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Ineptitude as Cultural Senility in Italo Svevo’s second Novel

The casuistry of ineptitude both in Una Vita and in La Coscienza di Zeno can be defined as broad spectrum (professional, affective, family, social, literary). Conversely, in Senilità, the phenomenology of ineptitude is more limited and is essentially linked to Emilio’s love affair, and to the role this romance plays in the life of the character. While the other elements of the spectrum are also present in the novel, they have secondary significance and are addressed through the main theme1.

This essay analyzes the phenomenology of the emotionally inept character presented in Senilità through the tools that philology makes available for the study of Svevo’s corpus. The aim is to highlight how Svevo’s analysis of the theme of love has precise implications in the context of the author’s literary theory, because the study of the phenomenology of love seen in this novel addresses not so much the specific story played out by the subject, but rather his mind-set when reacting to events and interacting with reality. As a result, love, chosen as the theme of the novel, is a single case study embodying a more complex problem.

Avantext of Senilità

We know there are neither surviving preparatory drafts or manuscripts of Senilità nor detailed statements on how the text was planned and written. Therefore, only the study of Svevo’s surviving personal papers can provide philologically reliable information for any attempts to reconstruct the history of the concept inspiring the composition of the novel.

These letters and papers reveal two sources that can be identified with certainty as avantexts of the novel: a letter, reporting the death of Svevo’s mother2, Allegra Moravia; then there is the series comprising his Diario per la fidanzata and the letters he addressed to Livia Venezian from December 18953 to 18984.

The first text, the letter about the death of his mother, is without doubt the structural and thematic avantext of chapters 12 and 13 of the novel, which describe the death throes and demise of Amalia. The second group of texts, in other words the personal pages addressed to Livia, does not correspond to any specific section of the novel but underpins it entirely and, more precisely, is the source for two key elements: the figure of Angiolina and, particularly, the psychological dynamic between Emilio and his young lover5.

It should be clarified immediately that these avantexts are not sources of direct “literal extractions”. They cannot, in this respect, be compared to the use of personal texts in literary works that occurred even amongst contemporaries. For example, Gabriele D’Annunzio constantly extracted from his journals the notes he had taken ad hoc for his literary works, sometimes even including these “pre-literary” extracts in his works of fiction without further revision. In the case of Svevo, literary self-references are rare but there are countless thematic and structural similarities. This similarities allow us to conclude that the literary text is

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1 For a more extensive discussion to this issue see Abrugiati (1982), Baldi (1998) and Rambelli (2000).
2 This undated letter was written few days after Allegra Moravia’s death (4 October 1895) to his brother and sister-in-law, Ottavio Schmitz and Frizzi Freiberger. FS Corr. A 107.2-1/17.
3 The first surviving letter, subsequent to their engagement, is dated 23/12/1895.
4 For a more extensive discussion of the issue see Santi (2011) and Contini (1979; 1987).
5 It should be stressed that the philological analysis of the avantexts has direct repercussions on the dating of the novel, the relationship of the novel with Svevo’s biography and on specific issues already amply discussed by the author’s critics (including the figure of Giuseppina Zergol, for instance). This is not the place for further discussion of the problem, but reference can be made to Santi (2011) ch. I.5.
inspired directly by the personal text, which therefore represents a phase of “live” study, although the author had no autobiographical or self-referential intentions. Indeed, the real and personal event is identified through details in the literary text, but the latter moves away from the former without further possible overlays when the author develops the themes typical of his narrative, which are absent in the private texts.

Therefore, both Amalia and Angiolina disconnect from the real female figures that Svevo writes about in private, and fact and fiction are separated by the literary implications with which the author imbues his fictional characters. In particular, the gap between the real and the fictional world is found in the themes that constantly recur in research on Svevo’s writings; in other words, those found not only in Senilità, and which thus go beyond the direct object of pre-literary or pre-fictional study that Senilità may have found in reality.

To accomplish this journey from reality to literature, the author selects a series of real elements that he re-functionalizes within the literary text, basing himself on the logic of the literary text itself. The items Svevo selects are consequently only those appropriate or adequate to his literary research and which lead to greater accuracy in handling the issues dear to him. Thus the private text acts as an initial reflection while the literary text reutilizes this reflection in a much more structured and complex context. As a result, Svevo’s characters can no longer be interpreted in a biographical key and acquire full significance only in a strictly literary dimension.

**Livia and Angiolina**

I try now to see how the data emerging from the philological research allow us to understand the specific handling of the theme of ineptitude entrusted to Senilità. To this end, I consider in detail only the relationship that established itself between the novel and the personal papers dedicated to Livia Veneziani.

