LITERARY DISEASES: FROM PATHOLOGY TO ONTOLOGY

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"Volli cercare il male
che torla il mondo, la piccola stortura
d'una leva che arresta
l'ordegno universale; e tutti vidi
gli eventi del minuto
come pronti a disgiungersi in un crollo."
Eugenio Montale

The ancient literary theme of disease, which was treated by the Romantics mainly in a vague, indefinite, melancholic way, having often little to do with a precise bodily sickness, took on a particularly notable importance in the second half of the last century in France. The death of Madame Bovary, described by Flaubert with relentless attention to painful and cruel medical details, dramatically marked the end of the Romantic hero.

From then on, disease was dealt with extensively in literature: the naturalistic writers, under the impulse of positivism and with the purpose of a "scientific" research, focused their attention on the poorer strata of the population, their miserable living conditions in urban slums, and certain typical illnesses transmitted from one generation to the next by heredity.

The results were literary works in which the most realistic details of a given sickness were described carefully, technically, and sometimes morbidly: it is well known that Zola said he took inspiration from a treatise on experimental medicine.

In Italy, the veristi writers in general abstained from the representation of the most extreme aspects of a pathological nature, yet the lesson of naturalism was deeply felt and left its mark upon Italian letters.
Toward the end of the century, however, disease took on a character somewhat different from what it had been in the *tranches de vie*: more elusive and suggestive, although still realistic and documentary. I shall try to describe that character by examining the new configuration and meaning taken on by disease in Italian literature since Italo Svevo.

In Svevo's work, in fact, one can see a definite development from the initial quasi-naturalistic description of a sickness and death in *Una vita* (1892) to the much subtler representation of another sickness and death in *Senilità* (1898), to the complex and articulated view of disease in *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923). Svevo's *iter*, in short, is from a *tranche de vie* to *life tout court*, from the absolute of objectivity to the relative of subjectivity. He expresses the breaking down of a whole *vision du monde* which is to be replaced by another: the world of objects is no longer a *datum*, a certainty; the world of others is no longer meaningful in itself, in its institutions. What comes to the fore is the awareness of the self, with all the ambiguities and the anguish inherent in the discovery of how unstable, contradictory and absurd the relationships of the self to the world of others and of objects can be: Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* and Freud's first psychoanalytical writings were published toward the end of the last century. Their impact becomes fully evident in Svevo, and particularly in the importance disease takes on progressively in his work as a powerful means of expressing the new *vision du monde*.

In *Una vita* the sickness and death of Signora Carolina, the mother of the protagonist Alfonso Nitti, are seen in their most detailed symptoms and manifestations, with a language which is plainly naturalistic: the inexorable progression of a heart disease is shown as an "organic sickness," with the swelling and lividity of a "decaying organism," with "cold sweat" and "frequent and superficial breathing," with eyes "dilated by anguish" and "perturbations of the nervous system," until Signora Carolina's organism becomes so weak that she is "unable even to suffer," her voice changes, and her breathing, already frequent and insufficient, becomes panting and is ended by the death-rattle.1 But such anguishing details are placed by Svevo in a context which is quite different from what a Zola might have done with them; they are,

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primarily, the counterpoint to Alfonso’s thoughts, dreams and reflections, to his states of consciousness; they underscore his ineptitude and weakness in his intersubjective relations, especially with the doctor, the tutor-notary and the servant, but also with some of the villagers; they provide him with a psychological alibi for abandoning Annetta, whom he loves nevertheless; they provide him with an excuse for self-pity and they prompt certain thoughts of a general nature which will become characteristic of the later Svevo: “He felt incapable of living. Something, which he had often and uselessly tried to understand, made life painful and unbearable to him. . . . He had to destroy his organism, which did not know peace.” The inner dimension of the naturalistic, medical details is further emphasized by the “malessere” Alfonso feels after seducing Annetta, and by his typhoid fever after his mother’s death. But the over-all atmosphere of the novel is undoubtedly and predominantly naturalistic, up to the final letter, a “human document” indeed, with which the Maller Bank announces Alfonso’s suicide.

In Svevo’s second novel, Senilità, certain patterns which were noticeable but still secondary in Una vita reappear in a more complex and subtler structure. The protagonist Emilio Brentani is a weak, dreaming, contemplative person who at the age of thirty-five falls in love with Angiolina Zarri, a splendid creature, presented by Svevo as the very portrait of youth and health (thus juxtaposing her, structurally and from the beginning, to those characters who represent “senility” and disease):

She was a tall, healthy blonde, with big blue eyes and a supple, graceful body, an expressive face and transparent skin glowing with health. As she walked, she held her head slightly on one side, as if it were weighed down by the mass of golden hair which was braided round it, and she kept looking down at the ground which she tapped at each step with her elegant parasol, as if she hoped there might issue from it some comment on the words that had just been spoken (p. 3).  

*ibid.*, p. 327.
*ibid.*, p. 343.
*Ibid.*, p. 423; see also p. 385: “In front of those healthy and strong organisms which had been destroyed or created uselessly, he had had his first doubts.”
7Italo Svevo, *As a Man Grows Older*, trans. from the Italian *Senilità* by Beryl De Zoete (New Directions Bk.: New York, n.d.). The numbers in parenthesis
Youth incarnate, clothed, would have walked like that in the sunlight (p. 174).

An episode underscores Angiolina’s character, as well as, somewhat ironically, the idea of health, in such a way as to indicate that the perfect human health of which Svevo speaks in *La coscienza di Zeno* is impossible:

She remained thoughtful for a few moments, and then complained that one of her teeth was aching. This one, she said, opening her delicious mouth for him to see, and displaying her red gums and strong white teeth, which seemed like a casket of precious gems chosen and set there by that incomparable artificer—health. He did not laugh, but gravely kissed the mouth she held out to him (p. 14).  

