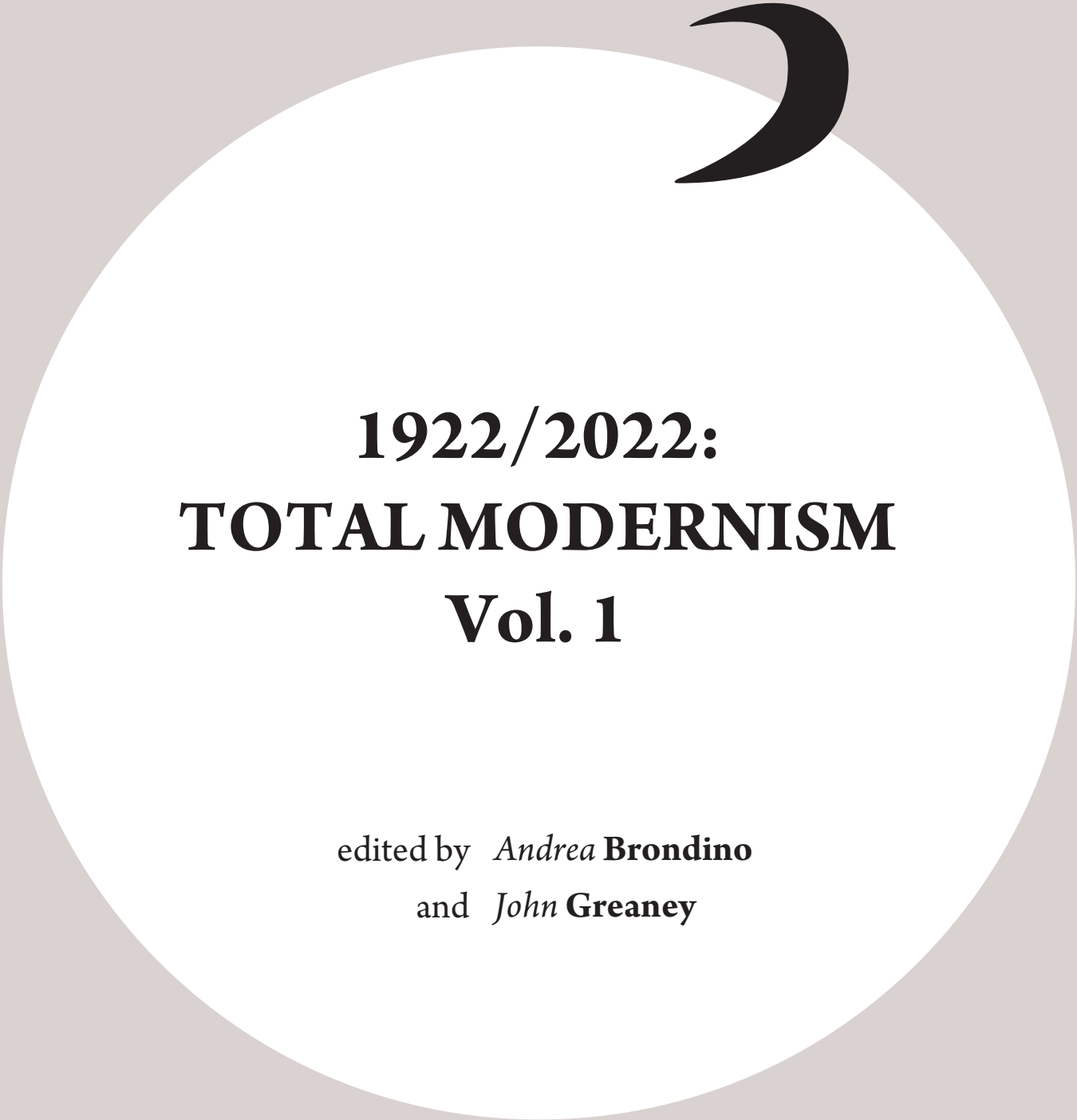


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Comparative  
Studies  
in Modernism

