Svevo’s *Una vita*, „inettitudine,“ and the novel of the employee

The first-person narrator in Herman Melville’s short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853) is an attorney working on Wall Street, who is both irritated and fascinated by the passive resistance of his employee Bartleby. Already at the beginning the narrator remarks that the interesting and somewhat peculiar group of the office copyists is a hitherto scarcely explored subject, thus claiming a certain literary novelty for his story. At the same time, the narrator admits that the documentary material for a biography of Bartleby is rather slim, so that this new topic appears already out of reach for literary representation: „It is an irreparable loss to literature“ (Melville 1998, 3). The beginning of the narrative sees the writer-employee both as a new theme of literature, and as the source of refusal and radical anonymity, which will repeatedly be shown by the story with the emblematic answer of Bartleby, „I would prefer not to,“ with which he always politely declines the orders of his boss. It is this radical posture of refusal and Bartleby’s apparently almost postmodern absence of qualities, which have turned Melville’s narrative not only into a paradigm of the modern literature of the employee, but also into an original figure of the „mechanized“ and „decentralized“ subject. Among the many recent reclamations of the Bartleby figure—from Borges to Deleuze and Agamben—I also want to mention a work by the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas, a meta-literary text with the title *Bartleby y compañía* (2000), which takes the figure as a paradigm for an extended and disparate gallery of a so-called literature of negation („literatura del no“), a series of writers who lose their voice, finish writing, paralyzed copyists, who withdraw themselves and their writing. In all of these revaluations of Melville’s Bartleby the inevitable point of reference are the works and the figure of Kafka.

The figure of Bartleby, then, may serve as an entry point for the discussion of the ambivalent role of the employee for a certain manifestation of the modern novel. However, my interest here lies less in the formation of an anonymous subject in the shadow of bureaucracy (as this may be pertinent for the novel of the employee during the Weimar Republic, as well as Kafka [Stüssel 2004]), but rather as a specific novelistic figure of the weak anti-hero, who is characterized by his incapacity for action and life, thus varying a paradigm already explored within the context of the nineteenth century novel. On the one hand, I will try to show how this anti-hero is determined by sociological and psychological factors. As in the case of Bartleby, we have here an ambivalence of dependency and autonomy, a position of estrangement and dislocation.

Italo Svevo’s first novel *Una vita* (1892) is most often read as pointing to his later, more well-known novels, since it establishes the concept of *inettitudine*, which is indeed a common feature of the male protagonists of all of Svevo’s novels. In the present essay, my proposal is to take *Una vita* somewhat more seriously in its own right, and at the same time to recognize its symptomatic kinship with a certain characteristic strand of the modern Western novel that might broadly be referred to with the term „novel of the employee.“ What I have in mind here is a specific type of protagonist that takes the form of a weak, inhibited anti-hero, unable to act and live—a paradigm that in some respects reaches back to the novel of the nineteenth century, yet which resonates at the turn of the twentieth century also with a symptomatic crisis of the concept of virility, as recent criticism has insisted (Baldi 2010, 10; Stewart 1998).

Similar to Melville’s figure Bartleby, these uprooted protagonists find themselves in an ambivalent position of dependency and autonomy, humility and narcissism. This type of novel originates from a perspective of literary dilettantism and assimilates the traditional
psychological-moralistic novel to the modern, urban world of the everyday. At the same time, the novel reflects on its own mythic evasion from this world, and therefore also on the relation between literature and life. In the twentieth century, we might thus recognize a literary family relationship (rather than a direct influence) between *Una vita* and novels by the Spanish writer Azorín (*La Voluntad*, 1902), the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa (*O livro do dessassossego*, 1913-34/1982), and the Swiss Robert Walser (*Der Gehülfe*. 1907). In the following, I will draw out some parallels between *Una vita* and a Brazilian novel from 1937, Cyro dos Anjos’ *O amanuense Belmiro*, two texts that may illuminate each other when understood as contributing to the representation of the modern employee.