It is not possible to reproduce here – even schematically – a detailed analysis of the points of contact that can be found between Livia and Angiolina. It need only be noted that they emerge in the first letter to Livia (23 December 1895) and are subsequently systematically repeated. In general, the connections that appear among the private papers,
where Svevo describes and analyzes their love, and the way Emilio’s love for Angiolina is described and analyzed are not accidental. In particular there is a correspondence between the real figure of Livia, depicted by Ettore, and that of Angiolina, which leads to the supposition that Livia was the model for the literary character. Secondly, and this is far more important, we can see the torment, the mental processes and attitudes which are consequential to the uniqueness and novelty of the feelings nurtured for Livia emerge in those of Emilio for Angiolina.

As an example of the analysis summarized above, we can take one of the characteristics shared by the two women, namely the fact that both Livia and Angiolina are described as having a light bearing presence (they are *luciferae*), endowed with a beauty that is axiomatically associated with a series of moral attributes such as chastity and purity. They are therefore represented as providing moral *salsus* for whoever draws aesthetic and intellectual joy from looking at them. In other words, the two women are presented as angel-like figures and the relationship with them is characterized in terms of the *locus amoenus*, the idyllic respite in the context of the lives of the two men and the lack of fulfillment they are experiencing, so that the women represent the occasion for uplifting emotion and spirit.

This transfer process of the female literary model, as determined by Italian poetic tradition, onto the woman who is the object of the feelings of love experienced by the cultured man who nurtures literary ambitions is not new in Svevo. Indeed, its most direct and relevant antecedent is to be found in *Una Vita*, precisely in the way in which Alfonso places the filter of romantic tradition between himself and the woman, Annetta. As Mathijs Duyck (2012) explains, this filter effectively stops Alfonso “seeing” the woman but he does try to identify in her an image of womanhood and an idea of love he has acquired from literature. It is particularly interesting that in *Una Vita*, as in *Senilità*, the moments when the literary setting is galvanized are those very same moments when the character believes he has found fulfillment of his own desires. However, the moments when dreams or desires collide with reality to reveal their tenuousness are those in which the literary model adopted for construing reality proves inadequate or illusory. In the case of *Una Vita*, the process of literaturization operated by Alfonso fails and produces outcomes that in part differ from those achieved later in *Senilità*, but what is interesting to underline here is that there is still an inter-textual constant in adopting a literary matrix that affects the reading of the world.

Comparison of the avantext and text reveals the distance between Livia and Angiolina, and allows a quantification and qualification of the distance between real inspiration and its literary re-functionalization. The distance is measured where the “real” elements that the fictional character derives from Livia are developed within the logic of the novel in their specific literary matrix, which is independent of the inspirational figure.

In fact, Livia is associated with a concrete existential perspective since the betrothed represents “l’unica [...] grande, grande speranza di vera, solida felicità” (Svevo 2004: 680),

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7 Or even goddesses: “il desiderio fece sentire ad Emilio la dea capace di qualunque nobiltà di suono o di parola” (Svevo 1898: 155) for Livia see infra Svevo (2004: 694-695).

8 “Nella vita priva di qualsiasi contenuto serio, diveniva seria e importante anche Angiolina!” (Svevo 1898: 118).
while the socially inferior and morally inadequate Angiolina is not and cannot be the bride from whom “attendere la pace e la felicità della [...] vita” (Svevo 2004: 692).

Thus, even if there is recourse to literary models in the private papers, to mirror Ettore’s love affair, the model still does not affect the reality of the biographical experience. In point of fact, what is staged in the literary text is the failure of the interpretive capacity derived from literature, upon which the character relies to find his direction in real life.

This divergence is already evident from the iconographic standpoint. Both Livia and Angiolina are described through the topical female attributes of Stil Novo and Petrarchan poetry. However, Livia’s description stops at the list of somatic features, while Angiolina is depicted in such a way as to become a double parody of the literary model. By parody I mean, like Tynianov (1929), that the parodied work serves as a proven pattern for the introduction of a new or different material. Since every opus comprises a systematic or systemic interaction, a correlation of elements where none are neutral, if there is introduction of new material or one element is replaced by another, this means that the sign of a different system has been added to the first system, so that the systematic aspect is destroyed and the conventionality of the system comes to light.

