

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

TAKE A LOOK at the author's name (his real name): Ettore Schmitz. The first half is Italian and, significantly, it is the name of a Greek hero, not of a Catholic saint. The surname is German. Then consider the birthplace: Trieste, a city that has had many masters, from ancient Romans to Austrians to Italians. In 1861, when Ettore Schmitz was born there, Trieste was an Austrian city, a vital one, the great empire's only seaport and a focus of trade between central Europe and the rest of the world. In this place of encounters and frontiers, young Ettore grew up to appreciate ambiguity, even contradiction; and, when he seriously began his career as a writer, he chose a pen name that reflected his complex background: Italo Svevo: Italus, the Italian; and Svevus, the Swabian (a duchy in medieval Germany, Swabia was also known as Alamannia).

His father Francesco Schmitz, was a German Jew, born in Trieste but closely linked to the German-speaking world. Ettore's mother was also Jewish and also from Trieste, but from an Italian family: her name was Allegra Moravia. Since the late eighteenth century Trieste had been a relatively serene place for its Jewish citizens, who were allowed to conduct business, accumulate wealth, occupy public office: some were even ennobled.

Francesco Schmitz was in the glassware business, and for much of Ettore's childhood that business went well. The boy, like his seven brothers and sisters, lived in comfort, if not affluence. Their father was something of an autocrat, and – like most other fathers in Trieste – he assumed his sons would follow him into the world of commerce. Francesco was a man

of firm convictions, and one of these was the belief that success in affairs was dependent on a total mastery of the German language. So when Ettore was eleven he was sent with his adoring younger brother Elio to board at the Brusse'sche Handels und Erziehungsinstitut, a trade and education academy at Segnitz-am-Main, near Würzburg. Ettore did well there, but his real interest was reading, not commerce: he devoured Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Schopenhauer, and other classics, including Shakespeare in German translation.

In 1878 Schmitz returned to Trieste for two years and studied, in a somewhat random fashion, at the Istituto Revoltella, the closest thing Trieste then had to a university. At this time he also began writing, chiefly plays, evidence of an enduring passion for the theater that he was able to feed by attendance at the Teatro Communale. After some performances at Shakespeare there in 1880, he published a first article, "Shylock," in an Italian-language paper, *L'Indipendente*, an irredentist organ with which he was to be associated for several decades.

In that same year, after the failure of his father's business, Schmitz abandoned formal study and found a position in the Trieste branch of the Unionbank of Vienna, assigned to deal with its French and German correspondence. He remained, unhappily, at the bank for almost twenty years.

He continued to write (but rarely complete) plays, as his contributions to *L'Indipendente* became more frequent. Finally, in December of 1887, he began a novel. Its working title was characteristic: *Un inetto*. This could be translated literally as "an inept man," but perhaps Svevo meant something more like our modern term "a loser." The story is set in a bank; Svevo later admitted the work was largely autobiographical.

After an unhappy love affair a decade earlier, Schmitz's life seemed dully divided between home and office, but then he began meeting other young artists – notably the painter Umberto Veruda, who introduced him to Trieste's bohemian circles. In the winter of 1891 he had a serious affair with a

working-class woman, whom he later portrayed in his second novel.

He completed the first novel, now retitled *Una vita* (*A Life*; Svevo was unaware of the Maupassant novel of the same title). In December of 1892 (after the manuscript had been rejected by the prestigious Milanese firm of Treves), *Una vita* was published – at the author's expense – by the firm of Vram in Trieste. The Trieste papers reviewed it benevolently; the critic of Milan's *Corriere della sera*, Domenico Oliva, a sustaining pillar of the Italian literary establishment, offered it mild praise. But the book made no real impression.

Svevo's father had died in 1892, a few months before the publication of *Una vita*. In October of 1895 Svevo's mother died. At thirty-four he felt adrift. His brother Ottavio suggested that the two of them move to Vienna and go into business, but there were economic obstacles, and Schmitz was reluctant to leave his part-time job with *Il Piccolo*, a leading Italian daily paper, where he was responsible for scanning the foreign press.

And there was another reason to stay in Trieste. During his mother's last illness, he had come to admire his young cousin, Livia Veneziani, who had impressed him with her gentle manner and her thoughtfulness. He began giving her books; at her insistence, he even promised to conquer his entrenched habit of smoking (a promise often repeated, but never kept). On 20 December 1895, despite strong objections from Livia's parents, who considered the much older Schmitz a poor prospect, Livia and Ettore became officially engaged. As a festive gift, Livia presented him with a diary, a "keepsake" album entitled *Blüthen und Ranken edler Dichtung* (*Blossoms and Tendrils of Noble Poetry*), handsomely bound and illustrated with watercolor reproductions of flowers, each day's page headed by a sentimental poem. The pages for January and February are dutifully filled in; a few March entries are written up, then the writing peters out. Published posthumously under

the title *Diario per la fidanzata*, the diary offers many engaging insights into the character not only of Svevo but also of his fictional alter ego, Zeno Cosini. For instead of recording his day-to-day events, the diarist examines his conscience, analyzes his love of his fiancée, and describes his often wild fancies.