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## 1922/2022: **TOTAL MODERNISM** Vol. 1

edited by *Andrea Brondino*  
and *John Greaney*

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RAFFAELE DONNARUMMA

# *NOLUNTAS SCIENDI, VOLUNTAS NESCIENDI*

*Anthropology of the Modernist Character*<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Among the many illnesses that literary characters might suffer from, the peculiar relationship with truth that some characters of the modernist novel come to develop is certainly the most alarming. This can manifest itself in two occasionally intertwined ways: on the one hand we have the *voluntas nesciendi*, the deliberate refusal of knowing something understood as truth; on the other hand there is the *noluntas sciendi*, the precautionary dismissal of a dangerous and destabilizing knowledge. It is not a matter of incapacity or impossibility, but rather of choice, one which holds meaning and therefore entails moral consequences. It is the reversal of the ancient Aristotelian axiom by which “all men by nature desire to know”: men, Freud argues, just as naturally wish not to know, and thus protect themselves through repression [*Verdrängung*], resistance [*Widerstand*], disavowal [*Verleugnung*], negation [*Verneinung*]. And since “*qui auget scientiam, auget et dolorem*,” we might also be dealing with the paradoxical actualization of the biblically derived imperative not to know. After reading Schopenhauer and learning something new about life and death, Thomas Buddenbrook closes the book in hopes of forgetting what he read. Lambert Strether, the protagonist of Henry James’ *Ambassadors*, surrenders to a sort of self-blinding. But Italo Svevo’s Zeno Cosini is the hero of this issue, and for this rewarded by his author. Zeno is the final, Nietzschean, and nihilistic outcome of a pathological perspective which is more worrisome than inept, though one which ultimately leads to salvation: truth is pointless for happiness.

**KEYWORDS:** Modernist Character, Knowledge, Psychoanalysis, Ethics, Nihilism, Thomas Mann, Henry James, Italo Svevo.

I would like to express my gratitude to Paolo Bugliani, Serena Grazzini, Francesco Rossi, Gloria Scarfone for their advice and recommendations, and to Giulio Milone for the English translation.

## 1. Thomas Buddenbrook, *noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi*

Though now successful and fully in his prime, Thomas Buddenbrook is distraught. He is worried about his son’s fate. He suspects that his wife is cheating on him. He suffers from poor health, and feels that death is near. One afternoon he picks up a volume from his library, Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*. While reading, he is filled with “an unfamiliar sense of immense and grateful contentment” (Mann 1994,

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Giulio Milone.

1047). He feels “the incomparable satisfaction of watching an enormously superior intellect grab hold of life, of cruel, mocking, powerful life, in order to subdue and condemn it” (Mann 1994, 104). Thomas does not understand what he is reading, but what he manages to grasp is terrifying: ours is “the worst of all possible worlds” (Mann 1994, 1047), and “every human being” is “a mistake, a blunder” (Mann 1994, 1051). Still, this “truth” that makes him feel “overwhelmed” (Mann 1994, 1048) has a certain touch of grace. He goes to bed, sleeps, and then wakes up “slightly embarrassed by the intellectual extravagances of the night”. He wishes he would keep on reading but he also asks himself: are these really “proper ideas for him” (Mann 1994, 1055)?

He never managed to give the book another glance, despite the treasures buried inside — let alone to buy the other volumes of that magnum opus. The nervous pedantry that had taken control of him over the years devoured each new day. Harried by five hundred pointless, workaday trifles — just tending to them and keeping them all in order was a torment—he found himself too weak-willed to arrange his time reasonably and productively. And about two weeks after that remarkable afternoon, he had arrived at the point where he abandoned the whole idea and told the maid to fetch a book that for some reason was lying in the drawer of the garden table and put it back in the bookcase.

And so Thomas Buddenbrook, who had stretched his hands out imploringly for high and final truths, sank back now into the ideas, images, and customary beliefs in which he had been drilled as a child. (Mann 1994, 1055-1056)

But not even his forefathers’ principles can offer him solace. Later, after leaving the dentist’s office, Thomas feels dizzy while walking on the street, hits his head on the ground, and dies.