The episode is emblematic of two different characters, and Emilio is certainly not the more realistic: in fact he idealizes Angiolina and calls her *Ange* (p. 19). On the contrary Stefano Balli, an energetic, active, determined artist who mediates Emilio completely and has all the attitudes of a “superior person” (p. 65), sees Angiolina in a very earthy, exact way, and calls her “Giolona,” “emphasizing the broad vowels to the utmost, so that the sounds conveyed the maximum of contempt” (pp. 60-61). The result is that Emilio, who deceives himself into believing that he, “a superior being, an immoralist” (p. 18) like Balli, has corrupted Angiolina, is really unable to cope with a reality that escapes him: “This was perhaps the cure he had been hoping for. Polluted by the tailor, possessed by him, *Ange* would soon die, and he would continue to amuse himself with Giolona; he would be gay, as she wanted all men to be, indifferent and cynical like Balli” (p. 62).

The word “cure,” in the preceding passage, is important in that it provides the characteristic trait of Emilio, his “disease” opposed to Angiolina’s health and never mentioned or specified explicitly except in the title of the novel.

after the quotations refer to this edition. On Angiolina’s health see also pp. 56 and 188. On the meaning of “senilità” in Svevo’s terms, see Russel Pfohl, “Imagery as Disease in *Senilità,” MLN, LXXVI, 2 (Feb. 1961), 143-150.

A fourth principal character, Amalia, Emilio’s sister, weak and dreaming like her brother, humble and gray, provides another necessary dialectical element in the structure of the novel: Amalia and Emilio on one hand (disease, senility, contemplation, non-life), Balli and Angiolina on the other (health, youth, action, life). Small wonder Amalia falls in love with Balli, as Emilio does with Angiolina; small wonder Emilio is mediated by Balli and mediates his own conception of Angiolina through the image of Amalia, his alter ego. Thus the intersubjective relationships in the novel are clearly stated and control its structure, especially through the significant dichotomy between health and disease and the consequent predominance of the latter in the narration.

It is therefore necessary to examine the long description of the sickness, agony and death of Amalia. As in Una vita, such description appears to be naturalistic in the crudeness of the symptoms and in the insistence on painful details, one of which, Amalia’s alcoholism, echoes L’assommoir directly, and contributes decisively to the decadence and death of the woman. Two whole chapters (xii and xiii) are dedicated to her sickness, pneumonia. After finding Amalia half naked on her bed and delirious, Emilio summarizes for the doctor her symptoms, the most interesting of which is her panting, whose sound is particularly emphasized and seems important because there is something similar, equally powerful, in La coscienza di Zeno: “He had been listening to it since the morning till it seemed to have become a quality of his own ear, a sound from which he would never again be able to free himself” (pp. 210-211).

See Italo Svevo, As a Man Grows Older, op. cit., p. 244: “Years afterwards... Angiolina underwent a strange metamorphosis in the writer’s imagination. She preserved all of her beauty, but acquired as well all the qualities of Amalia, who died a second time in her. She grew sad and dispirited, her eye acquired an intellectual clarity....”

Ibid., pp. 198-4.

Ibid., pp. 204-5.

And again, p. 233: “Amalia’s breathing became more and more rapid, then grew slower and slower, and finally ceased. The interval was so long this time that Emilio cried aloud with fear. The breathing began again, calm for a short time, and suddenly quickening to a dizzy speed. It was a period of agonising suspense for Emilio. He held his own breath with anxiety when Amalia ceased to breath, gave himself up to mad hope when heard her calm, rhythmic breathing begin again, and even shed tears of disappointment each time her painful breathing was resumed.” Similar situations reappear in La coscienza di Zeno, with the deaths of Zeno’s father and of Copler, and are catalysed in the obsessive image of the panting train engine.
Amalia's death is then underscored by a statement, dramatically divided into two parts by a chapter heading, and similar to one to be found in *Una vita*, but more important, in that it echoes philosophical positions derived from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, to be fully developed in *La coscienza di Zeno*:

[Amalia's death-rattle] was in fact the lament of matter which, already abandoned by the spirit, and beginning to disintegrate, was uttering the sounds it had learned during its long period of painful consciousness.

The image of death is great enough to fill the whole of one's mind. Gigantic forces are fighting together to draw death near and to expel it; every fibre of our being records its presence after having been near to it, every atom within us repels it in the very act of preserving and producing life. The thought of death is like an attribute of the body, a physical malady (pp. 237-8).

But for the moment, in *Senilità*, even more than in *Una vita*, sickness and death are above all the counterpoint to the protagonist's states of consciousness, and more precisely to his sense of guilt toward his sister. What is more striking, though, is the fact that Amalia appears to be the metaphor for Emilio himself: her sickness structurally corresponds to his progressive decadence, her delirium corresponds to his dreams and behavior.

The whole novel is filled with images and metaphors taken from

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14 The last words are, in Italian, “una malattia dell’organismo,” and are applied by Svevo, later on, to life itself: see his *Saggi e pagine sparse* (Mondadori: Milan, 1954), p. 323. Marziano Guglielminetti, *Struttura e sintassi del romanzo italiano del primo Novecento* (Silva: Milan, 1965), p. 139, has perceptive remarks on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as possible influences on Svevo. One might only add that the “Superman” was seen by Svevo with irony and antipathy, as in the earlier mention of the “immoral superior man” embodied in Balli (and later in Malfenti and Speier, in *La coscienza di Zeno*).
15 See Italo Svevo, *As a Man Grows Older* (V. n. 7), pp. 210 and 234-5. Also, with particular regard to Emilio's relationship with Amalia and Angiolina, pp. 201-2, 217-9, 225, 244.
16 The correlation between Amalia and Emilio is emphasized again and again in the novel; see pp. 120, 125 (Amalia is referred to as “this other dreamer”), 130, and 226: “He scrutinized her, he analysed her, so as to be able to feel her sorrow and to suffer with her. Then he looked away again, ashamed of himself; he had become conscious that in his emotion he had gone in search of images and metaphors.” One should also notice that, while in her delirium Amalia invokes Balli, at one point (p. 154) Emilio dreams of being seriously ill and taken care of by Angiolina.
medical terminology and applied to Emilio’s states of consciousness or to Amalia’s feelings—“malady,” “treatment,” “recovery,” and the like. Other terms denote instead a physiological reaction to psychic or emotional states: for instance, “malessere” (significantly translated as “prickings of conscience,” p. 49), stomach ache, indisposition, paralysis.