On the page for 3 January, under a soppy little poem by Georg Ebers, he wrote:

A man can have only two strokes of good luck in this world. That of loving greatly or that of combating victoriously in the battle for life. He is happy either way, but it is not often that fate grants both these happinesses. It seems to me therefore that . . . the happy are those who either renounce love or withdraw from the battle. Most unhappy are those who divide themselves according to desire or activity between these two fields, so opposed. Strange: thinking of my Livia I see both love and victory.

A few days later, on 7 January, he wrote:

At the moment of waking I surely do not remember either the face or the love of Livia. Sometimes to recall one and the other in their entirety I need to see the photograph that has remained calmly watching me sleep. And then the serenity of waking is broken all at once by the recollection of life, of all life, and I am assailed simultaneously by all the joy of possession and the uneasiness that has always accompanied and will always accompany my love. Then I recall all the discussions of the day before in your company or else my just being silent, beside you. I am then calmed, and when I get up, I am whistling Wagner, the musician of love and of pain but I feel only the former, I leave the house with my hat a jaunty angle and . . . a cigarette in my mouth. Poor Livia! Every pleasure and every displeasure that you give me increase my pharyngitis.

The frankness of the diary – which was submitted to Livia as he was writing it – did not diminish her love for her quirky future husband. She had developed a maternal fondness for his weaknesses, and she could smile at his many jokes and fancies.

Though she was one-quarter Jewish by birth, Livia had been brought up a Catholic and regularly attended Mass. So the prospective marriage involved a central conflict. Livia, after much debate, unhappily agreed to a civil ceremony. It took place on 30 July 1896. After a honeymoon – a month spent partly along the Adriatic coast and partly in Vienna – they moved into the large, somewhat pretentious villa of Livia's parents, in the outlying industrial town of Servola, where the Veneziani paint factory was also located. At first, Ettore and Livia occupied an independent apartment on the third floor of the villa. Later they moved downstairs and formed a single household with Olga and Gioachino, the senior Venezianis.

Svevo's in-laws played important roles in his life (and, to some extent, in his fiction). Gioachino is clearly the model for the ebullient, great-hearted Giovanni in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Olga – to whom Svevo sometimes referred, behind her back, as “the dragon” – was the moving force in the family and in the business (which, though founded by Gioachino, was to some extent descended from the chemicals firm of her father). It was Olga who ordered the workmen about, and it was she who – alone – mixed the secret ingredients of the formula for the underwater paint, used to protect the hulls of ships (including many naval vessels), that the Veneziani company produced and successfully marketed throughout Europe.

Despite Svevo's occasional ridiculous jealousy, the marriage was profoundly happy, and in 1897 Livia became pregnant; in that same year Svevo began a second novel, which he called *Il carnevale di Emilio* (*Emilio's Carnival*, later retitled *Senilità*). After the birth of their daughter, Letizia, Livia fell seriously ill, and Svevo decided to be baptized. On Livia's recovery they went through a marriage ceremony in church, though there is no evidence that Svevo took his new religion seriously.

Amid repeated vows to give up smoking, Svevo developed briefly another vice: gambling on the Exchange. In the spring

of 1898, when he had lost 1,000 florins, he wrote out a solemn oath to give up trading and added that, to recoup the loss, he would "do without tobacco, coffee, and wine for the next ten years!" As he meticulously dated his frequent written resolutions to give up smoking, so he solemnly dated this sheet of paper: "7 March 1898."

Three months later, *L'Indipendente* began publishing *Senilità* in installments, and in the autumn of 1898, again at the author's expense, Vram brought out the volume. Again it caused no stir. Not for the first time, Svevo thought of giving up writing. But for him, writing was a vice as deeply rooted as smoking, and though he later claimed he had stopped writing for a long period, he was not telling the whole truth. While it was many years before he essayed another novel, he constantly wrote little stories, fables, observations.

His life at the bank continued to be unhappy, and, at just about this time, his supplementary teaching position at the Revoltella fell through. Unexpectedly, Olga invited – or commanded – him to work for the family firm. He was initiated into the secret of the paint formula. Veneziani submarine paint was in demand far beyond Trieste, and the family set up branches, first in Italy (at nearby Murano), then in England. Svevo was often deputed to organize and control these outposts of Olga's empire. To Olga's satisfaction (and his own), he proved good at his job; and in the course of time, he achieved financial ease. He and Livia and their daughter could live in near-luxury. In his leisure moments – partly as a substitute for writing – he devoted himself to the violin. His success as a musician was less than brilliant, but he was able to put together an amateur quartet, which performed at social gatherings at their hospitable Veneziani villa.

His foreign travels were putting his command of languages to the test, and he felt that his English, in particular, needed improvement. Toward the end of 1906, Svevo was told of a young tutor, James Joyce, an Irishman who had been in

Trieste since the previous March and had achieved a certain popularity, especially among the Jewish haute bourgeoisie. Since the penniless Joyce and his wife, Nora, often had to change dwellings, Joyce taught his pupils at their homes. Sometime in the autumn of 1906 he and Svevo began meeting, with reciprocal pleasure.

