Elizabeth Schächter

**Svevo on Svevo**

The years 1925-1928 represented a period of belated fame for Italo Svevo, when at last he was accorded due recognition as a writer of international stature. Giuseppe Morreale from Milan, the publisher of the second editions of Svevo’s three novels, *Senilità* (1927), *Una vita* (1930), and *La coscienza di Zeno* (1930), was eager to publicise ‘la scoperta di un nuovo astro’ … ‘fra i più grandi scrittori d’Europa’, to cite his own words,¹ about whom little was known. Thus in 1928, at the request of Morreale, Svevo asked his journalist friend Giulio Cesari (1869-1944) to draft some biographical notes which he then extensively revised. This became the *Profilo autobiografico* which was published posthumously in 1929 in a small volume entitled *Italo Svevo scrittore. Italo Svevo nella sua nobile vita* that also included Silvio Benco’s obituary which had first appeared in *Il Piccolo* on 15 September 1928; an anthology of reviews by Italian and foreign critics compiled by Cesari,² an article by Aldo Palazzeschi, and Umberto Saba’s *Progetto per un’epigrafe di Italo Svevo*. Morreale intended to publish 20,000-25,000 copies to be distributed gratis. On the composition of the *Profilo* ‘a quattro mani’, written in the third person, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who wrote what.³

At this point, it would be wise to heed the words of Mario Lavagetto: ‘cautele necessarie: perché molti dettagli nella vita di Svevo sono destinati a restare imprecisi e appaiono frutto di ricostruzioni a posteriori … ci troviamo a fare i conti con un’identità sfuggente … ad ampie zone buie se ne contrappongono … altre, molto … brevi’.⁴ And also to recall Zeno’s comment: ‘con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo!’⁵ To some extent, the *Profilo* fleshes out the information that Svevo sent to Eugenio Montale and Benjamin Crémieux: the profile he wrote to Montale is brief:

Nacqui a Trieste nel 1861. A 12 anni fui mandato in un villaggio presso Würzburgo in una scuola commerciale ove rimasi fino a 17 anni. Poi frequentai per 2 anni la Scuola Sup. Comm. Revoltella di Trieste. Indi entrai in una Banca ove rimasi fino a 38 anni. Ne uscii, dopo il fiasco di *Senilità*, per lavorare in un’industria che mi fece soggiornare per

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¹ See Morreale’s letters to Svevo, dated 20 April 1927 and 23 May 1928, in Maier, pp. 133-34; 178.
² See his letter to Svevo of 31 August 1928 in Maier, pp. 188-89: ‘ho letto … tutte quelle centinaia di articoli … per trarne i riassunti … Sai, amico mio, che son venute 95 cartelline da quel spoglio?!’ (p. 188).
³ In his brief preface to this volume, Morreale recounts that Cesari gave Svevo handwritten notes which Svevo then typed up, but ‘accintosi alla ricopiatura, e come procedeva nell’opera, tanto mutò, corresse, rettificò, aggiunse, da trasformare le note del Cesari in un’opera nuova, originale, bellissima: l’autobiografia di Italo Svevo. E’questa che l’editore … dona oggi al pubblico italiano’, in Briganti, p. 3. There also exists in the Fonda Savio archive, an unsigned, unfinished typescript of Cesari’s draft for the *Profilo autobiografico*, reproduced in Briganti, pp. xi-xviii. See also Bertoni’s comments in Svevo, 2004, pp. 1452-53; and Cavaglion, p. 132: ‘un “patto autobiografico” a quattro mani … non semplice a districarsi … Sarà proprio Svevo l’autore del *Profilo*?’
⁴ Lavagetto, ‘Cronologia’, in Svevo, 2004, p. Ll. See also Calimani, p. 97: ‘e quali le difficoltà per dare un ritratto chiaro di … Italo Svevo? Prima di tutto le notevoli reticenze ed ambiguità fraposte dallo scrittore stesso, che circondò sempre di un velo la sua vita privata’; and Gatt-Rutter, p. 16: ‘Hardly anything about Svevo is straightforward: not his name or date of birth, nor his family origins’.
varii mesi all’anno a Londra. Visitai spesso per affari la Germania la Francia e l’Irlanda. Ecco tutto.6

