



PROJECT MUSE®

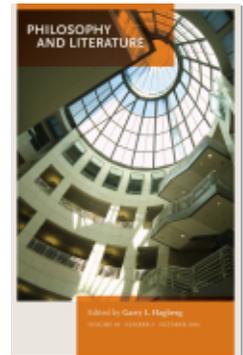
Irony as a Way of Life: Svevo, Kierkegaard, and Psychoanalysis

Emma Bond

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 40, Number 2, October 2016, pp. 431-445
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2016.0029>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649405>

EMMA BOND

IRONY AS A WAY OF LIFE: SVEVO, KIERKEGAARD, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Abstract. Dejected by decades of commercial and critical failure, the Triestine author Italo Svevo found fresh inspiration for his final novel (*La coscienza di Zeno*, 1923) in the writings of Freud. Yet critics have always puzzled over his declared intransigence toward his new master, often attributing this ambivalence to a simple defense mechanism. But what if Svevo had been reading other works simultaneously, works that challenged and exposed the weaknesses of psychoanalytic authority? As this article argues, Svevo's recently discovered reading of Kierkegaard's "existential irony" sheds light on his conception of the power of both narrative and the analytical process itself.

"To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality."¹

I

THE MAIN TITLE OF this article departs from a statement made by Andrew Cross in the chapter he wrote for *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, "Neither Either nor Or: the Perils of Reflexive Irony," which must surely suggest a tantalizing read for anyone familiar with the writings of Italo Svevo (1861–1928). In his chapter, Cross posits Søren Kierkegaard's theorizing of irony as "not just a verbal strategy, but a *way of life*."² It is, of course, commonly accepted that Kierkegaard's writing is characterized by various forms of intentional and self-conscious verbal indirectness, some of which will be explored in this article. But beyond irony as a speech mode or rhetorical device, Cross argues that

for Kierkegaard (and indeed for many of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries) irony “indicates a particular way of engaging in public (interpersonal) activity in general,” and that what really fascinates the Danish philosopher is examining “what it is to live ironically—to manifest in one’s life, unqualifiedly, the attitudes and type of orientation toward the world that constitute irony” (Cross, p. 126). What Cross is looking to identify within Kierkegaard’s work, then, is an *existential* irony, his self-positioning as an ironist “all the way down” (close, therefore, to what D. C. Muecke has called a “general ironist,”³ and how Muecke believed that such an attitude could offer improved self-understanding and maturation, ultimately leading toward “the awakening of subjectivity”⁴).

My aim in the present analysis is to identify within Svevo’s writing—most closely in his characterization of his alter-ego protagonist Zeno Cosini in the 1923 novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (Zeno’s Conscience)—some aspects and expressions of this Kierkegaardian “ironic way of life.” I start by detailing Svevo’s discovery of Kierkegaard, thus directly linking the two writers, and then expand on some specific elements within Kierkegaard’s conception of irony that lend themselves to comparative analysis. I am not looking to map these affirmations and ideas exactly onto Svevo’s texts, but rather to tease out areas of convergence and fissures of difference that might serve to illuminate aspects of the structure and spirit behind the work of the Triestine author. I conclude by suggesting that this ironist position serves also to shed light on Svevo’s narrative employment of psychoanalysis, which seems to take him radically beyond those writings of Freud that provided direct inspiration for his novel and toward anticipating later works of Jacques Lacan on language, and ultimately even shedding light on the essentially ironic nature of the analytical process itself.

II

First I want to briefly summarize why the link between Svevo and Kierkegaard is of such topical interest. For a long time it was assumed that the fire damage caused by Allied bombing at the end of the Second World War had entirely consumed the library at Villa Veneziani, Svevo’s home in Trieste, and that the only books belonging to him that survived were some gifts and personal editions of his own works that had been rescued by his wife. But a chance discovery in 2011 by Simone Volpato, a researcher at the University of Trieste, uncovered seventy-one volumes that had been catalogued as part of the collection belonging to Svevo’s

son-in-law (Antonio Fonda Savio), but were then revealed to have belonged to Svevo himself. Not only were all signed “Ettore” (Svevo’s real first name), but many had been scrupulously annotated as well.