Why was Thomas repelled by the act of reading Schopenhauer? What kind of character does this refusal make of him? Which narrative situation are we dealing with? Thomas experiences truth, but truth would not help him much in real life — in the same way in which finding out if (or rather, *that*) his wife is indeed cheating on him with Lieutenant von Throta would not. It is as if two very distinct attitudes were conflating in his persona, where knowledge and will are at odds with each other. In the first instance, Thomas does not want to know (more): in Schopenhauer’s pages he has seen the truth, about the world and about himself. However, he decides to shut his eyes and switch off that drive for truth from which he had been invested. In the second one, there is a willingness *not* to know: he could look into it, and maybe he should, but in the end, he simply prefers not to. In the former there is a *noluntas sciendi*; in the latter, a *voluntas nesciendi*. In both cases, Thomas is “too weak-willed,” but the temporal relationship between will and knowledge is inverted: in the first instance, truth is positively gained, almost epiphanically so, and without actively looking for it (would Thomas be able to, though?). In the second instance, truth should be chased, but it is better to steer clear of the risks and pains of any discovery. *Noluntas sciendi* is a matter of *not more*; *voluntas nesciendi* is a matter of *not yet*. Thomas exemplifies how profoundly intertwined these two stances are, and though distinguishing between the two is possible, one can already entertain the thought that instances of confusion and overlapping between the two are even more visible in other literary characters.

Thomas considers truth dangerous and unsettling: it would compel him to make stark choices, and, ultimately, to change. Even before than being an enemy of his happiness, truth is detrimental to his tranquility; his moral stature gets already compromised. *Buddenbrooks* are indeed a traditional novel; but a crack has appeared. If the Romantic character (Faust, for instance) was a hero of knowledge, will, and action, the Modernist character will be an anti-hero who rejects knowledge, who is weak-willed, and who prefers not to act.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Two conflicting anthropologies...

*Noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi* challenge Aristotle's solemn assertion at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, which reads: "all men by nature desire to know" (*Met.* 980a). They take one of the earliest and best established anthropological tenets of Western culture, and turn it upside down.

However, there is another Western anthropological principle, drawn from Hebrew culture: as Kohelet proverbially posits, "qui auget scientiam, auget et dolorem" (*Ecc* 1, 18). If these are the stakes, it is better not to know. And indeed the Bible opens with a ban on knowledge, which the Devil promptly exhorts to break ("Scit enim Deus quod in quocumque die comederitis ex eo [the tree at the center of the Garden of Eden], aperientur oculi vestri, et eritis sicut Deus scientes bonum et malum") (*Gen* 3, 5). This ban does not fit well with Greek culture, which understands knowledge not merely as the every man's natural instinct, but as a proper duty. *Gnothi seauton*, the famous inscription on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, affirms the very same thing and outlines a specific task — one which Thomas Buddenbrook backs out of.

How many philosophers or historians of ideas would be needed to retrace (in Western, and mostly Christian culture) the secular history of these two different needs and, more generally, of two completely different anthropologies? Which is better: knowing or limiting knowledge? Believing that happiness equates with knowledge ("felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas," as Vergil asserts in *Georg.* 2, 489), or accepting that one cannot simply know everything, and should rather stay away from an impossible and potentially dangerous project? Is it better to chase truth, or come to terms with the fact that, though being the *summum bonum*, truth is not attainable through reason only?

Biblical anthropology tells us that men must not want to know everything, and, contrary to the Greek one, it further suggests that they are not even properly equipped for knowledge. We are now dealing with both gnoseology and ethics, for some of the questions we are dealing with certainly are: what can we know? What should we know? Both the Hebrew and the Greek worlds present us with another problem, which could be described as psychological: what is the relationship between human nature and knowledge? Aristotle and the Bible seem to agree on this, in that men are instinctively

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<sup>2</sup> On modernist character see Stara 2004, 139-169.

curious. What they disagree on, though, is how to evaluate such tendency: as the highest virtue in one case, as a vice to be corrected in the other (*vana curiositas*, as Augustine will later say).

Thomas Buddenbrook, however, seems to deviate altogether from these paradigms. Surely he *is* curious — he would like to know what is going on between Gerda and von Throta, he avidly reads Schopenhauer — but he also displays signs of resistance, weariness, defenses, excuses — in other words, a wish *not* to know. This ambivalent attitude towards knowledge represents a shift in the anthropological paradigm, whose most prominent theorist, operating in the very same period as when *Buddenbrooks* was published, is obviously Freud.

### 3. ...and an anthropology of ambivalence

There is a strong connection between desiring to know, refusing to know and psychism. Freud links intellectual curiosity and creativity to the primal scene, that glimpse of truth that the subject finds both interesting and dreadful, both willing and unwilling to know. Oedipus himself is a hero of knowledge: he solves the Sphinx's riddles, and acrimoniously investigates the causes of the Thebes plague. His ignorance of Laius' and Jocasta's identities will eventually doom him, but at the same time he is undeniably driven by an extreme hunger for knowledge.