These minimal disclosures were divulged within the context of a private correspondence. How would Svevo construct his literary persona for a fascist public? In Trieste fascism was firmly established: the Fascio di Combattimento had been formed in April 1919 from a nucleus of the National Liberal party; the official fascist newspaper, Il Popolo di Trieste, was founded in the same year; fascism was equated with italianeità. This symbiosis can be seen in the figure of Giulio Cesari, co-author of the Profilo: as a journalist he wrote for the Irredentist paper L’Indipendente; he was co-editor of La Nazione, conceived in 1918 to celebrate Trieste’s redemption, and in 1922 he moved over to Il Popolo di Trieste. In other words, Cesari’s nationalism evolved into Fascism.7 Svevo never became a member of the Fascist party, but he did belong to the Unione industriale fascista, and in 1925 he was awarded the title of Cavaliere del Regno. The Veneziani family, on the other hand, were fascist sympathizers from the outset; indeed Livia Veneziani, his wife, joined the Fascist party on 23 March 1919, ‘fatto rarissimo per una donna […] aveva la qualifica di antemarcia, che distingueva i fascisti iscritti prima della Marcia su Roma’.8

Thus the opening statement of the Profilo has to explain away Svevo’s pseudonym ‘che sembra voler affratellare la razza italiana e quella germanica’;9 Germany had been Italy’s adversary in the First World War which had ended only a decade before. In several reviews of La coscienza di Zeno the author was attacked for having adopted such an unpatriotic surname.10 The racial aspect of the pseudonym, which combined Svevo’s Italian and Germanic ethnicity and had been chosen as such – ‘Ettore Schmitz’s pseudonym … indicates Italy and Germany (Swabia) as his double homeland’11 – is jettisoned in favour of a cultural dimension: the influence of the philosopher Schopenhauer and also ‘al suo pseudonimo … fu indotto non dal suo lontano antenato tedesco, ma dal suo prolungato soggiorno in Germania nell’adolescenza’, which is then criticised: ‘l’insegnamento in quel collegio non era certamente dei piú perfetti’ (p. 799). In addition, Svevo is evasive about his father’s origins, emphasising instead his italianità: ‘il padre suo … si considerò italiano, e sposò un’italiana … in molte circostanze accanto ai nomi dei piú fattivi patrioti liberali italiani, si può trovare il nome del padre di Italo’ (p.

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6 Svevo, Carteggio, p. 157. The letter is dated 27 March 1926. See also his letter to Crémieux in which he was a little more forthcoming, p. 92.
8 Anzellotti, 1991, p. 63. Livia was Anzellotti’s great-aunt. See also Gatt-Rutter, p. 323: ‘Livia, in common with the other Veneziani women, was an active member of the women’s Fascio, and the firm supported the regime financially’.
9 Profilo autobiografico in Svevo, 2004, p. 799. Subsequent page references to the Profilo will be given in parentheses in the main text after the quotations.
10 See Gatt-Rutter, pp. 317-18; 320.
11 Gatt-Rutter, p. 11; see also p. 23. To his German translator, Svevo wrote that he was proud of his surname Schmitz: ‘porto con qualche orgoglio un cognome tedesco’, cited in Cavaglion, p. 96. He was also proud to be Italian: he wrote to his wife Livia on 17 May 1898: ‘Telegrafarono un lungo dispaccio che, per la cortesia a cui è ispirato, anche in questi tristi tempi rende orgogliosi d’essere italiani’. In Svevo, Opera Omnia, vol. 1, p. 90.
And to further counteract any unfavourable initial impression, Svevo’s own patriotic credentials are given due prominence. Alberto Cavaglion suggests this is the work of his ‘antico intimo amico’ (p. 799): ‘la mano di Cesari rafforza oltre misura l’impegno irredentista’.