This discovery was brought fully into the public arena in 2013 with the publication of Volpato and Riccardo Cepach’s *Alla peggior andrò in biblioteca: I libri ritrovati di Italo Svevo*, which granted an invaluable snapshot into this collection of books that Svevo had personally bought, read, and reflected on, thus shedding light on an important fragment of his cultural, literary, and philosophical formation.⁵ From the scholarship in this volume we learn that Svevo came into possession of the German translation of *Either/Or* in 1909; its first part, the “Papers of A.,” is the most heavily annotated text in the Fonda Savio collection.

Several things emerge from an analysis of Svevo’s reading of Kierkegaard that are of great significance and that resonate with the composition of *La coscienza*, not only structurally (the assumption of authorial pseudonyms, for example, or the first-person, diaristic style) but also as an absolutely fundamental influence on the narrative philosophy behind the novel itself, in its slippery dissolution of the author/narrator/protagonist figures, which anticipates later poststructuralist or even postmodern matrices, and its consequent “betrayal” of the author-reader pact, both of which reside in that common appraisal of irony as the existential reconceptualization of subjectivity-in-the-world suggested at the outset of this article. Since Svevo does not seem to have been familiar with Kierkegaard’s earlier written works on irony (particularly *On the Concept of Irony* [1841]), nor his later ones (the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* [1846]), these will not form a major part of my analysis; rather, I will focus on the ideas that emerge from *Either/Or* and relate them, where necessary or appropriate, to other works.

Yet even this more limited scope of reference offers an exciting new addition to our understanding of Svevo’s philosophical trajectory, which to date had assumed a chronological lacuna from the publication of the Schopenhauerian-inspired *Una vita* (1892) to his discovery of Freud between 1908 and 1910, which led to the composition of *La coscienza* in the aftermath of the First World War. We now know that alongside Freud, Svevo was reading Kierkegaard (possibly even at the same time), and it is fascinating to reflect on how his reception of these two texts intertwines—perhaps most revealingly around the pole of irony.

III

As stated above, the first narrative technique that aligns Svevo and Kierkegaard is the inclusion of a sort of dual authorship *within* their respective texts. *Either/Or* is posited to have been “written” by two fictitious authors; the first part contains the supposed diary of a third, and the second contains a sermon by a fourth, and all are presented by a pseudonymous editor in the fictitious preface. The narrative of *La coscienza di Zenò* has a similarly complex framing device. The purloined manuscript is introduced in the ambiguously stated preface by Zenò’s analyst, Dottor S., which is itself followed by the obliquely “fictitious” memories (the self-confessed *tante bugie* [many lies]⁶) that Zenò produces through ambivalence and countertransference; the memories’ reliability is thus shattered for both analyst and reader.⁷

Related to this narrative structuring is Kierkegaard’s extratextual device of employing authorial polynymity. Critics have generally seen his prolific pseudonyms as free, even contradictory, agents—yet have accepted that the polynymity he assumes is not merely a game but rather carefully designed to orient the “ghost-written” works within a constructed philosophical framework. But as Alastair Hannay points out, Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonymity also allows him to disown authority for what he writes: “It scrambles the author-reader link in a way that allows the writings to enjoy a genuinely independent existence, letting them become considerations in the mind of the reader.”⁸

As I will argue, we could see Svevo adopting a similar strategy toward authorial authority and responsibility. He does this through his lifelong adoption of pseudonyms (from his given name of Ettore Schmitz, to E. Samigli, Ettore Muranese, and finally Italo Svevo), and through the related alter egos (of Alfonso, Emilio, Zenò, and even Dottor S.) that weave an autobiographically inspired narrative voice throughout his works.⁹

IV

Delving more deeply into specific details, which elements of Kierkegaard’s vast range of ironic statements and practices in the “Papers of A.” particularly caught Svevo’s eye (indicated by what he had marked or underlined in his copy of *Either/Or*), and where can we see their influence in *La coscienza di Zenò*?