I. *Una Vita*: The employee as anti-hero

Svevo’s earliest novel introduces the prototype of the apathetic, weak hero, the petit-bourgeois intellectual. Even as much of the novel still appears to follow in the footsteps of Naturalism, it has to be seen as a self-conscious, somewhat ironic palimpsest of literary conventions. Alfonso Nitti—his surname already designates the „nullity“ of his existence—works as a low-salaried business correspondent at the bank house Maller in Trieste; he is frustrated because of his low social position—and at the same time he is highly regarded by the impoverished family Lanucci, where he rents a room. The Lanuccis also set their hopes on him as a future son-in-law, which in turn instils in Alfonso a sense of economic and intellectual superiority. When his plans to gain fame as a writer fail, he becomes more and more a passive spectator of life, yearning for the protected world of childhood, as embodied by his mother. The mystification of the rural past and dreamy visions of the future are Alfonso’s reaction to his humiliation in the sphere of office work:

Dacché era impiegato, il suo ricco organismo, che non aveva più lo sfogo della fatica di braccia e di gambe da campagnolo, e che non ne trovava sufficiente nel misero lavoro intellettuale dell’impiegato, si contentava facendo fabbricare dal cervello dei mondi intieri. Centro dei suoi sogni era lui stesso, padrone di sé, ricco, felice. Aveva delle ambizioni di cui consapevole a pieno non era che quando sognava. (*Svevo 2009*, 13-14)

The basic plot of Svevo’s novel is based on a variation of the theme of the anti-hero in the French novel of disillusion, especially Frédéric Moreau (Flaubert, *L’Education sentimentale*) and Julien Sorel (Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*) [Brombert 1999, 62; Langella 1990], yet it is also influenced by Svevo’s long-standing interest in the figure of Hamlet.¹ For example, the parallel to the Stendhalian protagonist consists in the fact that Alfonso also ventures into a higher social sphere, by seducing the daughter of his employer, Annetta. Instead of marrying her, however, he takes the serious illness of his mother as a pretext to flee the city, and thus to extricate himself from the necessity to act, as well as the feared sanctions of her father, the patriarch Maller. When Alfonso returns to the city after the death of his mother, he is being demoted at the bank, loses Annetta, and is challenged to a duel by her cousin—and future husband—Macario, and finally commits suicide. Similar to the protagonists of Balzac and Flaubert, Alfonso is a young provincial who longs for quick success in the city, and, again

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¹ In his personal diary, Svevo’s prematurely deceased brother Elio writes of Svevo’s enthusiastic reading of *Hamlet* during his sojourn in the trade school in the Bavarian town of Segnitz. In 1880, Svevo is very impressed by the Hamlet performance of Ernesto Rossi. His interest in literary anti-heroes can be traced back to some of his earliest literary experiences (Jean Paul, Turgenev). Cf. Gatt-Rutter 1988, 30.
similar to these models, he is positioned within an ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres that represent different social worlds.

Aside from these similarities to the great paradigms of the novel of disillusion, in Svevo the determining milieu is the labyrinthical world of the bureaucracy, a world that further enhances Alfonso’s position as an outsider. The precise rendering of this world is part of the Naturalist heritage of the novel, just as the central theme of the struggle for life, which condemns the weak to failure. As a dilettante, Alfonso is positioned between his employment in the bank, on the one side, his artistic ambitions, on the other side. Only in the realm of culture he still sees a possibility to compensate for his otherwise low social standing. This condition of the low-paid office employee is not only a sociological phenomenon (as famously analyzed during the 1920’s by Siegfried Kracauer), but the employee as a writer—in both senses of the word—also reflects on the position of literature within a certain formation of modernity. Yet, in its representation of boredom and senselessness, and the relocation of heroic deeds to the level of the dream, the novel leaves behind the typical terrain of Naturalism and anticipates the bourgeois noia and indifferenza of the twentieth century.

Svevo embodies a decisive moment of transition, namely the transition from the observation of reality to the emergence of a gap between reality and individual consciousness, the crisis of the objective world by way of a process of subjectivization, which also dissolves the progressive temporal order. This tendency, characteristic of Svevo’s prose work as a whole, is here developed through the figure of the employee, who is estranged from his work, yet at the same time, has enough free time for tortuous self-reflections. The radical indeterminacy and incoherence of this subject marks a difference from traditional novelistic conventions, yet the citation of these very conventions puts an emphasis on the literariness of the situation itself.