Thus we read in the second paragraph that Svevo was a director of the Lega Nazionale, the Società Ginnastica Triestina, which was closed down many times for its anti-Austrian stance, and the Società Patria; and that he was a close associate of the Italian nationalist deputy Edoardo Gasser. We are also informed that he read the national poet Giosué Carducci, ‘an obligatory point of reference in Fascist Italy’, and the leading literary critic and historian Francesco De Sanctis; that ‘per lunghi anni fu collaboratore assiduo dell’Indipendente’ (p. 802); that he wrote for La Nazione, ‘un giornale veramente italiano’ (p. 811), and ‘poté onorarsi dell’amicizia di Riccardo Pitteri, Cesare Rossi ed anche Attilio Hortis’ (p. 802). They were all prominent figures of the Triestine literary milieu: Pitteri was a poet; Rossi, an editor of L’Indipendente and a poet – he composed verses for Svevo’s wedding; and Hortis, director of the Biblioteca Civica, historian, patriot and politician.

A glaring omission, one of the ‘ampie zone buie’, from all this rhetoric on the Italianità of the writer Italo Svevo is the fact that he was also a Jew, albeit a converted one. I have come to agree with Cavaglion that the phrase in the Profilo autobiografico ‘il padre d’Italo era già un assimilato quando giovanetto intraprese a Trieste un attivo e lucroso commercio di vetrami’ (p. 799), conveys in this context that Svevo’s father had successfully integrated into the ‘crogiolo assimilatore’ of Trieste, as the city is described in the opening sentence: ‘l’assimilazione di cui si discute non può essere quella dell’ebraio, ma dell’italiano che ha cancellato in sé ogni residuo della germanicità dei nonni’. However, I diverge from Cavaglion’s statement that ‘il termine “assimilazione”, nel vocabolario del tempo, anche a Trieste, non aveva ancora la valenza spregiativa che avrà in seguito. E’ comunque termine inimmaginabile sulla bocca dell’agnostic Svevo’. The concept of assimilation would have had another significance for the Schmitz family who were part of the Jewish community of Trieste. This aspect of Svevo’s life and his ambivalence towards his Jewish identity have been well documented; he rarely mentioned it even within the confines of his private correspondence; he also did not allude to it in the biographical notes he sent to Crémieux who was also Jewish. What perhaps is less well known is that in Trieste from 1862 to 1915, one of the most influential Jewish journals, Il Corriere Israelitico, was published. Its main objectives were to promote Jewish culture and religion, to keep its readers informed of Jewish activities worldwide and, from 1897, to support the political Zionism of Theodor Herzl; it also carried regular reports on the local community. Over the years, its editors treated the

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13 Cavaglion, p. 133.
14 Gatt-Rutter, p. 38.
15 See Veneziani Svevo, pp. 21; 89-90.
17 Cavaglion, p. 71.
18 Ibidem.
19 See, for example, Schächter, 2000, chapter two, ‘Svevo and the Triestine Jewish Community’; Moloney, chapter two, ‘Italo Svevo scrittore ebreo’; and Serafini, pp. 165-75.
subject of assimilation and the various forms in which it manifested itself: diminution of and indifference to traditional customs and religious practices; deliberate non-disclosure or repudiation of the individual’s Jewish origins in public and private life; renunciation of the faith; intermarriage; abandonment of Judaism through conversion to another religion and thus total assimilation to the host society. This list of disengagement from Judaism reflects the trajectory of Italo Svevo. For one of the journal’s editors, Rabbi Dante Lattes, the term assimilation had indeed ‘una valenza spregiativa’: he was harsh and unwavering in his condemnation of assimilationist Jews whom he perceived as enemies of Zionism and dangerous instigators of anti-semitism.

Svevo had been the victim of anti-semitism, and several reviews, in 1926, suggested that his recent literary fame was the fabrication of a foreign Jewish cabal; it was thought that Montale must also be Jewish because he contributed to ‘il caso Svevo’; that in real life Svevo bore a Semitic name. As Enrico Ghidetti points out, Svevo’s newfound celebrity of the late 1920s soon turned to posthumous vilification: ‘la censure fascista tenterà di risospingere nella clandestinità il “caso” ingombrante di uno scrittore ebreo dal cognome tedesco, specializzato nel narrare storie di inetti sulla falsariga della fosca e immorale pseudoscienza di uno stregone vienese’. In 1939, the bronze bust of Svevo in the Giardino Pubblico was removed by Fascist thugs and in its place were scrawled the words ‘Giudeo, il bronzo sia dato alla patria’.