The first statement I want to explore seems to echo the double premise of *La coscienza di Zenò* itself: the need or desire for self-evaluation

(the process of “auto-analisi” famously inspired by Freudian practice), and the screen issue of Zeno’s tobacco addiction. For example, Svevo underlined the following statement by A.: “One should be an enigma not just to others but to oneself too. I study myself. When I’m tired of that I light a cigar to pass the time, and think: God only knows what the good Lord really meant with me, or what He meant to make of me” (*E/O*, p. 47). Zeno, of course, is a notoriously resistant patient, one who would doubtless second this insistence on the importance of remaining an “enigma” to oneself. As Svevo himself wrote in a similar vein: “I didn’t care for psychoanalysis as a cure. I was healthy or at least I loved my illness (if it is one) so much that I wanted to hold on to it in the spirit of self-defense” (Come cura a me [la psicanalisi] non importava. Io ero sano o almeno amavo tanto la mia malattia [se c’è] da preservarmela con intero spirito di autodifesa).¹⁰

And spurred on by Dottor S.’s encouragement of his free-association practice, Zeno ties his resistance firmly to his smoking, saying: “Now that I am here, analyzing myself, I am seized by a suspicion: Did I perhaps love cigarettes so much because they enabled me to blame them for my clumsiness?” (*ZC*, p. 12) (Adesso che sono qui, ad analizzarmi, sono colto da un dubbio: che io forse abbia amato tanto la sigaretta per poter riversare su di essa la colpa della mia incapacità? [*CZ*, p. 11]). He also more generally posits analysis as a practice that is capable only of converting health into illness: “I am analyzing [Augusta’s] health, but I fail, because I realize that in analyzing it I convert it into sickness” (*ZC*, p. 158) (Io sto analizzando [la salute di Augusta], ma non ci riesco perché mi accorgo che, analizzandola, la converto in malattia [*CZ*, p. 148]). Interpretation is seen as praxis rather than goal, and one besides that might (ideally?) tie in more with strategies of resistance or avoidance than offer a positive cure or definitive answer.

The next citation that Svevo underlined within the “Papers of A.” cannot help but recall the famously ironic episode in *La coscienza* where Zeno follows the wrong carriage to his brother-in-law Guido’s funeral and ends up missing the burial itself. “How empty life is and without meaning. We bury a man, we follow him to the grave, we throw three spadefuls of earth on him, we ride out in a coach, we ride home in a coach, we take comfort in the thought that a long life awaits us. But how long is threescore years and ten?” (*E/O*, pp. 48–49). The way that death, as well as the social conventions surrounding its commemoration, highlights the futility of life itself is perhaps echoed in Ada’s dismissal of the stock market activities that (perhaps too) conveniently prevented Zeno

from attending her husband's funeral. "Thanks to what you've done, he actually died for something that wasn't worth it!" (*ZC*, p. 396) (Così hai fatto in modo ch'egli è morto proprio per una cosa che non ne valeva la pena! [*CZ*, p. 375]).

The dynamic of rivalry between the two men seems to have inspired Zeno to render Guido's death empty and without meaning, since his own failure imbues Zeno with a hitherto unknown sense of success. "I was all health and strength. Health is evident only through comparison. I compared myself to poor Guido and I climbed, higher and higher, with my victory in the very struggle where he had fallen" (*ZC*, p. 392) (Ero tutto salute e forza. La salute non risalta che da un paragone. Mi paragonavo a Guido e salivo, salivo in alto con la mia vittoria nella stessa lotta nella quale egli era soggiaciuto [*CZ*, p. 371]).

But Kierkegaard's reference to death also draws in a wider preoccupation with mortality that underpins the narrative of *La coscienza di Zeno* as a whole—as Zeno says, death is "the true organizer of life. I thought always of death, and therefore I had only . . . the certainty of having to die" (*ZC*, p. 79) (la vera organizzatrice della vita. Io sempre alla morte pensavo e perciò non avevo che . . . la certezza di dover morire [*CZ*, p. 73]). As we have seen, the defeat of death can be temporarily countered by the illusion of relationality that Kierkegaard highlights above, and which is enacted by Zeno's relations with his own father, his father-in-law Giovanni Malfenti, and (particularly) Guido, his rival in love.¹¹

A further element of striking commonality between the two texts is in their discourses on pleasure, which highlight a maximum sense of attainment as being linked not to the sensation of pleasure itself but rather to an awareness of victory, or of achieving one's own will. As Kierkegaard writes: "Pleasure consists not in what I enjoy but in *having my way*" (*E/O*, p. 49, emphasis added). Zeno mimics this in his retelling of the story of his courtship of Ada, "I dreamed of victory rather than of love" (*ZC*, p. 102) (Sognavo la vittoria invece che l'amore [*CZ*, p. 95]); as well as in his relationship with Guido, where—as anticipated above—his fullest delight is to be found not in the enjoyment of a certain camaraderie or friendship but rather in a sense of having succeeded in "imposing his own will" (*ZC*, p. 147) on the other (imporre la volontà [*CZ*, p. 138]).