The description of Alfonso’s workday in the office emphasizes his incapacity to adjust to the practice of copy work and to stop the process of reflection, in contrast to his various colleagues, who like the office head Sanneo, appear to be perfectly adapted to the situation of alienation; the diligent Ballina, for instance, almost comes to „live“ in the office (as was already the case for Bartleby; Svevo 2009, 44):

„(...) Alfonso non sapeva scrivere presto. Gli toccava rileggere più volte prima di saper trascrivere una frase. Fra una parola e l’altra lasciava correre il suo pensiero ad altre cose e si ritrovava con la penna in mano obbligato a cancellare qualche tratto che nella distrazione gli era venuto fatto disforme dall’originale. Anche quando gli riusciva di rivolgere tutta la sua attenzione al lavoro, non precedeva con la rapidità di Miceni perché non sapeva copiare macchinalmente. Essendo attento, correva sempre col pensiero al significato di quanto copiava e ciò lo arrestava. (Svevo 2009, 11)

Alfonso loudly declaims the long phrases and numbers he has transcribed („rimbombante di paroloni“, Svevo 2009, 13), the only possibility to concentrate on this act of mechanical repetition, which forces the writing hand into an autonomy independent of the subject. When at one point he is supposed to be promoted to a somewhat higher position, he declines this offer, since this more demanding kind of work would leave him no more time for reading (Svevo 2009, 55). The representation of daily work in the bank appears as an arena of struggle, characterized by the constant threat to be demoted, arbitrary hierarchies, and the mostly invisible figure of the patriarch Maller. In contrast to Svevo’s later novels, where the protagonists might also be said to be writer-figures of sorts, in Una Vita the complex writing/literature carries mostly negative connotations. Alfonso’s project to write a philosophical treatise with the grandiloquent title „The moral idea in the modern world“ (L’idea morale nel mondo moderno) is abandoned after the first four pages. Characteristically, Annetta’s erotic interest in Alfonso, who has eventually been introduced into the private
house of Maller, is generated when the two have decided to collaborate in the writing of a novel. For Annetta, this literary project has above all the function to embellish her social standing with a social ornament. The satirically presented literary discussions in the salon of the family Maller, where the program of Naturalism is hailed as the latest artistic fashion, implicitly comments on the cultural isolation of Trieste, which might be related to Svevo’s own literary isolation, yet, by way of contrast, also to his interest in different, somewhat eccentric literary models.\(^2\) For Alfonso, the participation in this project signifies the possibility to have access to the daughter of his employer (in competition with other suitors), for the sphere of culture, as sanctioned by the higher bourgeoisie, is the only field open to the aspiring petit bourgeois. Literature, then, becomes a form of social distinction, as well as a strategy of amorous seduction; moreover, it also becomes a meta-literary parody of the novel itself, for the projected work, according to the ideas of Alfonso, tells the story of an impoverished aristocrat, who looks for success in the city and ends up marrying the daughter of his employee. The novel-in-the-novel exposes the epigonality of the novelistic, as well as the impossibility to equate literature and life.

During the almost „Taylorist“ co-working process, Annetta criticizes the actual contributions by Alfonso as „too oppressive and too greyish“ („troppo greve e troppo grigio,“ Svevo 2009, 129). This critique might be said to anticipate the initially unfavourable reception that Svevo’s novels encountered, even as the pastiche of feuilletonistic prose marks of course a stark contrast to Svevo’s own literary work.\(^3\) In any case, Alfonso’s „grey,“ plotless technique of description might be seen as an index of his incapacity to turn his dreams into reality, and the reader connects this with other passages where the atmosphere, or Alfonso’s psyche are characterized as „grey“ (Svevo 2009, 13; 75). However, the novel will never be finished—yet the „romanzetto“ (Svevo 2009, 107) will be continued in the actual romance between the two dilettante writers. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the literary cooperation is the fact that it appears not as the opposite of Alfonso’s office work, but rather as its continuation by other means; for it repeats Alfonso’s subaltern position („posizione subalternana,“ Svevo 2009, 107), subordinating him to the „virile“ and haughty Annetta, who echoes the commanding attitude of her father, while Alfonso is located in a sort of „feminized“ position—as it is quite typical for the discourse of the employee at the beginning of the twentieth century. The structural similarity of work and love relationship, of mechanical writing in the office and mechanical writing of the novel, emphasizes the fact that Alfonso is imprisoned in the gap between idealism and reality.