As well as evasions and omissions, the Profilo contains ‘piccole mitologie’; the writer as ‘a martyr and a hero’; his stoical renunciation of a literary vocation; the ‘silenzio glaciale’ that greeted the publication of his second and third novels; the struggles he had to face – the theme of ‘la lotta per la vita’ being a leitmotif of his fiction. In order to explain why he had spent so many years – eighteen years in fact from 1880 to 1898 – working as a ‘piccolo impiegato … della Banca Union di Vienna’, Svevo states that he was compelled to give up any hope of furthering his studies because of ‘la catastrofe’, ‘la sventura’ that his father’s business activities. The reality was somewhat different. However, it is the case that Svevo’s life as a bank clerk ‘è descritta accuratamente in una parte del suo primo romanzo Una vita … ed anche le due ore serali di ogni giorno passate alla Biblioteca Civica’ (pp. 800-801) and is also somewhat self-deprecatingly reflected in the description of Emilio Brentani, the protagonist of Senilità, as ‘un impiegatuccio che gode nei circoli cittadini di una piccola fama letteraria’ (p. 804). Svevo’s second novel was not received in total silence; ‘nessuno giornale italiano se ne occupò’ (p. 805). There were in fact six reviews, some favourable; Giulio Cesari claimed that Senilità was widely read in Trieste’s circulating libraries; and there were nine

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20 See Schächter, 2000, p. 56.
21 See Cavaglion, p. 41; Gatt-Rutter, p. 328; and Ghidetti, p. 273
22 Ghidetti, p. 265.
23 Anzellotti, 1985, p. 279.
24 Cavaglion, p. 133: ‘il diritto-dovere di alimentare qualche piccolo mitologia di se’.
26 From his brother’s diary it is clear that their father’s serious financial difficulties occurred several years later: ‘21 Ottobre 1884: ‘gli affari di papà vanno molto male … il suo capitale è ora ridotto ai minimi termini … immagina che nel 1876 papà aveva una sostanza di circa 100.000 fiorini’; Schmitz, p. 140. See also Gatt-Rutter, pp. 48-51; 54.
reviews of La coscienza di Zeno.  

27. John Gatt-Rutter suggests that Svevo has to justify ‘the quarter of a century’s failure to publish’, so he constructed his ‘myth of heroic self denial’.  

28. In his letters too, there is the recurring motif of himself as an ‘eroe fallimentare’.  

29. After his perceived failure of the reception of Senilità, he wrote to Livia: ‘Assisto proprio alla fine dei miei sogni estetici e questo quando ci penso trovo che sia molto male. Forse se arrivo alla vecchiaia avrò tempo di pentirmene sentendo di avere offesa la mia intima natura mancando al compito a cui per 38 anni mi erede nato’.  

30. As in many instances in his life, he yielded to the force of circumstances and renounced his ambitions. Thus in the Profilo we read of his sacrifice of literature to life: a ‘proposito ferreo’; ‘la necessità della rinunzia (p. 807); ‘era … vano un suo sforzo ulteriore’; bisognava rassegnarsi’ (p. 808).  

31. And he devoted his free time to playing the violin, not too well, as is touchingly described ‘con qualche tristezza’ (p. 808) in La coscienza di Zeno.  

There is also another reason for Svevo’s renunciation of literature: ‘his long-standing linguistic inferiority complex’, to which he makes several references in the Profilo: the few critics who reviewed Una vita ‘dedicarono molte parole (pur troppo giustificate) a rimproveri per la povertà di lingua infarcita di solecismi e di formazioni dialettali’ (p. 804); ‘la sua lingua non poteva adornarsi di parole ch’egli non sentiva … la sua lingua viva non poteva essere altra che la loquela triestina’ (p. 808). However, it is also clear that Svevo can now afford to publicly acknowledge these difficulties since they, in the opinion of his French advocates, have been recognised as his linguistic originality; indeed, he adds, with his customary ironic humour, it has been shown that he writes as badly in Italian as Proust does in French; no mean comparison after all! ‘Senz’alcuna malizia né per il Proust né per lo Svevo sia ricordato qui che ad ambedue si rimproverano scorrettezze di lingua.’ (p. 806).  