Thus disease is no longer merely a naturalistic fact, but is transposed more and more toward the realm of the psyche: disease becomes literally a metaphor for analysis, introspection. Svevo himself seems aware of the fact that such a process has been developing in his writing and in his *vision du monde*. In fact he even makes his protagonist Emilio Brentani appear to be in the midst of a similar process:

Why revolt against the laws of nature? Angiolina was a lost woman even in her mother’s womb. . . . It was useless to punish her: she did not even deserve it: she was only the victim of a universal law. The *naturalist* who somewhere lay hidden in him revived . . . (p. 97). [Italics added.]

Feeling that speech would betray him in a situation like the present, because of his tendency to analyse everything, he immediately had recourse to what he knew to be a more forcible argument: abandoning her (p. 99).

Passion had for a moment freed him from his painful habit of observation . . . (p. 158).

In Svevo’s work, the process reaches its maturity in the novel *La coscienza di Zeno*, where in fact the full circle is closed by the episode of the chemical analysis juxtaposed to psychoanalysis:

Paoli analyzed my urine in my presence. The mixture turned black and Paoli looked grave. At last I was going to have a true analysis after all this psychoanalysis. . . . Nothing took place in that report to remind me of my behavior with Dr. S., when, to please him, I invented fresh details of my childhood in order to conform to Sophocles’ diagnosis. Here was only the truth. The thing that had to be analyzed was imprisoned in the phial and, incapable of being false to itself, awaited the reagent. When that came it always responded in the same way. In psychoanalysis, on the other hand, neither the same images nor the same words ever repeat themselves. It ought to be called by another name: psychical adventure, perhaps.17

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Actually, in order to probe Svevo, one need only apply a stethoscope, so to speak, to his life, auscultate his letters and the diary for his fiancée in order to have a confirmation of the symptoms observed in his literary works, of what disease and recovery, introspection and action, dream and reality meant in his life. Thus he writes to Livia Veneziani on December 23, 1895:

I gave you my first kiss with the same coldness with which I would have signed [paraphié] a contract; I gave you the second kiss with the enormous curiosity of analyzing you and me. . . . Now I understand less and less; certainly my capacity for analysis is much less great than I thought.\(^{18}\)

And on May 26, 1898: “Whereas, when we married, I asked you to dream with me, now I’ll ask you to help me remain fixed in real life, with my eyes wide open watching for thieves.”\(^{19}\)

Svevo’s capacity for analysis is indeed used not “as a literary tool,” but “as a norm” of life.\(^{20}\) And it is accompanied and underscored by the typical terminology examined so far. His diary for his fiancée, for instance, is filled with his desire to be “healthy and strong,” to have “health” like his blonde Livia;\(^{21}\) at the same time, in the same pages, there are the doubts, the anguish, the depressions, the hopes of a man who feels so much older and poorer than his woman, a man who is therefore tormented with jealousy (the Leitmotiv of Zeno’s last cigarette begins here) and who even writes a “Truthful History of My Probable Recovery.”\(^{22}\)

In *La coscienza di Zeno*, then, disease is the real and metaphorical element which presides over the structure of the narration and becomes crystallized in its major components—the psychoanalytical, the sociological and the ontological.

In saying “psychoanalytical” I am oversimplifying the term. In fact bodily disease is presented throughout the novel in various guises,\(^{23}\) but substantially all the maladies, illnesses, ailments, etc.,


\(^{19}\) Italo Svevo, *Lettere alla moglie* (Edizioni dello Zibaldone: Triest, 1963), p. 64, translation mine.


\(^{21}\) Italo Svevo, *Diario per la fidanzata* (V. n. 8), pp. 81, 97, 111.


\(^{23}\) Italo Svevo, *Confessions of Zeno* (V. n. 17), pp. 378-9: “I told him [Dr. Paoli] of my insomnia, my chronic bronchitis, the eruptions on my face which
by which Zeno is tormented are nothing but the raw material for his real disease, which is nervous, psychic; furthermore, even as a psychic manifestation, disease stands for something else, from the point of view of Svevo the author.

In fact, although *La coscienza di Zeno* is constructed around an unusual case of psychoanalytical treatment, beginning with the ironic preface by a “Dr. S.” and ending with a chapter on psychoanalysis, it seems clear that what really matters in the narration is the autobiography of the author, who universalizes himself through Zeno while keeping him at a distance. In fact Dr. S (vevo) says:

I must apologize for having persuaded my patient to write his autobiography. Students of psychoanalysis will turn up their noses at such an unorthodox proceeding. But he was old and I hoped that in the effort of recalling his past he would bring it to life again, and that the writing of his autobiography would be a good preparation for the treatment.\(^24\)

So even “autobiography” is not a satisfactory term; it will be noted that in the Italian text Svevo, following the early usage, writes “psico-analisì” with a hyphen that cuts the word and seems to underscore (if only because of the accent) “analisi”; in fact, in *La coscienza di Zeno*, his capacity for analyzing the subconscious motivations of men becomes as subtle as possible. But (here is the point) such an analysis is always presented as disease, which is therefore metaphorical. An example is Zeno’s statement about his wife Augusta, who seems to possess the “perfect health in a human being”:

I am trying to arrive at the source of her well-being, but I know that I cannot succeed, for directly I start analyzing it I seem to

were tormenting me just then; of the sharp stabbing pains in my legs, and finally of my inexplicable lapses of memory”; “I must confess that the thought of diabetes was very sweet to me.”