Alfonso, with his regressive and infantile-narcissist character, who had initially yearned for the „unspoiled“ air of his native village, realizes during his later visit there, that the possibility of return and escape is not open to him; it is just one more self-deception, just as his final illusion that his suicide represents a high-standing ethical principle (similar to the case of Foscolo’s Jacopo Ortis). The end of the novel finishes with a letter, in which the bank informs a notary of Alfonso’s suicide. The anonymous, bureaucratic coldness of the letter contrasts with the affective pathos of the letter that opens the novel, written by Alfonso to his mother. On the one side, then, we have the sentimental mystification of the subject, on the other side, the brutal reality voiced by the impersonal institution, Romanticism versus bureaucracy. Similarly, say, to Flaubert, the narrator represents the protagonist’s mentality with an ironic distance, thus emphasizing the derivative and „literary“ nature of his Romantic hopes.

In this sense, the novel might be said to focus on the problem of bourgeois individualism. The subject is positioned between the omnipresent pattern of rivalry in the sphere of work and love, on the one hand, and abstract, Romantic idealism, on the other hand. Even as the


incapacity of the hero is first developed in terms of naturalist-determinist influences, it is the psyche that emerges as the decisive cause that makes Alfonso “constitutionally” weak. With regard to this topos of the “struggle of life,” one must mention the well-known scene in which Alfonso, together with the complementary and “strong” rival, Annetta’s cousin Macario, travels with a boat unto the open, stormy sea, and where Macario develops a quasi-Darwinian philosophy with respect to the fierce seagulls plunging into the water:

Quanto poco cervello occorre per pigliare pesce! Il corpo è piccolo. Che cosa sarà la testa e che cosa sarà poi il cervello? Quantità da negligersi! (...) E lei che studia, che passa ore intere a tavolino a nutrire un essere inutile! Chi non ha ali necessarie quando nasce non gli crescono mai più. (...) Si muore precisamente nello stato in cui si nasce.“ (Svevo 2009, 114)

This lesson, of the equally self-deceiving Macario, who sarcastically thinks Alfonso only capable of “poetic flights,” has to be seen in the light of Svevo’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Darwin, in a brief text (“L’Uomo e la teoria darwiniana”), where, from an anthropological perspective, he sees man as a deficient being of undefined nature, as an essay (“abozzo”), or “sketch,” which forces him to live in the shadow of a stronger animal. Not the independent, free human being is qualified to survive, but the “little man,” who looks for shelter in the belly of a mammoth (Svevo 2000, 639). With reference to Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and especially Schopenhauer, Svevo rejects the model of the superuomo, at the time a current stereotype in the Italian cultural climate. Evidently, the complete (and not just self-delusional) re-evaluation of the weak and sick as the truly strong, that is, the positive understanding of “incapacity” as a promising form of non-conformity, occurs only in Svevo’s later works, especially in La Coscienza di Zeno. Insofar as Una Vita already shows the characteristic opposition between “strong“ and “weak“ characters, Alfonso is represented in a rather ambivalent way, namely, on the one hand, as unpleasant and self-deceiving, yet, on the other hand, with his “dreamy“ personality he is still more appealing to the reader than the “strong“ characters. At the same time, his return to the office after the death of his mother is presented in terms of a renunciation, where he now is apparently reconciled with the monotonous office routine: „Nel suo impieguccio egli si trovava bene. […] Si chiedeva talvolta se sulle proprie qualità non si fosse ingannato e se quella vita non fosse precisamente la più adatta al suo organismo“ (Svevo 2009; cf. 304). Yet even this new conformism, the relinquishing of all further hopes of social success, the apparently newfound „equilibrium“ (Svevo 2009, 314) turns out to be yet another self-deception.