Nevertheless, he initially feared rejection from France too, as is apparent in his reply to the first French writer, the poet Valery Larbaud, to express admiration for his work: ‘Avevo paura che scropandomi tanto scalcinato m’avreste voltato le spalle. Non l’avete fatto ed è una cosa indimenticabile. Ma in Italia ci sono delle persone incantate

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27 See Briganti, pp. xxxii-xxxiii; xxxviii; and Gatt-Rutter, pp. 161; 163; 318.  
29 Contini, p. 17.  
30 The letter is dated 26 May 1898 in Svevo, Opera Omnia, vol. 1, p. 115.  
31 See, for example, his letter of 28 May 1898 in Opera Omnia, vol. 1, p. 120.  
32 Gatt-Rutter, p. 332.  
33 Svevo also makes mention of the language problem in his letters: see, for example, his letters to Montale of 15 March and 3 April 1926, and those to Marie Anne Comnènes of 28 November 1925 and 16 March 1926, in Carteggio, pp. 109, 118, 155, and 160. See also Lepschy, pp. 227-39. Giorgio Voghera notes the influence of German on Svevo’s style and suggests somewhat bizarrely that ‘l’unica soluzione sarebbe stata che Svevo ci avesse dato un testo mistilingue’, pp. 107-109 (p. 109). Valerio Jahier, on the other hand, praises Svevo’s ‘dimesa veste linguistica’ in particular of the first two novels published ‘in pieno bizantinismo d’annunziano’; see his letter to Svevo of November 1927, in Carteggio, p. 234.
nel piacere di trovare dei romanzi scritti male. Parola d’onore’.  

In her biography, Livia Veneziani effectively conveys Svevo’s astonishment at reading Larbaud’s words: ‘Egregio Signore e Maestro, daché ho ricevuto e letto La coscienza di Zeno ho fatto tutto quello che ho potuto per fare conoscere in Francia questo libro ammirevole’; he thought the letter was some kind of joke. Within months, similar letters followed from Benjamin Crémieux and his wife Marie Anne Comnène. The favourable French reviews are given prominence in the Profilo with lengthy quotations, some in French, in which Svevo is compared to Dickens, Flaubert, Proust, and Tolstoy. His profound gratitude towards his French admirers is also evident in his correspondence with them: for example, to Larbaud, ‘io vivo ancora della Sua lettera’; to Marie Anne Comnène, ‘La cara Sua del 21 provocò a me la solita emozione di riconoscenza’; ‘sono … beato e riconoscente per tutta la vita al signor Crémieux per quanto ha fatto per me’. Her letters to him must have been balm to his ears: their leitmotif was ‘votre gloire en France’; and how he longed for this; how vital it was for him is also articulated in these letters: ‘Chi Le scrive ora è un uomo quasi celebre … Sono noto a tutti’; ‘bello sarebbe venire a salutarla da letterato’; ‘il successo mi fece piuttosto bene’; ‘Deve sapere che il mio successo è molto importante per me’. He could also gently mock the vanity of ‘un bambino di 64 anni’ who so relishes his new-found fame.