Now, Freud provides us with a wide range of instances of this refusal to know. These instances are always psychological, and that is probably the most prominent innovation in his anthropology. Many are in fact the pertinent psychoanalytical notions. First there is *repression* [*Verdrängung*], both a specific mechanism and a model towards which all the others refer; *resistance* [*Widerstand*], an individual reaction against whatever therapy unearths, as well as a collective stance towards what psychoanalysis itself represents; *disavowal* [*Verleugnung*], which unlike repression concerns the external reality and engenders a split in the ego where contrasting thoughts coexist without influencing each other; *negation* [*Verneinung*], a logical formation which, quite paradoxically, “tak[es] cognizance of what is repressed” (Freud 1953-73, XIX 235); *suppression* [*Unterdrückung*] which differs from repression in its being conscious, suppressed items being stored in the preconscious rather than the unconscious; *censorship* [*Zensur*], the basis of repression; the *undoing of what has been done* [*Ungeschehenmachen*], that is trying to erase the past; and we could easily go on.

These are heterogenous notions in terms of their extension and the criteria upon which they are formulated: some are general mechanisms; others, such as negation, are just rhetorical figures of the psyche. We should also keep in mind that Freud himself changed and reformulated these notions over the years. Yet, we could easily present them all under one comprehensive category, that of *defense* [*Abwehr*].

What exactly are we defending ourselves from? Perhaps from something that threatens the ego (or rather its equilibrium, which does not coincide with its actual



health), and that can come from anywhere: the external and the inner world, reality and imagination, truths and ghosts, what happened, as well as what could have happened. According to Laplace and Pontalis, “however great the differences may be between the various modalities of defensive process in hysteria, obsessional neurosis, paranoia, etc., the two poles of the conflict are invariably the ego and the instinct” (1988, 105). However, as it happens with Freud and as both Laplace and Pontalis know quite well, defense is not merely a pathogenic process; and if the intrapsychic battle really is between the ego and the instincts, the theatre of war is much wider. Defense is a constitutive aspect of the ego, in the same way in which repression establishes the unconscious. Simply put, all these processes are not accidental; they ultimately make humans what they are. They do not represent an anomaly or an unusual reaction; they are primal, originary, foundational.

Ancient Greek culture understands the notion of rejecting truth as a comical mistake. One can deceive and be deceived in turn, or even be so clueless as not to see what is in front of them. It is probably unimaginable for a Greek to see the truth and reject it *because* it is the truth. According to Hebrew culture, we cannot and we do not have to know everything, which is another way of highlighting men and their limits, both as natural and ideal beings. With Freud, on the other hand, the refusal to know is naturalized: one does not deliberately decide not to know. It is not a choice, it is not the observance of a ban and it is not being virtuous, but it is rather an automatism, a mode of preservation, fear. Most often, one does not even decide or choose not to know. And because it is so innate to every man, the refusal to know is exempted from both intellectual and moral negative judgment — it is not an expression of comic stupidity, and it is not even a proof of cowardice or impiety, as any attempt to cross the limits of knowledge is seen in Hebrew and Christian cultures.

The manifold Freudian ways of shielding oneself from knowledge do not exactly fit with *noluntas sciendi* or *voluntas nesciendi*; mainly because, for Freud, either will is not in action, or is not the real problem. We could try and pair *voluntas* with suppression (both being conscious activities), and *noluntas* with repression (both inhibiting a desire or an instinct). But *voluntas* and *noluntas* are categories spoiled by the very ethical assessments that Doctor Freud does not concern himself with. They trigger a judgment, in the characters’ world, in the narrator’s stance, in the readers’ reactions. Or rather, they make it so that formulating a judgment about them becomes a problem. With his willing refusal to acknowledge the truth, Thomas Buddenbrook represents a case study for a novelist, rather than a psychoanalyst.

#### 4. Strether, or the fear of ideas and of oneself

There is a certain irony at work in *Buddenbrooks* — one that is more dramatic than tragic. Even more ambiguous, though, is the case of Lambert Strether in Henry James’ *The Ambassadors*, whose story ends “with a certain philosophic humor” (2011, 690).

Thomas Buddenbrook avoids the universal truths disclosed by Schopenhauer, as well as the truth about his marriage. Strether, on the other hand, in his age of maturity too, is only preoccupied by affairs that concern him directly.