In point of fact, Angiolina destroys from within the conventional image of the woman who is angelic both in beauty and in morality by failing to respect it. She voids the image and destroys its credibility, or at the very least its utility (Santi 2007). In other words, Angiolina, unlike Livia, is a literary figure whose purpose is to demonstrate how the *topos* used by the male character is outdated. In this sense, Emilio, who is the ambassador for such models, shows himself to be an ambassador of an outdated form of knowledge, with the character reacting defensively to the failure and taking refuge in memories and in the past.

At the end of the novel, Emilio actually “saves” the literary model, rendering it eternal in an image (which combines Amalia and Angiolina) that has no contact with reality but is rather an unreal icon. Moreover, it is precisely because it is unreal that it can satisfy Emilio’s expectations.

Another example might be found in the men’s task of educating women, an operation thematized both for Livia and for Angiolina. However, in the case of Livia, Ettore says: “Per dirti il vero se avessi mai creduto che i libri possano avere influenza su una donna te ne avrei proibita la lettura”, while in the case of Angiolina, Emilio is unable to understand that the function of educator, which he believes to be part of the social and cultural role expected of him as a man, is insubstantial. What actually happens in *Senilità* is that Emilio tries to educate Angiolina in two different and contrasting ways, both of which fail. If these two models of education are nothing more than contrasting versions of one another, then they are simply the same model with the sign reversed, and the sense of this twice attempted and failed education is that the content of education is irrelevant. What matters is the gesture, the act of educating, or better yet the intellectual disposition of the educator whose role is to adapt, to standardize, to make fleeting reality (the woman) conform to a preceding idea or concept.

Nevertheless, since this foregoing concept, or the idea associated with the figure of the woman and her role in a love story, is not developed autonomously by Emilio but is rather extracted from literary tradition, and even more so from culture and social conventions, and as these models belong to the past, it can only be deduced that a system replicated without a capacity to produce results, which actually reveals itself to be barren, is an old and even “senile” model.

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9 See also Contini (1997).
Senility and youth

The private papers also state that the opposition between the subject’s expectations and substantiations received in matters of love are a case of a broader phenomenon, this being the contrast that is seen between the individual’s existential expectations and actual realization thereof. Svevo actually writes explicitly to Livia after she has let him down: “Non ne ho amarezza ma pure non tutto il ricordo di iersera è dolce. [...] Così è dunque fatta la vita! [...] Non tu, la vita è fatta così ed io ne soffirìo sempre” (Svevo 2004: 688-689).

The woman in this sense, Livia as much as Angiolina, is not responsible for the man’s psychological and emotional state, since this state is inherent to the life of the individual and is so unavoidable as to seem inheritable (and therefore a genetic abnormality). Indeed, Svevo writes to Livia telling her to imagine handing this trait down to the son she is expecting (in fact, it turned out to be a daughter, Letizia).

The root of this predisposition of the individual is basically of intellectual origin and lies in the doubt that afflicts man, in the disease of dreams and rhetoric.

Non ne ho amarezza ma pure non tutto il ricordo di iersera è dolce. [...] Così è dunque fatta la vita! [...] Non tu, la vita è fatta così ed io ne soffirìo sempre” (Svevo 2004: 688-689).

This intellectualistic predisposition of Svevo’s is frequently the subject of discussion between Livia and Ettore, from the early months of their engagement. At one point, after she scolds him for seeming indifferent or detached, and expressing an ironic intellectualism, Svevo tries to explain his point of view to his fiancée and writes:

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 [...] l’indifferenza per la vita è l’essenza della mia vita intellettuale. In quanto è spirito o forza, la mia parola non è altro che ironia ed io ho paura che il giorno in cui a te riuscisse di farmi credere nella vita (è cosa impossibile) io mi troverei grandemente sminuito.

In the context of a love story, this distrust or indifference towards life and the prospect of happiness translates into a conceptualizing, cerebral attitude that undermines emotional delight and de-harmonizes intellect and passion, to the point that Livia realizes it, as proved when Svevo writes: “Mi dicesti che tutto questo libro ti sembrava molto fin de siècle. Sarebbe male, male assai, se tu nelle mie parole non sentissi la passione” (Svevo 2004: 683).

The expression fin de siècle recurs repeatedly to connote lack of passion and an idea bereft of feeling. It is precisely this intellectual idea that refuses simple emotional delight and tends to raise doubts, frustration and the entire casuistry described by Ettore and then by Svevo with regard to Emilio. In Diario per la fidanzata, Ettore actually writes that doubts (which he calls “frogs”) blunt passion and plague a man’s relationship with a woman: “Le rane ora non dicono altro fuori che sulla mia età e sulla mia salute! Dubitano, dubitano! Quac, quac, quac! Bestie infami! Sono desse che mi tolgono la tranquillità, il sonno, la salute!” (Svevo 2004: 701).