\(^{24}\) *Ibid.*, p. 1. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Therapy and Technique* (Collier Books: New York, 1963), p. 125: “It is incorrect to set patient tasks, such as collecting his memories, thinking over a certain period of his life, and so on.” See also what Svevo wrote of himself, in the third person (in Livia Veneziani Svevo (see n. 18), p. 221): “It was then [in 1918] that Svevo tried some experiments in psychoanalysis on himself, but in solitude, which is in perfect contradiction with the theory and practice of Freud. The whole technique of the process remained unknown to him—a fact which anybody can realize in reading his novel.”
turn it into a disease. And now that I have begun writing about it I begin to wonder whether health like hers did not perhaps need some treatment or training to correct it.\textsuperscript{25}

The contemplative attitude of man, his terrifying power to destroy life by means of his thought, as one finds in Pirandello's *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, or in Unamuno's *Niebla*, seems thus to be regarded by Svevo as the only real and incurable condition in which he lives. Indeed, Zeno's struggles to stop chain-smoking, his "sentiments filiaux d'un parricide" (of a *parricide manqué*, to be sure, and with a complex of guilt), his being mediated by others, his marriage and his business partnership—all can be seen, at one level of interpretation, as attempts at self-awareness disguised and perfected through a fake, literary psychoanalytical process, in other words, as efforts to be cured, to reach health. But, as John Freccero has remarked, "the intellectual desire to know liberty leads to the paralysis of discontinuous time—disease, Zeno calls it—whereas the flow and rhythm of animal health preclude the exercise of what is distinctively human—thought."\textsuperscript{26}

Such is the predicament, or "disease," of Zeno: to live and at the same time to observe himself living, to be and at the same time to know. This predicament is humorously described in the two famous episodes when Zeno limps on hearing that there are fifty-four movements in the muscles of a moving knee, and when he plays the violin while beating the *tempo* with his foot.\textsuperscript{27} The development of Zeno's intellectual disease, of his analysis and contemplation, more and more abstract, tends to become theory, to reach an absolute knowledge of life that can be expressed or represented in very general terms, like parables or fables, which indeed are to be found at the end of *La coscienza di Zeno*, as well as in the stories *La novella del buon vecchio e della bella fanciulla*, *Una burla riuscita*, *La madre*, and *Il vecchione*.\textsuperscript{28} In an unpublished paper dated April 4, 1928, Svevo noted: "I know that the part of my life I recounted was not the most important. It became more


\textsuperscript{26} John Freccero, "Zeno's Last Cigarette," in *MLN*, 77, i, Jan. 1962, pp. 16-17.

\textsuperscript{27} Italo Svevo, *Confessions of Zeno*, respectively pp. 94-5 and 103-104. It is to be noted that in both cases Zeno's failure and "disease" are inevitably linked with the thought of Ada.

\textsuperscript{28} Italo Svevo, *Opere*, respectively pp. 994, 1019, 1065 ff., 1069 ff., and *passim*. 
important precisely because I fixed it with words, and now, what am I? Not the one who lived, but the one who described.”

Zeno’s predicament could not be stated in clearer terms, his disease could not be diagnosed with sharper words.

Yet, at another level of interpretation, analysis and introspection can be seen as a manifestation of the solitude and alienation of the individual vis à vis the society and reality in which he happens to live, and which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, are dominated by bourgeois capitalism, with all the cultural and ideological consequences inherent in it, described by Auerbach and Lukács. According to Auerbach,

... in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster—certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. ... But the method is not only a symptom of the confusion and helplessness, not only a mirror of the decline of our world. ... There is in all these works a certain atmosphere of universal doom. ... There is often something confusing, something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality which they represent.

As Lukács points out and explains, “The individual personality, juxtaposed to society, finds only in itself a point of reference for its moral life, and decidedly rejects any social criterion of behavior; ...” therefore, in many literary works, “... there is the accusation against a society in which and because of which man withers and succumbs; there is a feeling that the authentic man can realize his inner capabilities only against and beyond present society.”

There is, above all, an escape into the pathological as “a moral protest against capitalism,” a protest which, however, often lacks “a sense of direction” and expresses only “nausea, or discomfort, or longing,” as in the extreme, psychopathological cases to be found in Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury and in Beckett’s Molloy.

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29 In Livia Veneziani Svevo, p. 149, translation mine.
Svevo fits well in Auerbach's and Lukács' diagnosis. His characters take on a significance that transcends their personal cases by far, and that, precisely through the common denominator (or symptom, I should say) of disease, can be linked to similar contemporary experiences of such writers as Thomas Mann (The Buddenbrooks), Robert Musil (The Man Without Qualities), and Federigo Tozzi (Tre croci, Il podere), for whom the pathological plays a rôle similar to the one in Svevo, and who anticipate typical patterns to be found today in the works of Sartre and Camus, and, to a lesser extent, of Moravia, Brancati, Buzzati, Calvino.