II. Svevo: the employee as writer

In order to understand this peculiar ambivalence of Alfonso’s ambition/renunciation (and its continuation in Svevo’s later work), we have to briefly address an aspect of Svevo’s biography. Svevo’s attempts to succeed as a writer are always threatened—until the late fame, with over sixty years—by failure, by being a fallito. Many of his literary figures have a double existence as employees or businessmen and „writers.“ After a financial failure of Svevo’s father, a previously successful businessman, the son looks for employment as a writing correspondent in the Triestine branch of the Viennese Unionsbank. As we can read in

the late memories of Svevo’s widow (*Vita di mio marito*, 1958), this situation has led to the formation of a double identity, whereby Svevo, or rather Ettore Schmitz, represents the dutiful employee to the outside world, yet at the same time, privately, fashioned his writerly identity as Italo Svevo (the literary formulation of this problem may also be observed in the short story *Una burla riuscita*). As Claudio Magris has shown a long time ago, the literary outsider Svevo is a kind of metonymy of the cultural situation in Trieste during the end of the Habsburg Empire, which despite or because of its peripheral situation has become a prototypical place for the identification of life with the bourgeoisie. The schizophrenic doubling of Schmitz/Svevo is echoed by the ambivalent identity of Trieste: city of the mercantile bourgeoisie, of the banking business and bureaucracy, yet also a place of intellectual introspection and middle-European *Möglichkeitssinn* (Magris/Ara 1982, 180). In some of his autobiographical letters Svevo explicitly represents his literary ambition as being opposed to his economic activity, the mercantile and industrial business, in which he necessarily followed in the steps of his father: „Poi risolsi di rinunziare alla letteratura ch’evidentemente attenuava la mia capacità commerciale e le poche ore libere dedicai al violino, pur d’impedirmi il sogno letterario.“ (Lavagetto 1986, 6).

Svevo’s full entry into the world of business can be dated to the year 1898, when he, after eighteen years of working as an employee at the *Unionsbank*, becomes a shareholder in the underwater-paint company of his father-in-law Gioacchino Veneziani. There are a number of reasons that force Svevo to give up his literary aspirations: family, the lukewarm reception of his works, other commitments. Especially significant is a comment from 1902, where he sees private writing as the necessary vice of self-reflection, yet also as the incapacity to act, a kind of last pause before the entrance into action, similar to the tactic of the „last cigarette“ in *La Coscienza di Zeno*:

> Noto questo diario della mia vita di questi ultimi anni senza propormi assolutamente di pubblicarlo. Io, a quest’ora e definitivamente ho eliminato dalla mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura. Io voglio soltanto attraverso a queste pagine arrivare a capirmi meglio. L’abitudine mia e di tutti gli impotenti di non saper pensare che con la penna alla mano (come se il pensiero non fosse piú utile e necessario al momento della azione) mi obbliga a questo sacrificio. Dunque ancora una volta, grezzo e rigido strumento, la penna m’aiuterà ad arrivare al fondo tanto complesso del mio essere. Poi la getterò per sempre e voglio saper abituarmi a pensare nell’attitudine stessa dell’azione: ...(Lavagetto 1986, 8-9)

The passage makes clear that the activity of writing is a self-confessed vice, yet also the only possible cure and „self-immunization.“ Similar to the rhetoric with which Zeno invokes the moment of the „last cigarette,“ Svevo here speaks of the voluntary act of the „last diary,“ the renunciation of literary writing. In this perspective, the writing of a diary is a kind of defensive wall erected against the imperative of „practical life.“ As Mario Lavagetto has shown, the businessman Schmitz again and again infringes, even if secretly, his own contract of literary abstinence, precisely in order to keep the force of the prohibition alive. This opposition of workday and literature appears also in an early text by Svevo, the review of a theatre performance of *Hamlet*, where he recommends precisely this prototype of the hesitating hero for „bank employees who are left unsatisfied by the writing of business letters“ (Lavagetto, 1986, 11). If we take into account Svevo’s admission that the bank scenes of *Una Vita* have an autobiographical background, we realize that this condition is constitutive for virtually all of his literary work. The Hamletian non-activity of hesitation is, in the words of Joseph Vogl, the literary vice par excellence, a typically modern tendency of evasion and avoidance, which entails an opposition to linear time (Vogl 2008, 108).
III. Alfonso’s Brazilian Heir

