’affetto di Augusta valevano a calmarla. Uscimmo insieme. Poi l’accompagnai da sua madre e passai anche tutta la serata con lei.\(^6\)

The intimacy and harmony that have come -- to Zeno’s pleasant surprise -- to characterize his marriage are never more sweetly enacted than on this occasion, and they mitigate strongly in favor of Zeno’s next resolution, which is to go to Carla first thing the next day to rescind the implicit offer to become lovers that his kiss had extended the day before. But circumstances intervene between Zeno’s virtuous intentions and their enactment. Augusta, eager to prolong the conjugal tenderness, asks for Zeno’s company that next morning to go meet Ada’s future father-in-law at the Malfenti home. Zeno complies, but is agitated and impatient, viewing his participation in the family event and the conversations that linger on there as “una vera e propria costrizione” preventing him from enacting the

\(^6\) Italo Svevo, \textit{La Coscienza di Zeno}, Dall’Oglio, 1976, p.221
virtuous resolution he has made.

Throughout the description of the scene, the narrator places in view only the opinions of the young Zeno actually experiencing the scene. Never does any interruption on the part of the narrator intercede with a comment either condoning or condemning Zeno’s comportment, resolutions, or intentions. Eager to be on his way in order to accomplish “un'opera tanto utile a me e ad Augusta,” Zeno strains to devise his means of escape:

However honorable the justifications for Zeno’s urge to depart the gathering

7 Italo Svevo, La Coscienza di Zeno, Dall’Oglio, 1976, p.225
are in his mind, the dubious nature of the plan to rescind a seduction by paying a visit to the woman in question to present her with a bundle of cash, (the "busta di buon proposito" whose meaning, had Zeno ever actually handed it over, would have been as enigmatic for Carla as it was supposedly obvious to Zeno) undermines the explanations Zeno felt were true. Without having to render his criticism directly, the narrator exposes the self-indulgence of what Zeno thinks is self-sacrifice: impatience to consummate the seduction impels him, and the envelope of good resolutions affords him a veil between his conscious and unconscious motivations to license the departure.

It is precisely the lack of any editorializing on the part of the narrator – the absence of a subjective judgment on the part of the present-tense Zeno looking back on the events, in other words, the fluctuations of consciousness over the span of thirty years, that creates an extra-literary consciousness in which the readers are implicated by mentally narrating the unnarrated judgments and observations of the elder Zeno. Self-deceptions in this scene are multiple, and are not restricted to self-understanding: also patently clear to the writer of the episode and to the readers is Zeno’s obtuseness towards his wife, in whose name he was convinced he was desperate to leave, and whose thoughts are completely
misunderstood by the young Zeno. What the narrator sees, but doesn’t say explicitly that he sees, is that Augusta is afraid that the love she believes she and Zeno have come mutually to enjoy over the months since their wedding has been an illusion, or is weaker than Zeno’s past obsession with Ada. Zeno notices her lips go pale and immediately draws the analogy between her appearance here and at their wedding ceremony – a day fraught with anxieties for Augusta, who married her husband knowing he had really wanted to marry her own sister instead – but he is so absorbed in his own melodrama that the observation fails to kindle any analysis of the underlying fears uniting the two episodes. Augusta fears that witnessing the signs of Ada’s upcoming marriage to Guido is what has made Zeno so uncomfortable that he feels the uncontrollable urge to flee – and though Augusta’s misreadings of Zeno often inspire his gratitude and admiration for her as well as his attempts to live up to those misreadings, when her misreadings thwart Zeno’s immediate and overwhelming desires, he is blind to the content of her misunderstanding, and thus, can only learn from it in retrospect. (The same can be said of all Zeno’s relationships with women: they serve as a pathway to self-understanding, but only in retrospect, once they are transformed into opportunities for narrative.)

The narrating Zeno communicates these realizations precisely by not
narrating them here. Had he done so, the judgment proposed would offer a definitive interpretation of the episode and would only intensify the “unreliability” of his position as a first-person narrator – one who goes out of his way to show his lifelong predisposition to represent himself as a liar – and inevitably, his judgment would be suspect. By not commenting outright, his commentary on himself gains the solidity, form, and credibility of an omniscient narrator’s incontestable interpretation of events, while collapsing the distance between himself and the readers of the novel. Flaubert, whom Svevo greatly admired, no doubt supplies a perfect model with his technique throughout Madame Bovary of engaging the reader’s judgment more powerfully and comprehensively through his narrator’s austerity than could a Balzacian narrator with whose opinions a reader may be in agreement, but which a reader cannot experience as self-generated.