In keeping with the subject of retelling or recollecting events, memory is another shared concern between the two texts, particularly the influence of recollection on time and reality. A. states: "For me nothing is more dangerous than recollection. Once I have recalled some life-situation it ceases to exist. . . . A life in recollection is the most

perfect imaginable; memory gives you your fill more abundantly than all of reality and has security which no reality possesses. A life-situation recalled has already passed into eternity and has no more temporal interest" (*E/O*, p. 50). This may recall, to name but one example, the crystallization of memory into narrative that Zeno evokes when trying to remember to what extent the stories he told the Malfenti sisters during his courtship of Ada were true or not: "They were true inasmuch as I could not have told them in any other version. Today it's of no importance to me to prove their veracity" (*ZC*, p. 84) (Erano vere dal momento che io non avrei più saputo raccontarle altrimenti. Oggidì non m'importa di provarne la verità [*CZ*, p. 78]). But these comments also indicate more generally how the process of psychoanalysis and the recuperation of memory through image leads to a falsification of the past that persists into the present: "Thus, after pursuing those images, I overtook them. Now I know that I invented them" (*ZC*, p. 404) (È così che a forza di correr dietro a quelle immagini, io le raggiunsi. Ora so di averle inventate [*CZ*, p. 382]).¹²

But most of all, what unites the two texts is their shared position of laughter in relation to life. As Kierkegaard writes: "When I was very young I forgot in the cave of Trophonius how to laugh; when I became older, when I opened my eyes and saw reality, I started to laugh and haven't stopped since" (*E/O*, p. 51). This last quotation, I think, perfectly aligns Kierkegaard's conception of irony with that put forward by Zeno Cosini in *La coscienza*. Indeed, this citation shows the characteristics of verbal irony (as rhetorical practice)—the contradiction between internal and external perception and meaning, and the positioning of detachment and superiority to the other and to everyday life—but it also uses them as an orientation toward existence in general. In this regard, Zeno recalls that his father has two things that he can legitimately reproach him for: "my absentmindedness and my tendency to *laugh at the most serious matters*" (*ZC*, p. 34, emphasis added) (la mia distrazione e la mia tendenza di *ridere delle cose più serie* [*CZ*, p. 32, emphasis added]).

This detachment is what allows both *Either/Or* and *La coscienza* to maintain their status as texts that occupy a dynamic force field of shifting significance. Indeed, Cross speaks specifically of an "internal tension that renders the ironist's way of life unstable, self-undetermining" (Cross, p. 127), and Muecke notes that the general ironist has a need and a capacity for endless revision and self-correction, for questioning and suspending judgment, for living "hypothetically and subjectively . . . and keeping alive an infinity of possibilities" (Muecke, p. 129). This

also correlates with the third of Brian Moloney's definition of three interlocking but distinct levels of irony within *La coscienza*: the irony of events mysteriously turning out for the best; Zeno's self-deprecating irony, which absolves him from any blame; and the irony of his own self-betrayal,¹³ where irony functions for Zeno as a means to "readily evade the difficulties of direct expression."¹⁴

V

This evasion, I would argue, is also where the figure of the Kierkegaardian ironist comes into contact with the praxis of psychoanalysis within *La coscienza di Zeno*. For what Kierkegaard practices has been described by Cross as "radical verbal irony," or "saying something that can be taken in a variety of ways, where the speaker is only interested in producing riddles which do not commit him, in the sense that he cannot be held to account. . . . His only interest is in luxuriating in the freedom that comes from playing at conversation, tossing out statements that can be taken in a variety of ways, and letting the hearer who takes this to be a real conversation flounder among interpretative possibilities" (Cross, pp. 131–32). The emphasis here is on freedom, since the speaker's aim is no longer genuinely communicative, even though he might pretend that this had been his initial intention (since he did at least start off by engaging in a speech act).