In contemporary Italian literature, the author who perhaps more than others can help explain Svevo in relation to the metaphorical and sociological function of the pathological is Paolo Volponi. In his first novel Memoriale (1962), the character Albino Saluggia is shown alone and alienated in today's industrial society: he believes that some physicians have plotted against him to keep him out of the factory where he feels he belongs; but actually he is sick (tuberculosis), and his persecution complex is clearly a neurosis, right from the title. By inverting the terms of the situation in which Svevo portrayed Zeno, malade imaginaire, Volponi makes evident the structural significance of the pathological. To underscore it dramatically, Memoriale includes some poems in which the indignation and frustration of Saluggia are expressed in the obsessive cadence of the rhyme (for instance "'ia," even distorting the pronunciation of words like "Francia"), through which his life is recounted and his thoughts and dreams explained—one thinks of the same indignation and frustration which appear in the collage of awful newspaper items and trivial facts arranged in a metric bric-à-brac in Antonio Delfini's Poesie della fine del mondo.

But, to return to La coscienza di Zeno, in it disease appears in connection with a vision du monde derived from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as seen in Svevo's preceding novels, when Zeno says to his newly born nephew:

... poor innocent, you continue to explore your tiny body in search of pleasure; and the exquisite discoveries you make will bring you in the end disease and suffering, to which those who least wish it will contribute. What can one do? It is impossible to watch over your cradle. Mysterious forces are at work within you, child, strange elements combine. Each passing moment con-
tributes its reagent. Not all those moments can be pure, with such manifold chances of infection.\textsuperscript{33}

Life as disease is presented here \textit{in nuce}, and will be developed later in a longer passage, which could be considered an ironic \textit{summa} on the subject:

But I alone lived by Basedow! He seemed to me to have penetrated to the roots of life, and shown it to be as follows: all living beings are ranged along a certain line, at one end of which is Basedow's disease. All who are suffering from this disease use up their vital force recklessly in a mad vertiginous rhythm, the heart beating without control. At the other end of the line are those wretched beings, shriveled up by native avarice and doomed to die from a disease that looks like exhaustion but is really cowardice. The happy mean between these two maladies is to be found in the middle of the line, and is called health, though it is really only a suspension of movement. . . . Those at the center have the beginnings of either goiter or dropsy, and all along the line throughout the whole of humanity there is no such thing as perfect health.\textsuperscript{34}

The ontology underlying the idea that life is disease is completed by the consequent idea that real health is actually death. It is well known that Svevo was dominated by the thought of death, and in fact in the very last page he wrote before dying there is the following passage: "... Because the thought of death must be the thought of a healthy man. It must be alive and strong, not sick." \textsuperscript{35}

Since there is a striking similarity between Svevo's conception and that of Carlo Michelstaedter, an examination of the latter will help our understanding of the former.

Carlo Michelstaedter was born in 1887 at Gorizia, a city not far from Triest, of a Jewish and \textit{bourgeois} family; he committed suicide in 1910, in his home town. He had just graduated from the university of Florence with a thesis on \textit{La persuasione e la rettorica}, which deals with the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides and Heraclitus, but which actually, in contemporary terminology, could be entitled "Authenticity and

\textsuperscript{33} Italo Svevo, \textit{Confessions of Zeno}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 286-7. See also p. 397: "Life is a little like disease, with its crises and periods of quiescence, its daily improvements and setbacks. But unlike other diseases life is always mortal. It admits of no cure."

\textsuperscript{35} In Livia Veneziani Svevo, p. 156, translation mine.
Inauthenticity”; he also wrote *Il dialogo della salute* (1910), which sums up the themes of the thesis in literary form, and some poems, mostly directed to Senia, his beloved. His life was entirely pervaded by a tension toward, by a longing for an ideal absolute which sprang from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, from an active, energetic, youthful *vision du monde*, and it ended with death—like a rigorous syllogism. With frightening foresight, in 1905 Michelstaeedter himself had summed up his whole life, past and future, in a short, unobtrusive note:

A young man, educated in a religious school, as a reaction to it, turns to anything that appears to be against the human laws, and ripens through his speculations on the psyche of man and on the mystery of nature. He sees too much, and in his embittered soul the source of feelings dries up. He feels it and is sorry for it, therefore he wants to throw himself into life to excite the paralyzed fibres of his soul with strong sensations. And he does so. But he cannot regain his lost spontaneity and realizes that his enthusiasm is fake. . . . With his usual, cruel sincerity toward himself, he examines his own inside, analyses it, then, with a calm and reasoned resolution, he kills himself, thus giving back to mother earth the energies which inside himself were struggling uselessly.  

In Carlo Bo’s words, Michelstaeedter’s “total participation” to life (and to death) derived precisely from “the opposition between his own God and the history of men, from the impossibility of finding a compromise between the ideal and reality, between his longing and the mechanical possibilities.”  

Michelstaeedter’s is a rare example of an uncompromising philosophical attitude which is one with a corresponding behavior; his life and his beliefs form a totality which is authentic and tragic.

At the center of Michelstaeedter’s theory there is the “dull, continuous, measured sorrow which imbues all things,”—Schopenhauer’s “universal sorrow”—which is to be faced and “lived” by man if he wants to reach his authenticity, his “persuasion.” For the common man, this sorrow culminates in the thought and fear

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36 Carlo Michelstaeedter, *Opere* (Sansoni: Florence, 1958), p. 630. See also his letters, particularly the last one addressed to his mother on Sept. 10, 1910, pp. 617-621. The translations from Michelstaeedter’s works are mine.