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13 “Si tratta di amare bene e calmo, si tratta di aver i nervi sani per guarire dei dubbi e sentire l’affetto ugualmente intenso ogni mattina, ogni sera” (Svevo 2004: 676).
Frogs are thus images of the intellectualistic doubt that make Ettore’s love so fin de siècle and are therefore a metaphor for an inability to love simply and spontaneously, which Livia herself is able to do, in contrast with the decadent love of her fiancé, who writes: “In fondo un individuo decadente come me non sa amare bene” (Svevo 2004: 690).

Ettore is essentially destined to love only as his era allows: without spontaneity and plagued by the rhetoric that excludes any abandonment and makes him emotionally inferior to an individual who is not “decadent” (that is to say, Livia):

Mai non ho avuto tanto chiara la coscienza della mia inferiorità sentimentale! Oh! per divenire uguale a te con la tua semplicità d’espressione non mi basterebbe neppure di divenire sano e forte! Tu ami semplicemente e nella tua mente sana la cosa nuova s’adagia accanto a tutte le altre cose buone e caste che albergano sotto i tuoi capelli biondi e ne risulta un tutto buono, casto, sincero, assoluto. Io invece, come sono differente! [...] Hai poi ricevuta la lettera che ti scrissi e leggesti anche queste pagine. Come l’espressione ne è poco sincera in confronto alla tua, tu Knospe; come ne è ricercato il pensiero, come vi è accarezzata sempre piuttosto l’idea che il sentimento! Il terribile rétore che in me è sempre in guardia, prende il sopravvento e offusca tutto quanto io ti posso dire. [...] Io ti amerrò sempre come la fine del secolo me lo permetterà e non altrimenti. [...] Così dimosterai anche una volta che tu sei incorruttibile! (Svevo 2004: 694-695)

Man thus suffers an intimate spiritual failing that comes from being “l’ultimo prodotto della fermentazione di un secolo, una cosa che non può continuare perché non sa volere intensamente altro che la quiete o la soddisfazione breve”, which implies that in the absence of female figures, both Ettore and Emilio, as subjects incapable of “desiring”, would lose the very source of sentiment. The woman enters “raggiante di gioventù” (Svevo 1898: 5) the man’s life bringing him the gift of her health and youth, while she alone runs the risk of losing something precious: “Tu sola coi tuoi 21 anni hai da perdere tutto” (Svevo 2004: 682). The young woman thus brings what is indispensable to the man. Proof of this can be seen in (some of the) several later appearances of the theme of youth in the novel that are associated with the woman:

Ci pensava continuamente come un vecchio alla propria giovinezza. Come era stato giovane quella notte in cui gli sarebbe abbisognato di uccidere per tranquillarsi. [...] Ma tutto era passato per sempre! Angiolina viveva, ma non poteva più dargli la giovinezza! (Svevo 1898: 153)

La gioventù ritornava! Egli non anelava più di uccidere ma avrebbe voluto annientarsi dalla vergogna e dal dolore. (Svevo 1898: 159)

E dire che poche ore prima egli aveva pensato d’aver perduto la capacità di sognare. Oh! la gioventù era ritornata! Correva le sue vene prepotente come mai prima e annullava qualunque risoluzione che la mente senile avesse fatta. (Svevo 1898: 160)

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15 “nella sua mente non s’acquietava la tendenza a ricostruire l’Ange che nella realtà non aveva trovato. Il malcontento lo spingeva a rifugiarsi nei sogni più dolci. Angiolina quindi gli dava tutto: Il possesso della sua persona e – essendone essa l’origine, – anche il sogno del poeta.” (Svevo 1898: 172); “Angiolina era […] [Emilio] Si disse: – M’è fuggita la vita. – Invece, per qualche tempo, la fuga d’Angiolina lo ripose in piena vita, nel più vivace dei dolori e dei risentimenti. Sognò vendette e amore” (Svevo 1898: 255).
As I near the conclusion of the analysis I review the steps taken so far: access to the author’s papers reveals the existence of a series of avantexts, in particular in relation to female figures. Furthermore, we can observe that the relationship established with the woman urges the man to activate sterile or senile socio-cultural models. However, this process (prompted by the woman) is revealed to be a case of broader phenomenology, in which senility is the symbol of an entire cultural and social system that is no longer proactive or effective. The woman is thus only one possibility for hopes of “renewal”, of a new youth, developing in the man: Svevo actually writes of Livia: “Qui termina il primo periodo e incomincia l’evo moderno” (Svevo 2004: 704), and also “Ma del resto la cosa più importante è che da questo comincia l’era novella” (Svevo 2004: 707), and later “Ecco! da quest’ora comincia l’era novella”16. For Emilio, such a new era is clearly precluded, while Livia is found to be a regenerative force able to convince Ettore to at least have hope17, or to attempt to commence his “healing”.18 The personal text divides from the literary draft precisely in this difference in result, deriving from the themes connected to the female figures.