This is why Kierkegaard's A., as well as Svevo's Zeno, must both be described as ironists rather than simply ironic speakers (so therefore *living* ironically rather than just speaking ironically). Both are figures who outwardly engage in interaction while "inwardly repudiating its goals and treating it all as a kind of game": "Rather than engage with his social world either by taking part in or criticizing it, he lifts himself out of it altogether" (Cross, p. 134). Thus, irony allows the subject to disassociate himself from himself, from the social, embodied person that he has been and now merely plays at being. We see evidence of this in another passage from the "Papers of A." that Svevo underlined: "Of all the ridiculous things in the world what strikes me as the most ridiculous of all is being busy in the world, to be a man quick to his meals and quick to his work. So when, at the crucial moment, I see a fly settle on such a businessman's nose, . . . or a tile falls from the roof and strikes him dead, I laugh from the bottom of my heart. And who could help laughing?" (*E/O*, p. 46).

Similarly, Zeno succeeds in lifting himself out of the struggle for life that defeated both his literary predecessors Alfonso and Emilio (to varying extents) through the sort of laughter that is engendered by an existential ironistic position.¹⁵ Yet it is also important to conceptualize this laughter as part of a greater strategy of resistance that realigns Kierkegaard with Freud within the narrative structure of *La coscienza*. As Zeno says in response to Dottor S.'s "diagnosis" that he suffers from the Oedipus complex, "I laugh at it wholeheartedly" (*ZC*, p. 403) (*Ne rido di cuore* [*CZ*, p. 381]).

The ironic position of detachment from society and interaction here also mimics Zeno's insistence on his own illness and rejection of any sort of related "cure": "I am bent on recovering from his therapy. I avoid dreams and memories. Thanks to them, my poor head has been so transformed that it doesn't feel secure on my neck. I have frightful distractions" (*ZC*, pp. 417–18) (*Sono intento a guarire dalla sua cura. Evito i sogni ed i ricordi. Per essi la mia povera testa si è trasformata in modo da non saper sentirsi sicura sul collo. Ho delle distrazioni spaventose* [*CZ*, p. 395]). By enacting a successful resistance to diagnosis and cure, Zeno subsequently declares: "I could smile at my life and also at my sickness" (*ZC*, p. 419) (*seppi sorridere alla mia vita e anche alla mia malattia* [*CZ*, p. 396]).

VI

A well-known fact is that Freud never dealt extensively with the topic of irony in his works, only mentioning it a handful of times in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.¹⁶ This omission, as Stringfellow has argued, is because Freud takes irony to be a purely rhetorical technique, one that is rationally chosen by the speaker, and which therefore bears no relation to the sort of internal censorship that we see in other dynamics of repression.¹⁷ Indeed, although Freud posits that jokes betray a certain "untrustworthy" usage of language, which "needs to have its justification examined," he attributes this untrustworthiness to a deliberate sense of sophistry (*Jokes*, p. 61). But, if we apply a psychoanalytical model rather than a rhetorical one to the double logic of irony (thus privileging the incompatibility between intended and implied messages), we become aware that a level of unconscious meaning should exist on both levels, thus negating it as a purely intentional speech mode. "By assuming that a person means *everything* that she says, psychoanalysis can stay open to meanings that tend to be lost in a rhetorical analysis" (Stringfellow, p. 5, emphasis added).

For Svevo, irony, illness, and laughter are thus aligned by the praxis of analysis, which reveals the internal ambiguities and contradictions in both speech and selfhood. In this alignment, they merge to encompass a position of detachment that then characterizes the ironist's way of life. As he writes in the "Profilo autobiografico" from *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*: "And after realizing that life is imprecise, obscured rather than clarified by our intentions that do not impact on it, *we end up laughing at human activity in general*" (my translation; emphasis added) (E scoprendo tanto imprecisa la nostra personalità piuttosto oscurata che chiarita dalle nostre intenzioni che non arrivano ad atteggiare la nostra vita, *finiamo col ridere dell'attività umana in generale* [p. 812, emphasis added]).

Here Svevo's reception of Kierkegaardian irony leads him beyond Freud and toward anticipating the later writings of Jacques Lacan, which map the instruments of rhetoric onto the workings of the unconscious itself and thus deal in greater depth with irony, also in a self-reflexive way. "Freud provides [Lacan] with a guarantee that all thinking is 'thinking other': there is no stability, no stopping place, no supreme system. The speaking unconscious is a model for the intellectual life. Rather than create a monument and leave time, history or opinion to bring it down, Lacan writes works that displace and deconstruct themselves as they are produced."¹⁸ This praxis of displacing meaning within his own works is also mirrored in Lacan's attitude toward literary texts, which he considered "as inexhaustibly ambiguous and plural" (Bowie, p. 136).