It is well known that it was his former English teacher James Joyce who launched his international reputation and due acknowledgement is made to him in the Profilo: ‘delle lunghe care relazioni col Joyce lo Svevo parlò al “Convegno” di Milano nel 1927’ (p. 809). Svevo had contacted him in an uncustomary ‘atto di ribellione’ (p. 813) after experiencing ‘un’incomprensione assoluta’ (p. 812) and a total lack of success from the publication of his third novel to the extent that it damaged his health: ‘aveva 62 anni e scopriva che se la letteratura era nociva sempre, a quell’età era addirittura pericolosa (p. 813). Ghidetti describes the last years of Svevo’s life as ‘un dorato tramonto’; however they were marred by the antagonism of the Italian literary milieu, with the notable exception of Montale: Valerio Jahier, a young devotee of Svevo, wrote to him on 3 April 1928: ‘bisogna che per ora Lei si rassegni all’incomprensione degli italiani … Vi sono momenti in cui non riesco a persuadermi dell’italianità di Montale!’ The ‘capo orchestra’ of this opposition was Giulio Caprin (1880-1958), a Triestine born writer and journalist who worked for the influential Milanese newspaper Il Corriere della Sera which in those years ‘procedeva a grandi passi verso la sua totale fascistizzazione’.
Profilo relates that in 1924 a mutual friend recommended Caprin to Svevo; they met in Milan only for Svevo to be told that ‘il Corriere della Sera non disponeva di abbastanza spazio per occuparsi del suo libro’ (p. 813); some months later Caprin wrote a couple of lines in ‘Libri ricevuti’ … per notare che il romanzo era abbastanza interessante, ma scucito. Non era più il silenzio, ma la vera ostilità’ (ibidem). Moreover, he attempted to undermine Svevo’s celebrity in France: Crèmieux had written to Caprin offering to write a piece on Svevo for Il Corriere della Sera; the response he received, dated 21 January 1926, was outright rejection: there was no place for ‘Votre “offensive” internationale à la faveur d’un écrivain méconnu … Malheureusement l’extrême pauvreté de la langue et du style … lui rendent … plus difficile en Italie’. Undeterred, Crémieux went ahead and published his four-page article in Le Navire d’Argent on 1 February 1926, together with his translation of the first chapter of La coscienza di Zeno and Larbaud’s translation of selected passages from Senilità. Ten days later, on 11 February, in Il Corriere della Sera Caprin responded with a vitriolic counter attack entitled ‘Una proposta di celebrità’ in which he suggested that Svevo ‘ora tradotto in francese … pare un altro’, certainly not ‘questo disconosciuto italiano … questo disconosciuto romanziere triestino’; that Crémieux and Larbaud had overlooked ‘questa deficienza sostanziale [di] scrivere male … l’arte svanisce e non resta che una pena’. Their claim that Svevo was the only ‘romanziere d’analisi’ in Italy is subverted into censure: ‘l’analismo totale’ of Svevo’s third novel ‘è un dissolvimento totale della materia … la fatale monotonia di una scomposizione senza limiti … e senza perché … torturante’. Caprin concludes: ‘sarebbe ingiusto affermare che … non ci sia nella letteratura italiana niente di meglio che la triturazione veristica di libri come questo’. Svevo was devastated. He was convinced that Caprin’s article would adversely affect his nascent fame in France. In a flurry of correspondence a few days after its publication, Svevo wrote to Joyce, Prezzolini, and Montale: on 15 February to Joyce: ‘Ha visto l’articolo del “Corriere della Sera” di G. Caprin dell’undici corrente? Guai se continua così. Meno il furto mi rimprovera tutti gli altri delitti. Dio sa quello che penseranno Crémieux e Larbaud’; to Prezzolini on the same day: ‘Che cosa ne penseranno Crémieux e Larbaud? Questa è la sola preoccupazione’; two days later to Montale: ‘è bene che i Suoi articoli mi sieno pervenuti tardi perché così m’apportano un abbondante conforto al disgusto che mi diede l’articolo del signor Caprin’. He would have been relieved to receive Crémieux’s reassuring letter of 17 February: ‘Caprin n’a aucune autorité critique en Italie et moi … j’en ai beaucoup. Larbaud aussi. Entre ma “proposta di celebrità” e le “rifiuto” de Caprin, n’ayez crainte, c’est à moi que les gens

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45 See Gatt-Rutter for a different version: after Svevo’s death, Caprin denied both these events, p.327. The short review was in fact published on 9 December 1923; the meeting therefore would have taken place in that year.