The differences here between Svevo and Rousseau are once again highly instructive: The effect of Rousseau’s insistence on causality, and his tendency to develop the twelve books of the Confessions in a chronological order (a loose one, at times, for Rousseau wanders to where necessity can be discerned) is to subjugate present identity to past sentiments, simultaneously rendering static both the past and the present. Rousseau's is a narrative explicitly conceived as a means of carrying a stable,
controlled image of the self into the future. Implicit in Rousseau’s aesthetics of self-representation is a philosophy of the self as a thoroughly knowable, narratable subject. Svevo’s techniques, however, place equal value on the past and the present, and display a compassion for the various stages of one’s consciousness, for the different decisions, and justifications for those decisions that individuals make in the course of a lifetime of trying to understand themselves. Yet this compassion does not force him to dispense with self-criticism: on the contrary, *La Coscienza di Zeno* emphasizes repeatedly that understanding comes at moments, and from directions one cannot anticipate. This is a novel of retrospective reinterpretations made accessible through a transferring of the techniques of literature and life. Notably unlike *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, where Marcel’s revisions in his interpretation of people and events depend upon His extraordinary -- and necessarily contrived -- presence at moments and in locations that afford him this exclusive role, when Zeno learns of Augusta’s true feelings about his early departure from the family gathering for Ada and Guido’s engagement, it is presented not years later, but at a distance of just a few days, and it is from Augusta herself that Zeno hears the evidence of his misconstrual: Zeno has just returned home from consummating his affair with Carla, and is so tormented over the enormity
of this that he spends the evening at home in a stupor of silent lament. When Augusta approaches him to offer comfort, it is with the conviction that she first formed days earlier that Zeno's distress is linked to Ada. "Dovevi aspettartelo! Perche tanto dolorosa sorpresa?" Augusta asks. She can't possible be referring to his first interlude with Carla? A moment later she clarifies her concerns:


For the narrator, Augusta’s words are no revelation at all; and because for the young Zeno they merely inspire a rousing self-defense for a misreading he himself engineered rather than any awareness of the limitations of his understanding of others, the irony inherent in self-representation is uncommonly clearly distilled.

Writing then, for Zeno and for Svevo, is experienced as neither an agony, nor an obligation, but a joy because of the delight in being able to laugh at oneself and make of that amusement both the theme and form of a

8 Italo Svevo, La Coscienza di Zeno, Dall’Oglio, 1976, p.237
work of art. Zeno, whose existence as both charming businessman and ironic autobiographer, fuses several fictional models more typically represented in separate characters and by disparate narrative voices, offers in his multiplicity a means of considering the imperatives and the opportunities faced by authors whose work fabricates a consciousness aiming to understand and then represent itself. The pleasure, wit, and self-delighting nature of Svevo’s irony show us a modernism that is both more committed to the pleasure principle and less pessimistic in its assessment of human nature than are many of the more widely read European texts of this period. That is not to say there is no anxiety in Svevo’s novel; far from it, since Zeno’s famously obsessive self-involvement is often triggered by a fear of aging, of social and sexual ineptitude, and of his real and imagined physical inadequacies.

But somehow, and this is part of the magic of the novel, the result of these obsessions is a comic benevolence and a profound sanity. This delicately precarious poise between the grim and the farcical, touching neither but aware of both, gives us access to an art that is redemptive because it makes life into an art-form of its own. If there is a lesson to be learned in the overlap between Svevo’s techniques and Zeno’s, a justification for the efforts of writing, it can be heard with ebullient charm in
Svevo’s own words from a letter written to Benjamin Crémiuex on May 16, 1928, shortly before his death:

“...dopo alcune settimane meno buone sto tanto bene che, con improvvisa decisione, mi sono messo a fare un altro romanzo, Il Vecchione, una continuazione di Zeno. Ne scrissi una ventina di pagine e mi diverto un mondo. Non ci sarà di male se non arriverò a terminarlo. Intanto avrò riso di gusto una volta di più nella mia vita.”

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