Despite its connection to the novelistic world of the nineteenth century, *Una vita*’s Alfonso, then, partly anticipates a characteristic figure of modernity, the employee as an intellectual and literary dilettante. The physiognomy of this figure typically entails a hypertrophy of self-reflection, which turns it into a spectator of „real“ life, into a de-centred subject fixated on its own interiority, the correlative of the exterior monotony of work. One of the best examples for what I have in mind here is—without discounting considerable differences in place and time—the Brazilian novel *O amanuense Belmiro* (The amanuensis Belmiro, 1937) by Cyro dos Anjos. Belmiro, whose incessant self-analysis signals his melancholic impotence, is a provincial intellectual who comes to a city, Belo Horizonte, which, as a provincial capital, has itself a somewhat hybrid status within the process of modernization.

The novel *O amanuense Belmiro* is one of the most complex, as well as stylistically refined novels of Brazilian literature during the 1930’s and is today regarded as a minor classic (Gledson, 1981). It uses the form of a diary in order to reflect ironically upon the psychological processes of the first-person-narrator. Belmiro Borba, the „hero“ of this novel, who calls himself a „lyrical bureaucrat“ (dos Anjos 2005, 21) is a minor employee in a state institution. Belmiro is characterized above all by his inaction, his incapacity to achieve a desired object and to conform to social expectations. As has already been observed, this can be seen as a reflection on the status of the contemporary, petit bourgeois intellectual, at a time characterized by the consolidation of a centralized, bureaucratic state apparatus, which in Brazil is connected with the coup d’état and the establishment of the so-called *Estado Novo* (1937-1945) [Candido 2004]. The plot is situated in 1935, a historically significant year, for during this time several movements were formed (*Aliança Nacional Libertadora, Intentona Comunista*), which directly opposed the Vargas regime. It is a time when most writers and intellectuals see the necessity to assume an explicitly political position. In this context, it is all the more remarkable that the protagonist Belmiro is characterized precisely by his incapacity to take on a specific position. Equally symptomatic is the fact that he prefers his nostalgic memories of the past in favour of the reality of the present, even if this is doomed to failure:

I see that the present insinuates itself in these notes and sentiments in the form of deceptive masks, and that the past appears only here and there, in light evocations, generated by sounds, tastes, or colours, which remember the things of a period that has died.

The form of the novel is in itself significant: initially, the first-person narrator, who had always harboured literary ambitions, had planned a volume of memories („caderno de memórias“) of his early years in the countryside; the final work, however, is rather similar to a diary, since, as the narrator himself remarks, the present has pushed the images of the past out of the way (dos Anjos 2005, 195). Apparently of an entirely private nature, the narrative constantly plays with the possibility of publication. The formally hybrid structure of the text results from the fact that dos Anjos had initially published single fragments as newspaper

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5 All translations from the Brazilian Portuguese are my own.
feuilletons (in *A Tribuna*, 1933-35); he has talked about how the pseudonym Belmiro Borba had slowly developed into a veritable heteronym.

The focus of the narrative on the present time of narration is initiated when Belmiro falls in love with a young woman during the carnival, Carmélia, who reminds Belmiro of a love from the time of his youth, Camila, who in her turn is a double image of a mythical female dream-image of his childhood, Arabela. Only for a brief moment, during Belmiro’s ecstatic vision of Carmélia-as-Arabela, does occur a co-presence of phantasm and reality, past and present, and which is immediately revealed as a construction by Belmiro’s analysis. As in the case of Svevo’s *Una Vita* (and *Senilità*), the amorous infatuation rests on an “angelical“ idea of womanhood. Belmiro’s incapacity to approach the young woman leads him to air his sentiments in the diary, which now coincides with the novel that substitutes itself for life. After Carmélia has eventually married a young medical doctor, and the circle of his friends has dissolved, Belmiro, who had so far covered one year of his life, breaks up his diary, being convinced that his life has ended and that therefore there is nothing left to write about (“[...] que a vida parou e nada há mais de escrever;“ *dos Anjos* 2005, 213).