Joyce had recently managed (like Svevo, at his own expense) to publish a collection of his poems, *Chamber Music*, and had completed the stories of *Dubliners*, for which he was having trouble finding a publisher. He was also trying to get on with his more ambitious work, the novel then thought of as *Stephen Hero*. He showed his work to Svevo, and at one of their meetings actually read aloud his great story "The Dead" to Livia and Ettore, who immediately felt its power. After the reading, Livia went into the garden, picked some flowers, and handed the bouquet to Joyce as a sign of her admiration.

Eventually Svevo confessed to his young teacher that he also had – or had once had – literary ambitions. Joyce asked to read *Una vita* and *Senilità* and was profoundly impressed. He even quoted some passages of the latter work from memory to the thrilled author. (Svevo, it must be added, became one of several sources of "loans" to the young Irishman.)

Joyce discussed his own work more and more freely with Svevo. As he began planning *Ulysses*, he frequently consulted his pupil about Jewish beliefs and practices; and thus Svevo contributed to the characterization of Leopold Bloom. Livia – or, at least, her much-admired long blond tresses – was later a model for the personification of Dublin's river Liffey, as Anna Livia Plurabelle.

As the First World War began, Joyce had to leave Trieste, but from his exiles – first in Switzerland and later in Paris – he kept in touch with his friend. Joyce's continued moral support may have contributed to Svevo's first great postwar undertaking, *La coscienza di Zenò*, which was begun in March of 1919, more than twenty years after the completion of *Senilità*.

The years of the war were profoundly disruptive for Svevo, for Trieste, and for the underwater paint business. Even before hostilities began, many Italians fled the city, where the Austrian authorities had imposed a number of restrictions, including a severe censorship of the press. Gioachino and Olga, both Italian citizens, left for England, so Ettore remained in charge at the factory. Wanting to be near her Italian fiancé, Letizia – now in her teens – joined some family members in Florence.

The Austrians tried to confiscate the factory and wanted to know the secret formula; Ettore thwarted these efforts, first by concealing the ingredients and then by supplying a false formula. Finally he had to travel to Vienna to protest the confiscation of the factory. He was successful, but there was little business to be done in the beleaguered city.

Finally, well after the war's end and Trieste's annexation to Italy, the Schmitzes – including Letizia, now married and with a growing family – were able to take a vacation together. In the summer of 1922 they rented a villa in the hills north of Trieste. Here, in an access of fervid inspiration, Svevo went seriously to work on *La coscienza di Zeno*. Smoking furiously, he finished the book in a matter of months, and in May of 1923 the novel was published – again at the author's expense – by the firm Cappelli in Bologna. Once more Svevo's book aroused scant interest: a few local reviews, a brief and lukewarm notice in the *Corriere della sera*.

But the tide was soon to turn, dramatically. The last few years of Svevo's life would be radically different; he would come close to achieving victory in the battle of life. Though he had seen little of Joyce after his departure from Trieste and their correspondence had been desultory, Svevo had sent a copy of *La coscienza di Zeno* to his former English teacher. The response from Paris was immediate. Joyce's letter is dated 30 January 1924, and it reads, in part:

Thank you for the novel with the inscription. I am reading it with great pleasure. Why be discouraged? You must know it is by far your best work. As to Italian critics I can't speak. But send copies to Valéry Larbaud, Benjamin Crémieux, T. S. Eliot (Editor Criterion), F. M. Ford. I will speak or write to them about it also. I shall be able to write more when I've finished the book. So far two things interest me. The theme: I should never have thought that smoking could dominate a man like that. Secondly, the treatment of time in the book. You certainly don't lack penetration, and I see that the last paragraph of *Senilità* . . . has been growing and blossoming in secret.

Joyce, who knew something about promoting literary work, especially his own, was as good as his word. He did speak with Larbaud and Crémieux, prodding them to read and publicize the book. An important new Parisian review, *Le Navire d'Argent*, was soon planning a "Svevo number" with an essay by Larbaud and a translation of excerpts from *Senilità* and *La coscienza*. Svevo was the talk of literary Paris, and a young Italian poet, Eugenio Montale, visiting the city, heard of him there for the first time. On his return to Italy, Montale procured copies of the three novels and took up the cause, writing articles on Svevo for Italian reviews and enthusiastically spreading the word. Soon Svevo was a prominent literary figure, or rather a "case", debated at length in papers and in literary cafés. On one occasion, when Svevo was to pass through Milan en route to Trieste during a return trip from abroad, Montale arranged for a group of young writers to gather at the Milan train station and pay him homage. Svevo was also fêted by Florentine literary circles, and in Trieste he was now a respected member of the Caffè Garibaldi intellectual group.

The official literary establishment still regarded him with some suspicion and belittled his foreign fame, but that fame was undeniable. Translations of his works were already in progress. After his death an acquaintance, A. R. Ferrarin, recalled and quoted some remarks of his at this time:

“Until last year I was the . . . least ambitious old man in the world,” Svevo said. “Now I am overcome by ambition. I have become eager for praise. I now live only to manage my own glory. I went to Paris . . . and all I could see was Italo Svevo: Italo Svevo among the treasures of the Louvre; Italo Svevo on the stage of the fifty-some Parisian theaters. Italo Svevo on the Elysées, and Italo Svevo at Versailles . . . The ville lumière . . . seemed to exist only as a function of my glory.”