37 Carlo Bo (V. n. 20), pp. 51-2.

38 Carlo Michelstaeedter, p. 23.
of death; since “he who fears death is already dead,” Michelstaedter wants to teach men how not to fear death, how to be healthy by making death part of their lives (like the Stoics, or the existentialists):

Alas, we did not dream of this bitter death
in its pale frightening aspect,

but the young death, smiling
at him who does not fear it—
that death which unites
and does not divide the companions,
and does not press them with the obscure sorrow.40

Not dissimilarly, Svevo left written on a sheet of paper: “A time will come, when man does not fear death.” 41 So, Michelstaedter’s energetic pessimism has something in common with Svevo’s ironical self-analysis. The connection becomes apparent precisely in Il dialogo della salute, which begins in a cemetery, with the warden wishing two friends “May God give you health,” and ends thus:

Health belongs to the man who, in the midst of all things, consists [i.e. stands firm]; who lets his needs and hunger flow through himself and consists; who . . . has nothing to defend against others and nothing to ask of them, since there is no future for the man, who expects nothing. He does not have this or that emotion, this or that feeling—joy, anguish, terror, enthusiasm; but the sorrow of common deficiency talks to him with a unique voice, and he resists it with his entire life in each of its points. He looks at death straight in the face and gives life to the corpses around him. His firmness is a vertiginous way to the others who are in the stream. Darkness for him is split by a shining wake. This is the lightning that breaks the fog. And death, as life, is without weapons before him—he who does not ask for life and does not fear death. But with words of fog—life death, more and less, before and afterwards—you cannot talk of him, who, consisting in the point of health, has lived the beautiful death.42

40 Ibid., p. 34.
41 Ibid., p. 403, part III of the poem “A Senia,” beautifully interwoven with images of “the deserted sea,” of “the savage sea,” as a metaphor for an authentic life-death. See also the poems “Aprile,” “Onda per onda batte sullo scoglio,” “I figli del mare.”
42 In Livia Veneziani Svevo, pp. 180-1.
43 Carlo Michelstaedter, p. 366.
"To live the beautiful death" is not a paradox, but the completion of an absolute ideal, the culmination of authenticity: like a chrysalis, "with the thread of life" Michelstaedter indeed spinned his destiny "toward that death." 43

Healthy is then the authentic man, who lives and dies without compromises, who accepts his own being, the world, the others without illusions, without expecting anything, without fearing anything. On the contrary, too many men deceive themselves with fake values, with inauthentic beliefs; these men are vain, sick. Michelstaedter describes their mode of being in various fields of human endeavour. For instance,

... they go on talking and talking, and through the 'word' delude themselves into believing that they are asserting their individuality, which escapes them. In fact others want to talk, not to listen: so they murder and contradict one another. They don't care if a thing is said, but each one wants to be the one who said it. Hence the introductory particles of speech have taken up weapons, so to speak, and have become adversative.44

Language reflects the limitations, the sickness of man; in describing the subjunctive as "the elementary mode of subjective reality," Michelstaedter gives many examples based on the concept that "Whoever reflects is sick" ("E' malato chiunque rifletta"), thus emphasizing "the necessity inherent in reflection," 45 as Svevo does in La coscienza di Zeno.

According to Michelstaedter, also those who search for the truth and deceive themselves into believing that knowledge is an absolute value per se "are outside of life and of health in their organic beings. Betraying Nature, that wants persuasion in the complete man, they have betrayed themselves. Their conscience is not a living organism, a presence of things in the actuality of their persons, but a memory"—"and the presence itself of memory next to the actuality of one's own person is a malady: an organic being does not tolerate extraneous bodies." 46 Zeno's painful efforts at recollecting his past are indeed a perfect illustration of Michelstaedter's assertion.

43 Ibid., p. 369, in the poem "Il canto delle crisalidi."
44 Ibid., p. 343.
46 Ibid., p. 68 and n. 3.
A further consequence of his theory should be stressed, because it is important in connection with what was said before about disease and psychoanalysis:

The more man goes farther from nature, the more he is impotent, angry (sick) . . . . The fact by now is no longer only an individual one, but, by centuries-old movement, atavistic. And complacent science has immediately found a name, and a right to exist in society, for this inevitable disease; every petty act has received its pass permit under the name of Nervosität.47

The explanation of the preceding passage is to be found in a section of Michelstaedter's thesis, devoted to "the reduction of the person," in which he describes how man, in becoming "a social person," "has founded his life on the contingency of things and persons," whereby "all the progress of civilization is a regression of the individual," 48 especially in that "any substitution of machines for manual labor stunts man’s hands proportionately," and artisans and craftsmen "have been replaced by masses of sad and stupid workers in their factories, who know but one gesture, who are almost the last lever of their machines." 49 A consequence of such a situation will be

. . . illnesses of the limbs and in general muscular sicknesses, because of inertia and atrophy, and those of the internal organs as well, because they function in a void, without the measure that the vitality of the limbs gave to their activity. Connected with these, the diseases of circulation. . . . The sign that life is thus out of its regular course are the diseases of the nervous system—of which society seems almost to boast.50

The description of the civilized, bourgeois, industrial society is indeed an indictment, a protest. In fact, in an imaginary "Speech to the People" Michelstaedter envisages a future world "where man will reign—the working man, the man healthy in body and mind, the man who won't need unjust and complicated laws"; he ends with the exclamation, "Farewell, brothers—long live work and justice—death to the bourgeoisiel" 51

47 Ibid., p. 353. 48 Ibid., p. 110. 49 Ibid., p. 112. 50 Ibid., p. 113, n. 1. 51 Ibid., p. 671. The speech can be better understood if placed in the cultural climate that gave origin to literary protests such as Ada Negri’s poems on the "operaio superuomo."
Michelstaedter, nevertheless, advocates a strong, "total" individual, and wants "the self and the world to be one," thus indicating that he believes in a favorable prognosis and in a possible, although very difficult, therapy.