For the link between the workings of the unconscious and rhetorical modes of speech (explicitly including irony) is key for Lacan and can provide further insight into the dynamics of the neurotic symptoms at stake. "Can one see here mere manners of speaking, when it is the figures themselves that are at work in the rhetoric of the discourse the analysand actually utters?"¹⁹ Within this system of dialectical displacement that Lacan privileges, the significance of irony goes beyond its status as speech act and starts to yield insight into the construction and deconstruction of subjective identity itself. "Lacan's analysis of the indirection of language is useful in explaining irony by showing how all language really points in the same direction, toward the question of self-identity."²⁰ This is because the subject is brought into being through the linguistic encounter with Other. "The Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks along with he who hears, what is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding, in hearing [*entendre*] it, whether the one has spoken or not" (Lacan, p. 133). But as Malcolm Bowie says, this reciprocal relation is not always constitutive,

least of all when irony itself is involved. Indeed, in speaking ironically, the Other can also refuse to “yield a single sense; in each of its incarnations it is that which introduces lack and gap into the operations of the subject and which, in doing so, incapacitates the subject for selfhood” (Bowie, p. 117).

Irony thus plays an important role in this nonconstitutive relation between Self and Other through language, since it is itself conceived of as emerging from the subject and yet going against, or even deceiving the Other. “What does irony say? It says that the Other does not exist, that the social link in its very foundation is a fraud, that there is no discourse which is not a false pretence.”²¹ This builds on Lacan’s belief that truth has the same structure as fiction, thus allowing the word to have the effect of fiction. As Bowie reminds us, for Lacan, contradiction and irony are inherent in language: “In Lacan’s view, the person who speaks and is satisfied with what he says is not simply misguided: he is wrong. Every statement that does not provoke change and strangeness within itself is wrong. Truth that seeks to remove itself from the contradictory process of language becomes falsehood there and then” (Bowie, pp. 127–28).

This breakdown in the intersubjective exchange of language and selfhood that irony triggers thus intimates some kind of link with illness, or (more specifically) with neurotic symptoms—something that brings us back to the narrative motivations behind the writing of *La coscienza di Zeno* itself. As Paul Antze says: “Neurotic symptoms, such as ironic words or deeds, have a double meaning, one overt, the other hidden. . . . Because of their ambiguity, neurotic symptoms also lend themselves to the kind of covert commentary that we associate with irony—allowing the sufferer to express feelings in a way that escapes repercussions.”²²

VII

What are the wider implications, then, of the ironist position that Svevo expounds through the voice of Zeno in *La coscienza*, a position that would appear to have been inspired by his reading of Kierkegaard? I have already discussed the textual significance of the destabilization such a position engenders, which—by privileging a competition between different layers of meaning—seems to produce something of a narrative “underlife” that is itself akin to a type of neurosis. But following Antze’s argument in “Illness as Irony in Psychoanalysis,” we can also seek an alignment with what he terms “the ironic structure of

the analytic situation” (Antze, p. 103). Antze’s point is that despite the verbal nature of the therapy, what is *not* said, and what the patient tries to conceal, is of real interest to the analyst. The analyst’s role here is, therefore, to bring these “hidden voices” into a multiple conversation or “polylogue” that allows each voice to question, qualify, and “‘ironize’ the others” (Antze, p. 103, emphasis added).

Within the context of such a model the text of *La coscienza* can thus be seen as itself inherently resistant, since its multiple standpoints of meanings imply a refusal of the possibility of a coherent interpretation. And this resistance at a textual level neatly mimics the resistance of Zeno’s own ironist position, which is precisely based on a knowledge differential between himself and his reader/analyst, and which consequently allows the protagonist to retain a deferred sense of intentionality and agency. This is an example of the sort of secondary gain in illness that can be enacted by the patient as a strategy for avoiding decisions or winning sympathy, and which can—in Antze’s words—be “a formidable clinical adversary” (Antze, p. 105). As Zeno himself says (paradoxically keeping open two strikingly different propositions): “It was not death I desired, but sickness, a sickness that would serve me as a pretext to do what I wanted, or that would prevent me from doing it” (*ZC*, p. 207) (*Non la morte desideravo ma la malattia, una malattia che mi servisse da pretesto per fare quello che volevo, o che me lo impedisse* [*CZ*, p. 194]).