Svevo, in the last, satisfying years of his life, often visited Milan and frequented the literary salons there. In 1926 he gave a lecture on Joyce at the offices of *Il convegno*, an important review that also sponsored a club and a theater. Though Svevo, who had never spoken in public before, had grave misgivings, the occasion went well and reinforced his relationship with the review, which published some of his stories.

In the flush of excitement at his fame, he was not only writing stories but contemplating a sequel to *La coscienza di Zeno*. In the winter of 1927 a social event crowned this happy phase: Crémieux organized a dinner in Paris to honor Svevo, its guests including Isaak Babel, Ilya Ehrenburg, and other illustrious Paris residents, with Jules Romains presiding. Ehrenburg's account of the dinner emphasized the bad food and marveled at Svevo's incessant smoking.

His fame could not dispel an increasing pessimism. His conversation and his writing now contained frequent premonitions of death; his concern with old age – his “*senilità*,” which had been a spiritual more than a physical state – was now real. He had to cut down on his eating, for he had developed a heart condition. Nevertheless he continued to go to the office and, in good moments, to write. He did not give up smoking.

In late August of 1928, Ettore and Livia decided to spend some time at the Alpine spa Bormio, where he had previously taken a cure. They traveled by motorcar, their chauffeur at the wheel, and took with them their six-year-old grandson, Paolo.

Having set out on 11 September, they broke the trip overnight and on the twelfth resumed the journey despite pouring rain. As the car was crossing a bridge not far from Motta di Livenza, it skidded and crashed into a tree. Only Svevo seemed badly hurt, though Livia and Paolo were also bleeding.

Svevo had a broken leg, some cuts and bruises, but he was also suffering from severe shock; the doctor quickly realized that the injured man was dying. Letizia and her husband arrived the next morning. At a certain point one of his visitors was smoking, and Svevo asked him for a cigarette. It was refused. Svevo replied: "That really would have been the last cigarette." He died that afternoon at half past two.

Livia survived him for almost thirty years and became the alert custodian of his fame. His death was the first of many family tragedies. In March of 1943 Letizia's two eldest sons died as prisoners of war in Russia. Another son, Sergio, was killed in partisan street fighting in Trieste in 1945. Earlier that year the Villa Veneziani and the factory had been destroyed in an Allied bombing.

Livia herself spent much of the war hiding from the Nazis. During that time she began writing a biography of Svevo. Later, a friend, Lina Galli, helped her complete it. But she had as much trouble finding a publisher as Ettore had had. At last it appeared, as *Vita di mio marito (Life of My Husband)* in Trieste in 1950. A charming, affecting, usefully informative work, it has subsequently been reissued and translated.

Svevo's widow lived to see her husband established as a modern Italian classic, but the "Svevo case" continued to provoke discussion. One of the thorniest questions surrounding Svevo was, quite simply, his Italian. In *La coscienza di Zeno*, the narrator complains about his own Italian. Like all his fellow Triestines, Zeno's first language is the local dialect. For Ettore Schmitz, his first language was also Triestino; his second, German. Italian was an acquired tongue, and from the beginning of his career critics have insisted that his Italian is clumsy.

“The Italian of a bookkeeper” is a recurrent jibe. In his preface to a reissue of Livia’s *Vita di mio marito*, Montale tackles the question:

But the smell of warehouse and cellar, the almost Goldonian chatter of the Tergesteo, the unmistakable “late Ottocento” painting in some of his rare expanses of landscape and his numerous “interiors” – are they not the sure presence of a style? A commercial style, true, but also the only one natural to his characters.

If Svevo – or rather, Zeno Cosini – writes like a bookkeeper, that may be because he *is* a bookkeeper. At the suggestion of the Bolognese publisher Cappelli, Svevo actually took the step of having a professional, non-Triestine writer, Attilio Frescura, examine his manuscript. For some time Svevo’s papers have not been accessible. They are in packing-cases stored in the Trieste library, which is being “renovated” (renovation, in institutional Italy, is likely to be an endless process). So we have no idea what Frescura’s proposed revisions were, nor do we know to what extent Svevo accepted them.

In making this translation – and here I must adopt the first person singular – I have steadfastly resisted the temptation to “prettify” Svevo’s prose. And as I progressed, the temptation became less frequent, as that prose worked its charm on me. What could sometimes at first seem flat, unaccented, even opaque was, I realized, an essential part of Zeno’s character, like his subtle irony, his cockeyed ratiocination, his quiet humor. In his important study, *In Praise of Antiheroes*, Victor Brombert devotes an acute chapter to Zeno, an antihero in the great European tradition, where the bumbling importer Zeno Cosini ranks with that other great creation, the good soldier Schweik.

I first read Svevo’s novel when I was a college senior, in the English translation by Beryl de Zoete, under the title *Confessions of Zeno*. I fell in love with the book, and a few years later,

when my Italian was more fluent, I read it again in the original and loved it even more. Beryl de Zoete must have been a fascinating woman. Her published works include scholarly studies of Oriental dance; she was the companion of the great translator and scholar Arthur Waley, and thus lived in the magic circle of Bloomsbury. She also translated *Senilità* and, later, one of Alberto Moravia's early novellas, the splendid *Agostino*.