46 In Carteggio, p. 74.


48 Giuseppe Prezzolini, former founding editor of La Voce, was living in Paris at this time and had offered to help promote Svevo’s literary reputation; see his letter to Svevo of 27 November 1925 in Maier, pp. 106-7.

ont donné raison … La bataille ne fait que commencer’. Nevertheless, Svevo continued to be tormented by Caprin and his influence: ‘In Caprin si può dire che Svevo vide incarnare l’intera critica italiana’. Svevo was initially reluctant to consider a second edition of *Senilità* in case someone like Caprin were to criticize it. It was to Montale in particular that he confided: ‘non m’arrabbiai che con un critico: Il Caprin’; ‘Fuori che per il Suo studio si direbbe che il capo orchestra è Caprin’; ‘quella bestia di Caprin’; he heard from friends that ‘ogni qualvolta Caprin parla di me alza la voce’. In the *Profilo* Svevo also alludes to the fact that *Il Corriere della Sera* did not report his lecture on Joyce given in Milan on 8 March 1927: ‘sia detto qui d’incidenza che un solo giornale di Milano parlò di tale lettura: il “Secolo”’ (p. 809); to Crémieux he wrote with characteristic irony: ‘Il “Corr. Della Sera” sempre tanto simpatico con me non mi menzionò’. Caprin was not the only hostile Italian critic to attempt to discredit Svevo’s literary reputation in France: there were disparaging articles in *La Fiera letteraria* and *I libri del giorno* in February and March 1926, but the crudest assault, ‘una stroncatura feroce’, was by the twenty-year-old aspiring novelist Guido Piovene in his 1927 review of the second edition of *Senilità* published in *La parola e il libro*; it has all the hallmarks of brash Fascist rhetoric:

> i cencoli parigini, non contenti di regalarci pose e snobismi letterari sempre nuovi, ci regalano anche le “celebrità italiane”. Italo Svevo, commerciante triestino, scrittore di tre mediocri romanzi … è improvvisamente annunciato come un grande scrittore da uno scadente poeta irlandese … [e] uno scadente poeta di Parigi … Un romanzo, *Senilità*, stampato … nel 1898, che nessun critico aveva menzionato né lettore acquistato, doveva ristamparsi … Si, è il solito uomo irresoluto e introspettivo, il solito impiegatuccio malato di sadismo analitico … Una inclinazione verso il mediocre … verso l’abiezione morale … la mania dei personaggi fisicamente spiacevoli, dei pazzi quieti … v’è quella impossibilità di rappresentare nobile azione o nobile personaggio; quella predilezione per l’ignobile.

Established writers were also to spurn him: Svevo wrote to Pirandello in July 1925, enclosing a copy of *La coscienza di Zeno*, but did not receive a reply;
nevertheless the following year Svevo entertained the playwright and Marta Abba in Trieste, but no mention was made of his novels.⁵⁹ According to Livia Veneziani, ‘è un fatto che Pirandello non lo comprese e questa incomprensione fu una delle sue ultime amarezze’⁶⁰ Moreover, Svevo met with repeated rejections from Italian publishers despite the fact that the Parisian publishing house of Gallimard had agreed to bring out the French translation of his third novel and despite the support and encouragement of Montale and other Milanese admirers of his work. Svevo first approached Emilio Treves, a Triestine Jew, who had established his firm in Milan in 1861: the prospects were promising; a second, revised edition of Senilità was agreed upon in April 1926,⁶¹ but in June Svevo received no further communication from Treves, and in July he learnt that ‘per tre anni voi siete impegnati e non potete occuparvi di me’.⁶² It was in fact the second time this prestigious publisher who had D’Annunzio, Pirandello and Verga on his books was to dismiss Svevo: his first novel under its original title Un inetto had been rejected many years earlier. Svevo fared no better with Mondadori.⁶³ Montale then recommended Enrico Somarè, editor of the literary periodical L’Esame, who had accepted Montale’s first article on Svevo. Once again, negotiations proceeded smoothly as the correspondence between author and publisher reveals: two thousand copies of the second edition of Senilità were scheduled for the end of 1926 and proposals were also made to bring out La coscienza di Zeno; publicity material was to be distributed to bookshops in Milan.⁶⁴ Then there was silence, and on 5 January 1927 an admission from the publisher of insurmountable difficulties. Some weeks later, Svevo heard from Montale that L’Esame had closed down and Somarè was seriously ill.⁶⁵