The deliberate, intentional nature of this splitting gives rise to symptoms that characterize Zeno’s neurotic narrative, and which point precisely to a sense of intentionality that brings him the kind of potential advantage mentioned above. In *La coscienza*, this intentionality leads to an impulse toward repetition and reconstruction that aims at preventing the analyst from carrying out his work of solving the riddle of the distortion and disguise caused by the neurosis itself. And the way in which Zeno’s narrative resistance works here brings us back to Kierkegaard’s notion of irony as “a sickness in so far as it is unable to tolerate the absolute except in the form of nothingness, and yet this sickness is an endemic fever which but few individuals contract, and even fewer overcome.”²³

Both Svevo’s and Kierkegaard’s work indicate a sense of pride in the refined rejection of the absolute, the existence of a stable truth that privileges illness as a dynamic and intentional stance. Svevo himself wrote of his desire to keep the gap between ignorance and knowledge (or indeed, conscious and unconscious thought) resolutely open, and resist the decoding impulse of analysis. As he wrote to Valerio Jahier on December 27, 1927: “And why should we want to cure our illness? Do we

really have to take away the best element of humanity?" (my translation) (E perché voler curare la nostra malattia? Davvero dobbiamo togliere all'umanità quello ch'essa ha di meglio?)²⁴

Yet if the implications of this ironist stance are challenging for a reading of *La coscienza di Zeno*, then the consequences for psychoanalysis itself are equally far-reaching, as Svevo himself surely realized. If we accept the lack of an absolute truth, or a total knowledge of self, then what in turn "insulates the analyst or psychoanalysis itself from the dramatic ironies of the unconscious"? (Antze, p. 119). Psychoanalysis itself, as practice, becomes inherently ironic by design. As Jacques-Alain Miller has said, "According to Lacan, psychoanalysis, following the path prescribed by Freud, restores irony in neurosis. It would be wonderful, in fact, to cure neurosis by irony. If we succeeded in curing neurosis by irony, we would not need to support it by psychoanalysis. But we are not yet cured of psychoanalysis, despite Lacan's irony" (Miller, pp. 11–12).

I believe that this use of irony is where Svevo is remarkably forward thinking in his understanding of psychoanalysis as a potentially electrifying narrative tool or matrix, and also where his reading of Kierkegaard helps him to elaborate an effective rejection of psychoanalysis as cure. As he writes to Jahier on December 10, 1927, "A great man, our Freud, but more so for novelists than for actual sufferers" (*Carteggio*, p. 239, my translation) (Grande uomo quel nostro Freud, ma piú per i romanzieri che per gli ammalati). Indeed, this proposition, which links Kierkegaard and Svevo, is perhaps the first recorded realization of how psychoanalysis, in the words of Adam Phillips, "becomes an ironic critique . . . a primer of necessary ignorance, a reminder of the ironies of knowledge."²⁵

UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

1. Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 139.
2. Andrew Cross, "Neither Either nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alistair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 125–53 (125, emphasis added); hereafter abbreviated Cross.
3. See D. C. Muecke, *Irony* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 66–77; hereafter abbreviated Muecke.