In the 1920s, when she worked on *La coscienza di Zeno*, she was translating the work of an eccentric, virtually unknown Italian writer. Seventy years later, when I began my translation, I was dealing with a text of world renown, universally loved. There are times when a translator must also be something of a salesperson, and I suspect that Beryl de Zoete, in her admiration for Svevo, was also eager to sell him to an un-instructed public. Her translation did just that, and she must have been pleased, rightfully, with her achievement.

But, more than novels, translations age. The translators whose work illuminated my youth – Constance Garnett, Helen Lowe-Porter, Dorothy Bussy, C. K. Scott Moncrieff – have all been challenged and, in some cases, replaced. And I expect – admittedly without enthusiasm – that a new generation will retranslate the works of Gadda, Calvino, Eco, whom I introduced to English readers.

While I was working on this translation, I left my old, college-days copy of *Confessions of Zeno* on the shelf. When I had finished, or almost finished the job, I took two or three peeks at de Zoete's work, to compare a few of her solutions to mine. It was clear to me that she had had similar trouble with passages that troubled me. I had been ready to use (and duly acknowledge) any felicitous solutions of hers, but as it turned out, her words regularly drove me to press on and find new solutions of my own.

The first and perhaps greatest problem is the very title of the book. In Italian, "*coscienza*" means both "conscience" and "consciousness," and the word recurs often in the body of the

novel. De Zoete's choice of "confessions," skirting the original word deftly, was inspired but, I felt, finally misleading, placing Zeno Cosini in a line descended from Augustine and Rousseau. (To one of my Catholic background, the word also had a religious, sacramental connotation that I felt was unsuitable.) Then, one day, in an article in *The Times Literary Supplement*, I read that in the past, the English word "conscience" had also had the meaning of "consciousness." The article quoted Shakespeare ("conscience doth make cowards of us all"). And I decided that my title would be *Zeno's Conscience*.

Translation is often described as a lonely profession. I have never found it so. True, during most of the work, I am alone in my study, facing the blank screen and the printed page. But I also have the pleasure of discussing work and words with others, with colleagues and friends. I began this translation years ago in Italy and completed it at Bard College, where the campus teems with Svevians, always ready to talk about his great novel. At Bard, I must thank my valued colleagues James Chace, Frederick Hammond, Robert Kelly, William Mullen, Maria Assunta Nicoletti, and Carlo Zei. I am also grateful to my student Jorge Santana for his help, and to my former student Kristina Olson for collaborating on the bibliographical note. In New York, my old friend Riccardo Gori Montanelli (who helped me with some of my first translations, in Charlottesville, Virginia, fifty years ago) came to my assistance with some stock-market terminology, and my editor, LuAnn Walther, and her assistant, John Siciliano, helped with the final stages of the long process of seeing *Zeno's Conscience* into print.

William Weaver

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

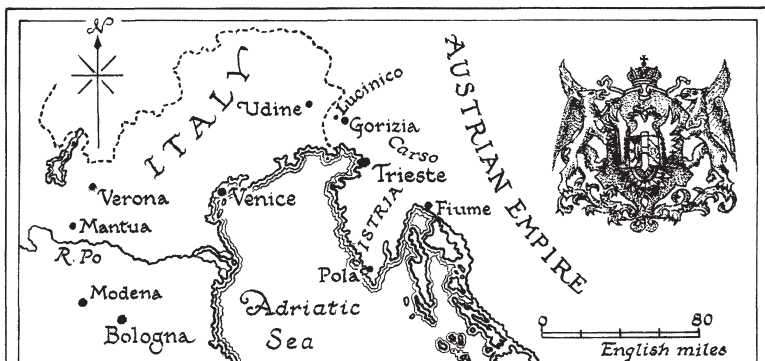
THERE ARE COUNTLESS editions of *La coscienza di Zeno* available in any Italian bookstore. Among these one of the best is a paperback issued by the firm of Einaudi, in Turin, with a stimulating preface by the Svevo scholar Mario Lavagetto. The volume also contains the “continuations” of *La coscienza* (five stories Svevo wrote at the end of his life). Another leading Svevo scholar, Bruno Maier, has supervised the essential and impressive opera omnia edition of Svevo’s work (including many letters and his plays and scattered pages), brought out by the enterprising, devoted Milanese firm dall’Oglio. The prestigious Meridiani series, published by Mondadori in Milan, has brought out a volume containing the three Svevo novels, with an important introduction by Franco Gavazzeni, a good chronology, many notes, and a bibliography. In preparing my translation, I also consulted a scholarly edition of the novel published by Principato (Milan), with invaluable footnotes.

In English, P. N. Furbank’s biography, *Italo Svevo: The Man and the Writer*, published in 1966 (University of California Press), remains indispensable: thoroughly researched, elegantly written, eminently readable. It has more recently been complemented by John Gatt-Rutter’s *Italo Svevo: A Double Life* (Oxford, 1988).

For Svevo’s relations with James Joyce, see Richard Ellmann’s biography, *James Joyce* (Oxford, 1959), and, more specifically, the recent, excellent study, *The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste, 1904–1920* by John McCourt (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000). McCourt is also the author, with

Renzo Crivelli, of *Joyce: In Svenno's Garden* (International Scholars Publication, 1997).