Similar to Svevo’s first novel, we also find in this work an opposition between a supposedly idyllic rural past and the present in the city. The socio-historical background is the urban migration of the descendants of the formerly privileged social class that had long been rooted in the now economically decadent rural fazendas. Since the turn of the century these socially de-privileged and uprooted men find new opportunities of employment in the growing administrative institutions of the cities. The city of Belo Horizonte, since the turn of the century the new capital of Minas Gerais, embodies this type of a semi-provincial city of bureaucrats and employees of the public sector, which, similar to Trieste—likewise a provincial capital—has a relatively recent past. An important difference to the case of Trieste and Svevo is the fact that in the Brazilian context, the salaried leisure of the employee and the concomitant bad conscience is typical for an entire generation of intellectuals (especially from Minas Gerais). Simply put: while the feudally conducted bank in Trieste is distinguished by a hectic atmosphere of work, the Latin American state institution is conducive to not working at all.

Contrary to Belmiro’s own pronouncements, the proclaimed memories of the former life in the countryside are not fleshed out by the narrative and remain rather nebulous. The only significant point appears to be the fact that Belmiro constantly compares himself with the patriarchal representatives of the Borba family, especially his diligent and strong grandfather Porfírio, since his father, because of his literary inclinations, was potentially already “decadent.” Belmiro, whose intellectual sensibility has now entirely estranged him from the rural milieu, maintains a connection to this world only by way of being a state employee in the so-called „Section for Animal Feeding“ („Seção do Fomento Animal“); the fact that he is dependent on social favours from his superiors is another sign of his loss of social status.

When he falls in love with Carmélia, who belongs to the higher social classes of the city, he realizes that the possibility of entering this world is barred for him.

Belmiro, then, is a man of the city who is both repelled and fascinated by everything that is instable, that is threatening to his own regressive subjectivity: the sea, the urban crowd (on the occasion of a trip to Rio de Janeiro), and women. While his closest friends are associated with the extreme political orientations of the time—Redelvim is an „anarchist“ communist, Silviano an intellectual of the so-called „integralist“ Right—Belmiro is not capable to take on any specific position with regard to these pressing questions of politics, and for this reasons his friends accuse him of being a petit bourgeois, to be „weak“ and „diminutive,“ a „man of the level plain“ („homem de planicie,“ *dos Anjos* 2005, 68). Belmiro is such a good friend because he understands everything and everyone („In this world, I am just someone who

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6 The literary modernists of Minas Gerais were generally characterized by their nostalgic memory within a rapidly modernizing urban milieu. See Ferreira Cury 2004; Marques 2011 (on Cyro dos Anjos: 197-244).
looks for friends;“ dos Anjos 2005, 124). His different relations to the circle of friends constitute—aside from the practice of writing—the main activity of his life.

It is precisely these aspects, the will to understand everything and the incapacitating, isolating self-analysis of the diarist, which already at the end of the nineteenth century had been seen as the typical attributes of dilettantism. This is directly connected with Svevo’s concept of inettitudine, for the Triestine writer saw himself in a tradition that had been criticized by Paul Bourget as „the degenerate type of modernity,“ as a maladie de la volonté. Bourget exemplified this with the case of the monstrously prolific diarist Henri-Frédéric Amiel, whose Journal Intime (1884, posthumous) is one of the most significant intertexts for the novel by Cyro dos Anjos (aside from Bergson, Proust, the French-Catholic roman d’analyse, the poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade). These literary allusions are brilliantly integrated into the novel by dos Anjos, yet they also serve to reveal Belmiro as a literary parasite.

According to Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, the perspectival prose employed in Belmiro’s diary leads to a characteristic mixture of true sentiment and conformity, of „understanding, learnedness, banality, and lyricism“ (Schwarz 2008, 13). Yet in the representation of the first-person narrator one should not only identify the aspect of conformity, but also the self-ironic attempt to withdraw oneself from life and the present by the means of literature. For against the background of Belmiro’s tribulations, namely the impending dissolution of his circle of friends, the diary, written on the official paper of the state institution (dos Anjos 2005, 32), becomes a kind of shield or means of salvation, which transforms his suffering into analysis, rhetorical stylization, and the compensatory sentiment of superiority:

Quem quiser fale mal da literatura. Quanto a mim, direi que devo a ela minha salvação. Venho da rua oprimido, escrevo dez linhas, torno-me olímpico. [...] Em verdade vos digo: o que escreve neste caderno não é o homem fraco que há pouco entrou no escritório. É um homem poderoso. (dos Anjos 2005, 184).