4. Indeed, Cross states that the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* posits irony as a transitional phase between the aesthetic and the ethical spheres (Cross, p. 126).
5. Simone Volpato and Riccardo Cepach, *Alla peggio andrò in biblioteca: I libri ritrovati di Italo Svevo* (Macerata: Bibliothaus, 2013). For a more in-depth comment on this volume, see also my review in *Italian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2014):159–60.
6. Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), p. 396, hereafter abbreviated CZ; Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, trans. William Weaver (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 419, hereafter abbreviated ZC.
7. See also, for example, the famous lines: “With our every Tuscan word, we lie! . . . Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in our dialect” (ZC, p. 404) (Con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo! . . . Si capisce come la nostra vita avrebbe tutt’altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto [CZ, p. 382]). This statement provides “the proof that a confession made by me in Italian could be neither complete nor sincere” (ZC, p. 414) (la prova che una confessione fatta da me in italiano non poteva essere né completa né sincera [CZ, p. 391]).
8. Alastair Hannay, introduction to Søren Kierkegaard, *Eiðer/Or: A Fragment of Life*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 1–26 (10); hereafter abbreviated E/O.
9. On this point, it is interesting to note that Svevo, in the *Soggiorno Londinese*, denied being the author of several of his novels, instead attributing their authorship to his brother Elio. A very similar story is told of Kierkegaard by Hans Brøchner: “On this occasion [Kierkegaard] told of how he had been visited by a German scholar. . . . He had received the German very politely, but assured him that a misunderstanding must have led to the visit. ‘My brother, the doctor,’ he had said, ‘is an exceedingly learned man, with whom it would surely interest you to become acquainted, but I am a beer dealer.’” “Hans Brøchner on Kierkegaard,” *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, ed. and trans. Bruce Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 225–52 (238). My thanks to Brian Moloney for pointing out this link to me in personal correspondence.
10. Italo Svevo, *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, ed. Clotilde Bertoni (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), pp. 798–813 (812) (my translation).
11. For example, in regard to the death of the father, Zeno says, “In short, compared with him I represented strength, and at times I think that the disappearance of his weakness, which had strengthened me, was something I felt as a reduction” (ZC, p. 35) (Insomma io, accanto a lui, rappresentavo la forza e talvolta penso che la scomparsa di quella debolezza, che mi elevava, fu sentita da me come una diminuzione [CZ, p. 33]). On this, see also Emma Bond, *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini* (Oxford: Legenda/MHRA, 2012), esp. pp. 63–86.
12. See also the opening to the unfinished continuation of *La coscienza*, “Le confessioni del vegliardo”: “And now what am I? Not a person who lived, but a person who described. Oh! The only important part of life is reflection. . . . One’s life will become clearer or more obscure but will be repeated, corrected, and fixed. At least it will not remain as it is, devoid of import, buried as soon as it is born, with days that pass and accumulate

one by one to form years, decades, a totally empty life" (my translation) (Ed ora che cosa sono io? Non colui che visse ma colui che descrissi. Oh! L'unica parte importante della vita è il raccoglimento. . . . La propria vita risulterà più chiara o più oscura ma si ripeterà si correggerà si cristallizzerà. Almeno non resterà quale è priva di rilievo, sepolta non appena nata, con quei giorni che vanno via e s'accumulano uno eguale all'altro a formare gli anni, i decenni, la vita tanto vuota [Italo Svevo, "Le confessioni del vegliardo," in *Romanzi e "Continuazioni,"* ed. Nunzia Palmieri and Fabio Vittorini (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), pp. 1116–57 [1116–17]).

13. Brian Moloney, "Psychoanalysis and Irony in *La coscienza di Zenò*," *Modern Language Review* 67, no. 2 (1972): 309–18 (311–12).

14. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 174; hereafter abbreviated *Jokes*.

15. Alfonso is the protagonist of Svevo's first novel, *Una vita* (1892); Emilio that of his second (*Senilità*, 1898). See also on this point the "Profilo autobiografico": "Zeno is obviously a brother to Emilio and Alfonso. He differs from them because of his age and financial standing. He could very well avoid the struggle for life and stay on the sidelines, contemplating the struggle of others. But he feels miserable not joining in" (my translation) (Zeno è evidentemente un fratello di Emilio e di Alfonso. Si distingue da loro per la sua età più avanzata e anche perché è ricco. Potrebbe fare a meno della lotta per la vita e stare in riposo a contemplare la lotta degli altri. Ma si sente infelicissimo di non poter parteciparvi [p. 812]).

16. See Freud, *Jokes*, p. 73.

17. See Frank Stringfellow Jr., *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 2; hereafter abbreviated Stringfellow.

18. Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 133; hereafter abbreviated Bowie.

19. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 160; hereafter abbreviated Lacan.

20. Gary J. Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 126.

21. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Irony: A Contribution of Schizophrenia to the Analytic Clinic" ("La clinique d'ironie"), trans. Ellie Ragland, (*Re*)-turn: *A Journal of Lacanian Studies* 1 (Winter 2003): 9–33 (11); hereafter abbreviated Miller.

22. Paul Antze, "Illness as Irony in Psychoanalysis," in *Illness and Irony: On the Ambiguity of Suffering in Culture*, ed. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), pp. 102–121 (114); hereafter abbreviated Antze.

23. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 113–14.

24. Italo Svevo, *Carteggio* (Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1965), p. 243; hereafter abbreviated *Carteggio*.

25. Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 8.