Important essays on Svevo include Renato Poggioli's introduction to the New Directions edition of the de Zoete translation, *Confessions of Zeno* (1947), and the above-mentioned chapter on Zeno in Victor Brombert's *In Praise of Antiheroes* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).



ZENO'S CONSCIENCE

PREFACE

I AM THE doctor occasionally mentioned in this story, in unflattering terms. Anyone familiar with psychoanalysis knows how to assess the patient's obvious hostility toward me.

I will not discuss psychoanalysis here, because in the following pages it is discussed more than enough. I must apologize for having suggested my patient write his autobiography; students of psychoanalysis will frown on this new departure. But he was an old man, and I hoped that recalling his past would rejuvenate him, and that the autobiography would serve as a useful prelude to his analysis. Even today my idea still seems a good one to me, for it achieved results far beyond my hopes. The results would have been even greater if the patient had not suspended treatment just when things were going well, denying me the fruit of my long and painstaking analysis of these memories.

I am publishing them in revenge, and I hope he is displeased. I want him to know, however, that I am prepared to share with him the lavish profits I expect to make from this publication, on condition that he resume his treatment. He seemed so curious about himself! If he only knew the countless surprises he might enjoy from discussing the many truths and the many lies he has assembled here! . . .

Doctor S.

PREAMBLE

REVIEW MY CHILDHOOD? More than a half-century stretches between that time and me, but my farsighted eyes could perhaps perceive it if the light still glowing there were not blocked by obstacles of every sort, outright mountain peaks: all my years and some of my hours.

The doctor has urged me not to insist stubbornly on trying to see all that far back. Recent things can also be valuable, and especially fantasies and last night's dreams. But there should be at least some kind of order, and to help me begin *ab ovo*, the moment I left the doctor, who is going out of town shortly and will be absent from Trieste for some time, I bought and read a treatise on psychoanalysis, just to make his task easier. It's not hard to understand, but it's very boring.

Now, having dined, comfortably lying in my overstuffed lounge chair, I am holding a pencil and a piece of paper. My brow is unfurrowed because I have dismissed all concern from my mind. My thinking seems something separate from me. I can see it. It rises and falls . . . but that is its only activity. To remind it that it is my thinking and that its duty is to make itself evident, I grasp the pencil. Now my brow does wrinkle, because each word is made up of so many letters and the imperious present looms up and blots out the past.

Yesterday I tried to achieve maximum relaxation. The experiment ended in deepest sleep, and its only effect on me was a great repose and the curious sensation of having seen, during that sleep, something important. But it was forgotten by then, lost forever.

Today, thanks to the pencil I'm holding in my hand, I remain awake. I can see, or glimpse, some odd images that surely have nothing to do with my past: a puffing locomotive dragging countless coaches up a steep grade. Who knows where it's coming from or where it's going or why it has now turned up here?

As I doze, I remember how my textbook claims that this method will allow you to recall your earliest infancy, your cradle days. I see immediately a baby in a cradle, but why should that baby be me? He doesn't look anything like me; on the contrary, I believe he was born a few weeks ago to my sister-in-law, who displayed him as a miracle because he has such tiny hands and such big eyes. Recall my infancy? Hardly. Poor baby! I can't even find a way to warn you, now living in your own infancy, how important it is to remember it, for the benefit of your intelligence and your health. When will you discover that it would be a good idea to memorize your life, even the large part of it that will revolt you? Meanwhile, unconscious, you are investigating your tiny organism in search of pleasure, and your delightful discoveries will pave the way toward the grief and sickness to which you will be driven even by those who would not wish them on you. What is to be done? It is impossible to keep constant watch over your crib. In your breast – you poor little thing! – a mysterious combination is forming. Every passing minute provides a reagent. Too many probabilities of illness surround you, for not all your minutes can be pure. And besides – poor baby! – you are the blood relation of people I know. The minutes now passing may actually be pure, but all the centuries that prepared for your coming were certainly not.

Here I am, quite far from the images that precede sleep. I will make another attempt tomorrow.

SMOKE

THE DOCTOR WITH whom I discussed the question told me to begin my work with a historical analysis of my smoking habit.

“Write it down! And you’ll see yourself whole! Try it!”

I believe I can write about smoking here at my desk, without having to sit and dream in that chair. I can’t seem to begin, so I must seek help from my cigarettes, all very like the one I am now holding.

Today I discover immediately something I had forgotten. The cigarettes I first smoked are no longer on the market. Around 1870 in Austria there was a brand that came in cardboard boxes stamped with the two-headed eagle. Now, around one of those boxes I see a few people gathering, each with some characteristic, so distinct that I can recall their names, but not distinct enough to prompt any emotion at this unforeseen encounter. I want to delve deeper, so I go to the armchair: the people fade and are replaced by some clowns, who mock me. Dejected, I return to the desk.

One of those figures, with a somewhat hoarse voice, was Giuseppe, a youth my own age, and with him was my brother, a year younger than I, who died many years ago. It seems Giuseppe received a generous allowance from his father, and used to give us some of those cigarettes. But I am certain he offered more of them to my brother than to me. Hence I was faced with the necessity of procuring some for myself. So I stole. In summer my father hung his waistcoat over a chair in the breakfast room, and in its pocket there was always change. I procured the ten pennies necessary to purchase the precious

little packet, and I smoked its ten cigarettes one after the other, rather than hold on to the compromising fruit of my theft.