Whoever wants to do so, may speak badly of literature. As far as I am concerned, I owe to literature my salvation. I come home from the city depressed, I write ten lines, and I am overwhelmed by an Olympian feeling. Truly, I say to you: the person who writes in this notebook is not the weak man who had entered the office a short time ago. It is a powerful man.

Writing for Belmiro is an index of his self-estrangement, as when he writes poems under the very eyes of his boss („versos frustrados;“ dos Anjos 2005, 36). In contrast to his resentful colleagues, Belmiro is in fact rather content with his employment. As we have seen, this stoical insight into the identity of the self with the position of the employee (dos Anjos 2005, 37-38) has to be „learned“ by Alfonso Nitti in Una vita, who initially had thought of himself as something better. At the same time, Belmiro’s daydreams are contrasted with the self-hate of the „leisurely“ intellectual, as when he writes that the „Section for Animal Feeding“ „feeds“ nothing but his own lyricism; he is an „incorrigible producer of phantasms“ (dos Anjos 2005, 34).

It is precisely this insistent tendency toward self-reflexiveness that stands in the way of Belmiro’s happiness, for, as his friend Silviano puts it, with reference to both Amiel and Faust, „life is strangled by the capacity of reflection“ (dos Anjos 2005, 122). Despite the satirical tones, Silviano embodies for Belmiro the ideal of the intellectual and poet, the

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7 Cf. Bourget’s critique of Naturalism, referring to the maladie de la volonté in Zola, the impuissance in Huysmans and Goncourt (Essais de la psychologie moderne). As quoted in Jonard 1969, 78.
transformation of reality by art. Belmiro himself remains tied to the banalities of an uneventful life. The abrupt ending of the novel produces the impression of a failure; the literary self-affirmation is almost extinguished by scepticism. In contrast to *Una vita*, where the anti-hero finds himself in what is still a traditional opposition to the world, this dynamic relation between individual and society is dissolved in the essayistic and discontinuous text by dos Anjos (Gil 1999, 55).

IV. Conclusion

In both of these novels (if more radically in the later one) the linearity of temporal development is dissolved in favour of formal symmetries and tableaus, which might be seen as the most radical consequence of the novel of disillusion. In the case of Svevo’s novel, this non-linear, cyclical aspect becomes clear above all by the framing device of the letters. The novel by Cyro dos Anjos, similar to Svevo’s *Coscienza*, adopts the form of the confessional diary in order to represent the superimposition of different temporal planes. Already at the end of the nineteenth century, the topic of the hero’s ambition to understand everything and his tendency toward self-analysis have been seen as typical attributes of dilettantism. This is to say that both Svevo and Cyro dos Anjos use their respective protagonists to critically expose the self-deceptions of the “otiose intellectual,” partially drawing on autobiographical experiences. Whereas in *Una vita* the village is associated with the mother and connotated as a regressive place of retreat, in Cyro dos Anjos the rural back land is a sign of a father complex (equally present in Svevo). In both cases the motivation for narrative is the fantasy-induced relation to a young woman, who will eventually be married by a “strong,” successful bourgeois man (in both cases it is the cousin).

As we mentioned, especially the early twentieth century is full of such Bartleby-like figures that are constitutionally incapable to act and to live. Typically, in contrast to the realist novel, these texts dispense with the pre-history of their protagonists, or invoke it only in a very fragmentary form. Just as these protagonists occupy an ambivalent, contradictory position in the social world, also many of the writers occupy a specific kind of author-function. They are writers—employees—dilettantes, who enter the literary market in a belated or hesitating form. Svevo himself once said that only employees, those who have time for self-reflection, are qualified to become writers of literature.\(^8\) In contrast to the tendencies of the literature of the fin-de-siècle, so-called high literature is now assimilated to the “uninteresting“ life of the bourgeoisie. Svevo and dos Anjos, as I have tried to show, use the figure of the weak anti-hero, in order to negotiate the relation between life and literature. With the words of Svevo, one might speak here of the “autobiography of another,“ the transformation of one’s own into an *imaginary* life.

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