Svevo then turned to Licinio Cappelli who had published the first edition of La coscienza di Zeno. However, he demanded 5,000 lire for the second edition of Senilità and Svevo had vowed ‘di mai più pubblicare a mie spese’.⁶⁶ Finally, a publisher was found for Senilità, Giuseppe Morreale, but Svevo had to pay 3,000 lire for a run of 3,000 copies. The only publisher who actually paid Svevo, ‘il primo compenso tangibile per la sua fatica letteraria’,⁶⁷ was Rhein-Verlag for the German translation by Piero Rismondo of La coscienza di Zeno, which appeared in 1929. Some years earlier, in a letter to Marie Anne Comnène, Svevo had caustically remarked that ‘in famiglia per credere nella letteratura dovrebbero vedere dei denari’.⁶⁸ Svevo gave the cheque to Livia as a gift.

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⁵⁹ See Ghidetti, p. 269.
⁶⁰ Veneziani Svevo, p. 153.
⁶¹ See Svevo’s letters to the fratelli Treves of 12 April and May/June 1926 in Opera Omnia, vol. 1, pp. 792; 794-5.
⁶² Ibidem, p. 805. See also his letter to Montale of 19 July 1926 in which he refers to ‘quei trogloditi dei Treves’, in Carteggio, p. 173.
⁶⁴ See the letters in Maier, pp. 118; 121; 122-23; 124-25; Svevo, Opera Omnia, vol.1, pp. 810-12. The correspondence began in September 1926.
⁶⁵ In Maier, p. 126; Montale’s letter to Svevo of 22 January 1927 in Carteggio, p. 203.
⁶⁶ Svevo, Opera Omnia, vol. 1, p. 811. He wrote this to Somarè on 14 September 1926. See also his letter to Montale of 14 February 1927: ‘In quanto a Senilità son dolori: Un amico … fece … una circolare ai vari editori d’Italia per offrirla. Mi domandano fra le sette e le diecimila lire per pubblicarla’; in Carteggio, p. 206.
⁶⁷ Veneziani Svevo, p. 122.
⁶⁸ In Carteggio, p. 111.
Recognition in the Anglophone world was also only to come to Svevo posthumously. In 1928, on Joyce’s advice, Svevo sent copies of his third novel to Jonathan Cape in London and the Viking Press in New York; both turned him down. He would have longed for recognition in England, a country he knew and loved. This occurred a year later, from a source of which he would have been proud, but he did not live to see it. The Hogarth Press, founded by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, published the English translation of Una burla riuscita (The Hoax) in 1929 and in 1930 Il buon vecchio e la bella fanciulla (The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl and Other Stories). This latter volume contains an introductory note by Montale who boldly acknowledges Svevo as ‘the greatest novelist our literature has produced from Verga’s day to our own’, but he admits that this claim ‘will prove unacceptable … to some professional men of letters’ whose narrow judgement ‘is humiliating to our country’.\(^69\) He was in all probability alluding to Svevo’s bête noir, the critic Giulio Caprin, whose pernicious presence pervades the conclusion of the Profilo autobiografico.

What would Svevo have liked to achieve with this autobiographical sketch? Certainly revenge: ‘vous serez vengé par votre succès en France et G. Caprin crévera de jalousie’, Crémieux wrote to Svevo in the aftermath of Caprin’s polemical piece in Il Corriere della Sera.\(^70\) Thus it was crucial not only to emphasise the breadth of Svevo’s European culture, with references to Shakespeare, Turgenev, Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, Schopenhauer, the German classics et al in contrast to the parochial insularity of the Italian literary establishment, but it was also imperative, in order to publicise his international literary stature, to compare him to great European writers: ‘Una vita, che il Crémieux considera quale il parallelo italiano dell’Education sentimentale del Flaubert … fu anche scoperta una certa analogia fra i rapporti di Emilio con Angiolina e quelli di Swann con Odette … Le roman de Svevo n’est pas indigne … d’être rapproché de telles grandes oeuvres de Dickens e de Tolstoi’ (pp. 802; 805; 806). In this way, ‘questo disconosciuto scrittore italiano’, author of ‘tre romanzi mediocri’,\(^71\) triumphed over his Italian adversaries.

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\(^70\) In Carteggio, p. 87.
\(^71\) Caprin’s and Piovene’s words in Ghidetti, Il caso svevo, pp. 28; 32.

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