To conclude I return to the concept of the “senility” of the inept: I’ve said that women and – above all – the feeling of love they arouse is associated with the idea of youth, while the ageing – namely the absence of proactive capabilities – that afflicts fin de siècle man, in other words the inept man, and which even emerges in the concept of love, is not an individual condition but rather part of the symptomatology of an era.

Once again, this is philologically provable. Indeed, when Svevo was embarking on a new edition of Senilità, faced with the option of changing the title, he decided that there should be no change because the title explained not only the character but also the period and culture of which the character was an expression, and it is in this sense that Svevo can write that he experienced it (see infra). Svevo wrote to Montale:

Poi c’è un dubbio grave: il Larbaud odia il titolo Senilità che gli sembra una bugia. A me ancora adesso che sono tanto senile mi sembra proprio per l’individuo e per il suo mondo.19

In one of the intermediate drafts of the preface to the second edition he is even more explicit:

Mi sembrerebbe proprio di mutilare il libro privandolo del suo titolo. Io non so neppure l’origine di esso, non so se attribui un carattere senile al protagonista del romanzo, alla sua razza […], o all’ambiente in cui si muoveva. Ma è certo che il titolo mi guidò e che lo vissi.20

and, in the final draft:

17 “La mia sposa è un bonbon ed io spero che mangiandolo i miei denti marci risaneranno” (Svevo 2004: 686).
18 “ora che sono tanto deciso di guarire e di ringiovanire” (Svevo 2004: 686).
19 FS Corr A 76.6-3 ((10/03/1926).
Anch’io, che so ormai che cosa sia una vera senilità, sorrido talvolta di aver attribuito ad essa un eccesso in amore. Eppure, neppure per conformarmi ad un consiglio del Larbaud [...] devo avere dei motivi fortissimi. Mi sembrerebbe di mutilare il libro privandolo del suo titolo che a me pare possa spiegare e scusare qualche cosa. Quel titolo mi guidò e lo vissi (Svevo 1927: 8)

Svevo, then, refused the title proposed by Larbaud (Emilio Brentani), despite having considered adopting it in the frontispiece of the first annotated version of Senilità, on which he started the revision for its second edition. The new title was rejected because it would have shifted the emphasis to the individual and undermine the value of this individual as an example and representative, and also because it would have negated the exemplary value of the “excess” represented by Emilio, which is only occasionally present as an excess “in love” but ultimately is the prototypical ineptitude of an era and the cultural system that the era reflects.

Moreover, the title sums up the novel’s non-individual but collective nature, and the ineptitude expressed by the character is already evident in the first title Svevo formulated: Il carnevale di Emilio. Indeed, this title suggests the metaphor of carnival as a moment of deferral, voiced in the text:

Quel carnevale, perché meschino, gli dava [al Balli] un’ira da moralista; più tardi, molto più tardi, anche lui vi avrebbe presa parte, dimentico del tutto di quell’ira, innamorato del lusso e dei colori. Ma intanto ricordava d’assistere al preludio di una triste commedia. Incominciava a formarsi il vortice che per un istante avrebbe sottratto l’operaio, la sartina, il povero borghese, alla noia della vita volgare per condurli poi al dolore. Ammaccati, sperduti, alcuni sarebbero ritornati all’antica via divenuta però più greve; gli altri non avrebbero trovata mai più la quaresima (Svevo 1898: 83-84)

Carnival, like the experience of love, is a moment of respite from boredom and from mundane life, an illusion. Similarly, the sentiment of love for Angiolina simultaneously conquers and arouses moralistic reactions and again, like the adventure of love, leaves everybody (“l’operaio, la sartina, il povero borghese [...] alcuni [...] altri”) “battered and lost”, in other words, unhappy and without points of reference, without redemption, and therefore without a future, without “quaresima” and with no alternative to the “antica via”, just like Emilio at the end of the affair and what he represents.

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