James frames the problem of knowledge in strictly psychological and moral terms, though employing a wider range of tones than Mann. Having been sent to Paris to find out why young Chad Newsome is not willing to come back home, Strether soon entertains the possibility that the boy is having an affair with Madame de Vionnet. It turns out that he is not mistaken, but the protagonist dismisses the idea for a variety of reasons: to begin with, Chad and Madame de Vionnet lie to him; not even his friend Maria Gostrey reveals him everything she knows; finally, Strether himself does not want to see the truth, seduced as he is by the young compatriot, the charming Frenchwoman, and the way in which Paris sparks in him a belated sense of youth.

Strether is therefore a character who is deceived by others, but also by himself. If the latter condition provides an example of *voluntas nesciendi* (since the truth was first guessed and then pushed away), the former makes him a mockable character — and indeed James makes great use of comic undertones, which are absent in Mann, but which we will encounter again in Svevo.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the psychological complexity of the character and the predominantly internal focus of the narration, the ridicule to which “poor Strether” (as he is often affectionately referred to) is exposed does not undercut his stature; on the contrary, it adds further depth to his story as a man who considers himself “a perfectly equipped failure” (James 2011, 101) and who experiences true melancholy.

Strether has a mental activity that is both brisk and insufficient: he thinks a lot, but his reasoning gives way to an excessive imagination which ultimately disengages him from reality. He is curious and his reactions range from amazement to perplexity. “He but half knew at the time” (James 2011, 630) that he is living in an uncertain, muffled state of consciousness where, if anything, he perceives the sense of things “at the back of his head, behind everything” (James 2011, 316).

James’ use of psychology here is particularly perceptive — though obviously pre-Freudian, since there is no trace of unconscious in the novel (we could, at best, speak of *preconscious*).<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what sharpens the moral and existential drama, made all the more intense because Strether’s authenticity, honesty and, even paradoxically, intelligence (or at least his human sensibility) are not actually erased by his incomprehension of things and people.

As the story reaches its conclusion, Strether finds out what he should have known immediately. In keeping with one of the most ancient traditions, this particular form of blindness is the result of those ever-changing passions which are responsible for the character’s exhibited and self-aware “inconsequence” (James 2011, 568). Beyond the

<sup>3</sup> For the most convincing interpretation of James through a theatrical lens, see Peter Brook’s analysis of his “melodrama of consciousness” (1995, 157 and ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Ellmann 2010 reads instead James through Freud. On James’ actual knowledge of Freud, see Rivkin 2007.

mood swings, though, there is something else — almost an essential trait. That is why Strether ultimately claims *voluntas nesciendi* and *noluntas nesciendi*: “I never think a step further than I’m obliged to” (James 2011, 656), he declares (even though he should not be trusted), thus setting the limits of his knowledge. And when Maria Gostrey asks him if he is in love with Madame de Vionnet, he candidly replies: “It’s of no importance I should know [...]. It matters so little — has nothing to do, practically, with either of us” (James 2011, 594). Shortly after, he adds: “What I want is a thing I’ve ceased to measure or even to understand” (James 2011, 599). Finally, on the last page: “I have no ideas. I’m afraid of them. I’ve done with them” (James 2011, 696). Strether chooses to be what he really is: a man “afraid of himself” (James 2011, 416), a man who cannot help but refusing the truth. But whereas Thomas is, in a way, narratively punished with death, Strether is instead rewarded with a second youth — though only for being eventually overwhelmed by it.

*Noluntas sciendi* is also dictated by social manners and comfort, as is the case when Strether surprises Chad and Madame de Vionnet on a romantic trip, and the three spend all the time trying to ignore the awkwardness of the situation. Strether is “at that point of vantage, in full possession, to make of it all what he could” (James 2011, 631): he must finally come to terms with the fact that he was the victim of “simply a lie” (James 2011, 631). But is it really a consolation to find out that the truth is our mistake? That we have been deluded and deceived by a “performance” (James 2011, 631)? What if, then, ignoring oneself were the only way to happiness, to life? Actual wisdom is not, as Socrates would have put it, knowing that we do not know; rather, it coincides with the awareness that we do not *want* to know.

## 5. Zeno Cosini, on leave from the truth

If Thomas lives in a state of dramatic irony and Strether, in turn, of narrative ambiguity, the case of Zeno Cosini is more compromised by irony, as well as more resolute in declaring war on knowledge. In addition to that, while Thomas was perfectly conscious, and Strether found himself in a wavering mental state where knowledge is acquired late, Zeno ushers in the Freudian unconscious. The realm of consciousness is thinning: the character is escaping from himself. Before modernism, characters who would not know were ridiculous because they were codified as fools. Now, not only is Svevo a master of goofiness, but he also resorts to irony as a destabilizing tool.