All this lay in my consciousness, within reach. It resurfaces only now because previously I didn't know that it could be of any importance. So I have recorded the origin of the filthy habit and (who knows?) I may already be cured of it. Therefore, I light a last cigarette, as a test; perhaps I will throw it away at once, revolted.

Then, I remember, one day my father caught me with his waistcoat in my hands. With a shamelessness I could not muster today, which still disgusts me (perhaps – who knows? – that disgust is highly significant in my life), I told him I had felt a sudden impulse to count the buttons. My father laughed at my mathematical or sartorial leanings, failing to notice that I had my fingers in the watch pocket. It should be said, to my credit, that this laughter, inspired by my innocence when it no longer existed, sufficed to keep me from ever stealing again. Or rather . . . I stole again, but unawares. My father left some half-smoked Virginia cigars around the house, perched on table edges and armoires. I believed this was how he threw them away, and I believe our old maidservant, Catina, did then fling them out. I carried them off and smoked them in secret. At the very moment I grabbed them I was overcome by a shudder of revulsion, knowing how sick they would make me. Then I smoked them until my brow was drenched in cold sweat and my stomach was in knots. It cannot be said that in my childhood I lacked energy.

I know perfectly well also how my father cured me of this habit. One summer day I returned home from a school outing, tired and soaked in sweat. My mother helped me undress, and wrapping me in a big towel, she made me lie down to sleep on a sofa where she was also seated, busy with some sewing. I was almost asleep, but the sun was still in my eyes, and it was taking me a while to lose consciousness. The sweetness that, in those tender years, accompanied repose after great weariness is clear

to me, like an image on its own, as clear as if I were there now, beside that beloved body that no longer exists.

I remember the big, cool room where we children used to play; now, in these times when space has become so precious, it is subdivided into two parts. In this scene my brother doesn't appear, and I am surprised because I think he must also have participated in that excursion, and should have shared in the rest afterwards. Was he also sleeping, at the other end of the sofa? I look at that place, but it seems empty to me. I see only myself, in the sweetness of that repose, my mother, then my father, whose words I hear re-echoing. He had come in and hadn't immediately seen me, because he called aloud: "Maria!"

Mamma, with a gesture accompanied by a faint sound of the lips, nodded toward me, whom she believed immersed in sleep, though I was only afloat on the surface, fully conscious. I was so pleased that, for my sake, Papà had to control himself that I kept absolutely still.

In a low voice my father complained, "I think I'm going mad. I could swear that, not thirty minutes ago, I left half a cigar on that cupboard, and now I can't find it. I'm getting worse. I'm losing track of things."

Also in a low voice, yet betraying an amusement restrained only by her fear of waking me, my mother replied, "But no one's been in that room since dinner."

My father murmured, "I know that, too, and that's why I feel I'm going mad!"

He turned and went out.

I half opened my eyes and looked at my mother. She had resumed her work, but was still smiling. Surely she didn't think my father was about to go mad, if she could smile at his fears like that. Her smile was so imprinted on my mind that I recalled it immediately one day when I saw it on the lips of my wife.

Later, it wasn't lack of money that made it difficult for me to satisfy my craving, but prohibitions that helped stimulate it.

I remember I smoked a great deal, hiding in every possible corner. Because of the strong physical disgust that ensued, I recall once staying a full half hour in a dark cellar, together with two other boys of whom I remember nothing but their childish clothing. Two pairs of short socks that stand erect because there were then bodies inside them, which time has erased. They had many cigarettes, and we wanted to see who could consume the most in the shortest time. I won, and heroically I concealed the sickness produced by this strange exploit. Then we came out into the sun and air. Dazed, I had to close my eyes to keep from falling. I recovered, and boasted of my victory. One of the two little men said to me: "I don't care about losing: I smoke only when I need to."

I remember the healthy words but not the little face, also surely healthy, which he must have turned toward me at that moment.

At that time I didn't know whether I loved or hated cigarettes, their taste, the condition nicotine created in me. But when I came to realize that I hated all of those, it was worse. And I had this realization at the age of about twenty. Then for some weeks I suffered from a violent sore throat accompanied by fever. The doctor prescribed bed rest and absolute abstention from smoking. I remember that word, *absolute!* It wounded me, and my fever colored it. A great void, and nothing to help me resist the enormous pressure immediately produced around a void.

When the doctor left me, my father (my mother had been dead for many years), his cigar clenched firmly between his teeth, remained a little longer to keep me company. As he went out, after gently running his hand over my blazing brow, he said: "No smoking, eh!"

A huge uneasiness came over me. I thought: "It's bad for me, so I will never smoke again. But first I want to have one last smoke." I lit a cigarette and felt immediately released from the uneasiness, though my fever was perhaps increasing, and at

every puff I felt my tonsils burning as if they had been touched by a red-hot coal. I finished the whole cigarette dutifully, as if fulfilling a vow. And, still suffering horribly, I smoked many others during my illness. My father came and went with his cigar in his mouth, saying: "Bravo! A few more days without smoking and you'll be cured!"