On the contrary Svevo, in open disagreement also with Freud, does not believe in therapy. Ironical, skeptical, and compassionate, he ends La coscienza di Zeno with the famous, terrifying prophecy of an apocalypse which today has become part of the concrete possibilities of mankind. After foreseeing what Rachel Carlson has recently called The Silent Spring ("Our life today is poisoned to the root"), Svevo goes on to say:

But it is not only that, not only that. Every effort to procure health is in vain. Health can only belong to the beasts, whose sole idea of progress lies in their own bodies. . . . But spectacled man invents implements outside his body, and if there was any health or nobility in the inventor there is none in the user. . . . The earliest implements only added to the length of his arm, and could not be employed except by the exercise of his own strength. But a machine bears no relation to the body. The machine creates disease because it denies what has been the law of creation throughout the ages. The law of the strongest disappeared, and we have abandoned natural selection. We need something more than psychoanalysis to help us. Under the law of the greatest number of machines, disease will prosper and the diseased will grow ever more numerous.53

So far Svevo's diagnosis is substantially similar to Michelstaedter's. But now his prognosis becomes actually a prophecy:

Perhaps some incredible disaster produced by machines will lead us back to health. When all the poison gases are exhausted, a man, made like all other men of flesh and blood, will in the quiet of his room invent an explosive of such potency that all the explosives in existence will seem like harmless toys beside it. And another man, made in his image and in the image of all the rest, but a little weaker than them, will steal that explosive and crawl to the center of the earth with it, and place it just where he calculates it would have the maximum effect. [Are these not the so-called "Doomsday machines," about which spectacled strategists rave?] There will be a tremendous explosion, but no

53 Ibid., p. 46.
55 Italo Svevo, Confessions of Zeno, pp. 397-8.
one will hear it and the earth will return to its nebulous state and go wandering through the sky, free at last from parasites and disease.\textsuperscript{54}

Thus for Svevo the disease of the individual, his failure in inter-subjective relations because of the weakness of his nature and the abstractions of his thought, becomes the very disease of society and of history, the anguishing recognition that human reason cannot explain life, cannot control a world deprived of a teleology (as J. Hillis Miller points out in his \textit{The Disappearance of God}), and cannot discover or cure the sorrow that lies behind our existence. Here disease, more than a metaphor, appears indeed as an ontological category.

It is precisely along Michelstaedter's and Svevo's ultimate developments and conclusions that some contemporary Italian writers, notably Carlo Emilio Gadda, have evolved.

Gadda, born in 1893 in Milan (hence almost a contemporary of Michelstaedter, if Michelstaedter were still alive), published his two novels \textit{La cognizione del dolore} and \textit{Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana} in instalments in the review \textit{Letteratura}, but the former remained unfinished, in 1941, because of the outburst of the second World War.

In \textit{La cognizione del dolore}, which, although unfinished, probably is one of today's most important novels, Gadda portrays his tragic \textit{alter ego} Gonzalo Pirobutirro d'Eltilno, who is presented as the epitome of the seven capital sins, but who actually appears as a character in desperate search for the absolute, incapable of compromises (just like Michelstaedter):

He was Germanic in his mania for order and silence, in his hatred for dirty papers, for egg shells, for ceremonious manners on the threshold. . . . They told him, 'You have to try hard,' and insisted, 'You've got to make a living.' He had no genius for trying hard, for making a living—two attitudes in which he was clumsier than a seal frying doughnuts. . . . There was, for him, the problem of evil: the tale of disease, the strange tale told by the \textit{Conquistadores}, who happened to hear the last word of an Inca, according to whom death arrives for nothing, surrounded

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., p. 398, italics added. On the "Doomsday machines," it might be useful to consult the frightening anthology \textit{Arms Control, Disarmament and National Security}, ed. by Donald G. Brennan (Brazillier: New York, 1960).
with silence, as a tacit, last combination of thought. It is the 'invisible disease.' ...

Indeed Gonzalo’s face is tragic precisely because, behind it, one sees "the dirty grimace of death." His condition humaine is "a psychopathological grotesque," an obsession deriving "from his exasperated awareness of common beastliness" and from the others’ enormous "dissociality." Gonzalo’s neurosis is manifested (to use words that Gadda refers to himself) in the "intolerance, seeming cruelty, ‘misanthropic’ delays of his thought," in the yellings, obscenities, angry remarks, menaces he addresses to almost everyone, but above all in a love-hatred for his mother, with a related, symbolic parricide.

The love-hatred is openly Freudian and culminates (in an unpublished fragment of the novel) in the death of the mother, killed not by burglars, as Gonzalo feared in his anguish, but by the same agents of the "Nistituto" who were supposed to protect her. The significance of the relationship between the son and the mother, who are constantly juxtaposed throughout the narration, is to be found in their different approaches to reality: Gonzalo, in his search for the absolute, cannot but reject the world as it is, "full of sound and fury," and look at it with disgust mixed with compassion. On the contrary his mother is practical, concrete; like Zeno’s wife, Augusta, she is a laborious little ant and her head does not spin when she thinks of the stars and the earth rotating in the universe: "... she had learned and taught many things: mathematical formulas and Kepler’s quadratures, which trace the ellipsis of our desperate sorrow in the emptiness of meaningless spaces.”


56 Ibid., p. 188.

57 Ibid., p. 35.

58 Ibid., p. 37.

59 Ibid., p. 32.

60 See ibid., p. 144, and Pietro Citati (V. n. 55), pp. 16-17 and 39-40.

61 Ibid., p. 168. The Italian text is "spazi senza senso," and Gadda, playing on the double meaning of the sentence, footnotes: "Without a sensory apparatus, and therefore without sensitivity.”
The mother accepts all the limitations, compromises and illusory values of this world, to the point of "appropriating to herself the Idea-Mother of the villa as a red organ, an entelechy which was consubstantial with her womb." Here Gonzalo's polemic against his mother is one with Gadda's written polemic against the bad taste and selfishness of the bourgeoisie, embodied in the ugly ville built on the lovely, melancholic Brianza hills; the psychopathological, the metaphysical and the sociological are strictly interwoven.