At the end of the *Conscience*, Doctor S. tells Zeno that he suffers from Oedipus complex. The patient reacts with sarcasm: his affection towards his parents has always been pure and unbound, so the psychoanalyst must be just “another hysteric” (Svevo 2003, 633) who projects his own perversities onto his patients. This anger, however, sends Zeno into a spiral of contradictions. First, he states that he will get violent with the doctor. Then, feigning an air of superiority, he declares not to be angry with him anymore. He writes: “The best proof that I never had that sickness is supplied by the fact

that I am not cured of it” (Svevo 2003, 617), with that “it” clearly nodding to the fact that he is indeed sick. Shortly after, as if nothing happened, he proclaims himself “healthy, absolutely” (Svevo 2003, 661). He also turns down the accusation of having always hated his brother-in-law Guido and explains that he was absent from his funeral because he was “intent on his labor of love, saving Ada’s fortune” (Svevo 2003, 632) — thus admitting that he never stopped pining after his sister-in-law, and was still trying to seduce her. Zeno desperately wants us to believe him, and he humorously admits that “a confession made by *him* in Italian could be neither complete nor sincere” (Svevo 2003, 632).

Some may still have doubts about this, but if there were an Oedipal character in the history of the novel, that would be Zeno. The ironic rigmarole of his contradictions is the definitive proof of it, as if all the other signs were not already there — his troubled relationship with his father, as well as with any other fatherly figure; his neurosis and all its symptoms; his dreams, his fantasies, his entire history of completed or failed acts. Yes, deontologically speaking Doctor S. is a horrible physician: to say that his methods are unorthodox would be an understatement, not to mention that he publishes Zeno’s memoirs for revenge. However, as a diagnostician, Doctor S. is right, because he confronts Zeno with the truth. The narrator’s unreliability, about which there has been quite a lot of misunderstanding, could not work if this degree of certainty were not there in the first place.

Zeno lies, in the sense that he consciously alters the truth — to other characters and, obviously, to his doctor. It is a detail of the utmost importance because, together with others, it makes him a morally reprehensible character, unlike Thomas and Strether. Yet, paradoxically enough, Zeno is sincere with us readers: he tells us that he lied because he knows that that is how he can have us on his side, against the doctor, and all his other enemies. In short, Zeno may be a lying character, but he is not a lying narrator: with all due respect to Epimenides, who admits that having lied is in fact not lying at all. Liars knowingly manipulate what they believe to be the truth — an act for which we do not even need to resort to Freud. Zeno instead engages with *noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi*: he rejects the truth of his Oedipism that his whole story hints at, and that we, Svevo and Doctor S. all know of. Or to put it better, Zeno’s conscience rejects the truth that his unconscious harbors, and it reveals it in ways that escape him.

The hypothesis that Zeno could be a liar can be approached from a twofold perspective: on the one hand, one which considers, according to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century *topos*, every confession as untruthful (if so, where would the Freudian specificity of the *Conscience* lie?); on the other hand, one which claims to verify local lies in the novel, mistakenly interpreting Italo Svevo’s oversights — a writer who notoriously was often inattentive — for a refined (and a bit paranoid) literary construction.<sup>5</sup> These claims, brilliantly argued for, would require space to be deconstructed: but they both marginalize

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<sup>5</sup> The most consistent theorist of Zeno as a liar is Lavagetto 1986 and 1992: support to his claims can be found in Vittorini 2004. Svevo’s oversights as a writer are revealed and acutely examined by Carrai 2010, 57-79.

the import of Freud's lesson, one that Svevo, on the contrary, had brilliantly assimilated. The ploy was indeed very well performed: as we have seen, Zeno claims he lied because he comes from Trieste, and he is not fluent in Italian. Such a *Witz's* geniality is confirmed by the fact that many have been deceived by it. Is it really possible that Zeno's trustworthiness is dependent on a linguistic problem? How are we to overlook the fact that here we are witnessing the umpteenth form of resistance to the analyst, and an attempt to deactivate the truths that our hero has unwillingly let slip?