Gonzalo's symbolic Parricide is told in various occasions and seems addressed to his mother rather than to his father, as an excruciating indication to her, who does not want to see, that there are evils and sorrows in the world, that the world is not an absolute value in itself. The Parricide is perpetrated by Gonzalo as a ritual (hence the repetitions), by stepping on the portrait of his father under his mother's eyes: "... stepping on it as if he were pressing grapes in a vat, he shattered the glass. His heels drew something like a moustache on the portrait, two frightful bruises on the portrait." 64

The anthropomorphic connotation of "bruises" referred to "portrait" seems to contain all of Gonzalo's love-hatred, and of Gadda's pietas.

Through Gonzalo's neurosis, Gadda expresses his vision du monde, or "referto," as he says, using a medical term; the "referto" is grotesque and baroque, presented with a composite language made of highly literary Italian mixed with fake Spanish (and, in Quer pasticcio brutto de via Merulana, with at least four dialects): such "vast diagram of expressive modes is used for the simultaneous representation of the thousand different faces of reality," as the philologist Piero Pucci points out. 66 In fact Gadda's style, beyond its luxuriant language, which in itself is a symptom of a sort of linguistic alienation, is a magic phantasmagory,

63 Ibid., p. 183.
64 Ibid., p. 213.
65 Ibid., p. 32. Often in the novel Gadda uses medical terminology, and his interest in medicine as a means of knowing life in its innermost roots, of exploring the mystery of life, is shown especially in his virtuoso description of a surgical operation (Anastomosi).
with myriads of images and scenes which are all seen in the same perspective and point therefore to the chaotic, meaningless reality. Indeed in Gadda one finds all the elements considered by Auerbach and Lukács in describing the modern novel: the hostility toward society, the fragmentation of reality, the escape into the psychopathological.

But Gadda’s longing for the absolute is at the core of his work at every level of interpretation. Gonzalo says to his doctor, who is visiting him:

. . . Well, I think; but I’m ill of thinking. . . . The pronouns! They are the lice of thought. . . . The fact alone that we constipated beings destined to putrescence go on proclaiming . . . I, you . . . this fact alone . . . I, you . . . denounces the lowness of our common dialectics . . . and certifies to our impotence to preach about anything at all. . . . since we ignore . . . the subject of every possible sentence.  

One recalls Michelstaedter’s considerations on “the words of fog,” the subjunctive, the introductory particles of the speech. At the end of the medical examination,

[Gonzalo] took the prescription from the doctor’s hand and put it on the table, under a small, clear polyhedron of polished crystal full of light. He seemed not to have given any importance to the physician’s statement, nor to the ceremony which had preceded it: while closing his justaucorps, he seemed to have forgotten the disease. ‘Le mal physique,’ in this case: the visible disease.  

The one that really counts, in fact, is the “invisible disease.” Gonzalo’s own diagnosis probes life in depth: “It was the obscure disease whose cause and patterns the histories and laws and the universal disciplines of the great University chairs must continue to ignore; and the victim carries it within himself, throughout the whole blasted descent of a lifetime, heavier every day, untreated.”  

Disease, for Gadda, indeed seems the ontological foundation of life, and his “misanthropic” character Gonzalo seems to take the burden of it on himself, as an expiation for, or a liberation from, the contingent reality which precludes the absolute:

67 Carlo Emilio Gadda (V. n. 55), pp. 123-4. The italics are in English in the original.
68 Ibid., pp. 106-7.
69 Ibid., p. 187.
To pluck the false kiss of Appearance, to lie down with her on filthy straw, to breathe her breath, to swallow, down inside one’s soul, her belch, her harlot’s stink. Or, to plunge her, the Appearance, into rancor and scorn as into a puddle of excrements, denying, denying. . . .

The *hidalgo*, perhaps, was to deny himself: by advocating to himself the reasons of sorrow, the knowledge and truth of sorrow, nothing was left to possibility. Everything was exhausted in the storm of sorrow. Only the scorn of designs and appearances was left, almost a tragic mask on the *metope* of the theatre.\textsuperscript{70}

*La cognizione del dolore* has an inner development similar to Svevo’s and Michelstaedter’s, with a desperate lyricism that harkens back to Leopardi (and therefore to Schopenhauer) and with an emphasis on psychopathology which is not an end in itself, but expresses a precise and compassionate “referto.”

On the contrary, Giuseppe Berto’s *Il male oscuro*, which takes after Gadda even from the title, emphasizes the merely psycho-analytical aspects of the “obscure disease” of life, and especially the “struggle against the father,” with a painful insistence on hospitals, surgery, awful medical details of a dozen or so disgusting maladies.

It seems much more rewarding, therefore, to turn once again to Paolo Volponi, the author who in *Memoriale* had dealt with disease in connection with the relationship of contemplation to action, of literature to industry. In his latest novel *La macchina mondiale* (1965) he combines the idea of disease with that of the machines, as Svevo had done at the end of *La coscienza di Zeno*. His protagonist Anteo Crocioni is undoubtedly a psychic case, but a man who tries to reconcile nature, society and the individual through a mechanistic conception of the universe which, in its present state, is deeply sick, inadequate, abandoned by the “Automata-Gods” who once created it: his final suicide seals the failure of his attempt, but his story cannot be easily forgotten.

Volponi’s *La macchina mondiale* can be considered as the latest point of a literary development in which disease, from purely and literally pathological, becomes subtly emblematic of a particular *vision du monde* analysed so far in the works of Svevo, Michelstaedter, and Gadda, a *vision du monde* which is concerned with the inadequacy of reality to give a significance and a transcendence

\textsuperscript{70} *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.
to man as a social and as a metaphysical animal. Disease is used by the writers as a particularly effective means of expressing such inadequacy and of presenting a hard, problematic ontology.

Disease, thus, appears to be a gnomic category applicable to the individual and society, to the self and the world; but above all it appears to be on ontological category of twentieth century man.

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