Zeno is most certainly misfit. This designation (which we actually owe to Svevo himself and which had an extraordinary success), however, might distract us from the most disturbing aspect of his personality. I am not referring here to the fact that, as everyone knows, Zeno is ultimately a winning misfit, a Darwinian animal capable of adapting to ever-changing circumstances. The misfit condition is, rather, an incapacity or inadaptability to adjust to life, which manifests itself, above all, in the practical and social spheres. The point here is that misfit characters might potentially have an even higher intelligence than commoners (as would be the case of Myskin, or the narrator of the *Recherche*). When it comes to Svevo's characters, not only are Alfonso Nitti and Emilio Brentani, the protagonists of *A Life* and *As a Man Grows Older*, essentially defeated, but they also live in false consciousness. Or in other words: poetic justice punishes them because they live in self-deception. Things get more complicated with Zeno, because his rejection of the truth strengthens as his morality becomes more ambiguous, and the wisdom he manages to acquire in the last pages of the novel, with the famous apologue on the end of maladies and of humanity, is completely foreign to Alfonso and Emilio. As if all this were not enough, he is also rewarded at the end of the novel.

Upon closer inspection, Zeno wins not because he rejects the truth that psychoanalysis revealed to him about himself, but because he gets rid of truth altogether. We can (and we must) read this behavior through Freud, that is by retracing in him instances of defense, from repression to resistance, and from negation to disavowal.<sup>6</sup> But the real level of discourse still pertains to *noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi*, that is, the moral implications of this rejection of knowledge from a character who claims to tell us how to make meaning of the world at the cost of self-blindness. The final musings on life at the end of the *Conscience* must be taken seriously: Zeno understands that truth does not lead to a healthy and happy life — not because it is harmful, but because it is simply useless. In the preface, Dr. S. says that the memoir contains “many truths and many lies” (Svevo 2003, 40), but this warning does not function only as a pledge to the common, pre-Freudian language, but also to its moral perspective which, as I said, cannot be removed from the story. However, Zeno too is right when, while explaining that he related dreams he never had, he says that “inventing is a creation, not a lie” (Svevo 2003, 619) — and indeed, in those dreams does he limit himself to appease the analyst,

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, Gigante 2020 has brought critical attention back to Freudism in the *Conscience*.

confirming his interpretation, or does he reveal something more profound about his own instincts?

When dealing with Freudian logic, one can never really escape the truth: dreams, symptoms, lapsus, missed acts, wit — all of which could be taken as mistakes or details of no importance in daytime logic and conscience, but that still say something essential about us.<sup>7</sup> But from Zeno's point of view, truth is useless. Translated into our individual unconscious, the great tragedy of Oedipus becomes a domestic parody ("An illustrious sickness, whose ancestors dated back to the mythological era!"; Svevo 2003, 617). There is no terrible solemnity that cannot be laughed at, and there is no myth that cannot be turned into farce. This depreciation of truth is a "device" implanted in our consciences — a device even more dangerous than the one that, one day, a bespectacled man "a bit sicker than others" will place at the center of the earth (Svevo 2003, 790). Zeno arrives where Thomas and Strether could not, and where not even Schopenhauer and Freud could: he arrives where Nietzsche did.<sup>8</sup> Zeno's laughter is a Nietzschean laughter over the ruins of the world: on Europe hit by WWI, on the failure of Western values, on a planet threatened by total destruction in its final apologue.

If characters who live in *noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi* are relatively infrequent in the history of the novel, it is because, as Zeno reveals, they are the most dangerous. Thomas and Strether are still afraid of the truth, and therefore reject it. Knowing that Gerda and von Throta are lovers, or drawing the conclusions from reading Schopenhauer, or acknowledging the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet: any of these acts would compromise their lives too much. Be that as it may, they take truth seriously, and are therefore committed to avoiding it. But not Zeno. Zeno laughs. Is it because he is sick? Are we not all, by the way? Did he really want to possess his mother and kill his father? He did not do it — but then again, who has not dreamed of it? Sure, truth does exist, of course, but it is of no use for life: it is worth nothing. Thomas has been rightfully described as an example of passive nihilism (Crescenzi 2007, 26). But the final destination of *noluntas sciendi* and *voluntas nesciendi*, which overturns centuries of Western thought, is full nihilism.

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<sup>7</sup> Saccone 1991, 9 already highlighted it.

<sup>8</sup> On Nietzsche's influence on Svevo, see Mariani 2009.

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