These words alone made me yearn for him to leave, to go out at once, allowing me to rush to my cigarettes. I even pretended to fall asleep, to induce him to leave more quickly.

That illness provoked the second of my troubles: the effort to rid myself of the first. In the end, my days were full of cigarettes and of resolutions to smoke no more; and to make a long story short, from time to time my days are the same now. The whirl of last cigarettes, begun at twenty, continues still. My resolutions are less extreme, and my weakness finds greater indulgence in my elderly soul. When we are old, we smile at life and at everything it contains. I can say also that for some time I have been smoking many cigarettes . . . and they are not the last.

On the flyleaf of a dictionary I find this note of mine, recorded in an elegant, even ornate, hand:

"Today, 2 February 1886, I am transferring from the school of law to the faculty of chemistry. Last cigarette!!"

That was a very important last cigarette. I remember all the hopes that accompanied it. I had become infuriated with canon law, which seemed to me so remote from life, and I was rushing to science, which is life itself, perhaps condensed in a beaker. That last cigarette actually signified my desire for activity (even manual) and for serene thought, sober and solid.

To escape the chain of carbon compounds in which I had no faith, I returned to the law. An error – alas! – also marked by a last cigarette, which I find recorded in a book. This one was also important, and I became resigned yet again to those complications of the mine, the thine, and the theirs, always with the best intentions, finally throwing off the carbon

chains. I had demonstrated scant inclination for chemistry, thanks in part to my lack of manual dexterity. How could I possibly have been dextrous, when I continued smoking like a Turk?

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? Who knows? If I had stopped smoking, would I have become the strong, ideal man I expected to be? Perhaps it was this suspicion that bound me to my habit, for it is comfortable to live in the belief that you are great, though your greatness is latent. I venture this hypothesis to explain my youthful weakness, but without any firm conviction. Now that I am old and no one demands anything of me, I still pass from cigarette to resolve, and from resolve to cigarette. What do those resolutions mean today? Like that old doctor described by Goldoni,* can I expect to die healthy, having lived with illness all my life?

Once, as a student, when I changed lodgings, I had to have my old room repapered at my own expense, because I had covered the walls with dates. Probably I left that room precisely because it had become the graveyard of my good intentions and I believed it no longer possible to conceive any further such intentions in that tomb of so many old ones.

I believe the taste of a cigarette is more intense when it's your last. The others, too, have a special taste of their own, but less intense. The last one gains flavor from the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of an imminent future of strength and health. The others have their importance because, in lighting them, you are proclaiming your freedom, while the future of strength and health remains, only moving off a bit.

*Carlo Goldoni (1707–93), Venetian playwright. This prolific writer of comedies of Venetian life (as well as libretti, memoirs, and other works) has remained in the repertoire, not only in Italy.

The dates on the walls of my room were written in the most varied colors, even painted in oil. The resolution, reaffirmed with the most ingenuous good faith, found suitable expression in the strength of the color, which was to make the previous vow look pale. Certain dates were favorites of mine because of the harmony of the numbers. From the last century I remember one date that I felt should seal forever the coffin in which I wanted to bury my habit: "Ninth day of the ninth month of 1899." Significant, isn't it? The new century brought me dates of quite a different musicality: "First day of the first month of 1901." Today I still believe that if that date could be repeated, I would be able to begin a new life.

But the calendar is never lacking for dates, and with a little imagination any one of them can be found suitable for a good resolution. I remember the following, because it seemed to contain a supreme categorical imperative for me: "Third day of the sixth month of 1912, 2400 hours." It sounds as if each number were doubling the stakes.

The year 1913 gave me a moment's pause. There was no thirteenth month, to harmonize with the year. But you must not think so many harmonies are required for a date to lend significance to a last cigarette. Many dates that I find written down in volumes or in favorite notebooks stand out because of their dissonance. For example, the third day of the second month of 1905, at six o'clock! It has a rhythm of its own, when you think about it, because each number contradicts its predecessor. Many events, indeed all, from the death of Pius IX to the birth of my son, seemed to me worthy of being celebrated by the usual ironclad vow. All of my family are amazed at my memory for our anniversaries, sad and happy, and they believe me so considerate!

To reduce its outlandish appearance, I even tried to give a philosophical content to the last-cigarette disease. Striking a beautiful attitude, one says: "Never again." But what becomes of that attitude if the promise is then kept? It's possible to strike

the attitude only when you are obliged to renew the vow. And besides, for me, time is not that inconceivable thing that never stops. For me, and only for me, it retraces its steps.

*

Disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction. Of the disease I had at twenty, I would remember very little if I hadn't had it described for me at that time by the doctor. It's odd how you remember spoken words better than emotions, which cannot stir the air.

I went to that doctor because I had been told he cured nervous disorders with electricity. I thought that electricity could endow me with the strength necessary to give up smoking.

The doctor had a big belly, and his asthmatic breathing accompanied the clicking of the electric mechanism he employed immediately, at the first session: a disappointment, because I had expected that the doctor would study me and discover the poison polluting my blood. On the contrary, he pronounced my constitution healthy, and when I complained of difficulty in digesting and sleeping, he opined that my stomach lacked acids and that my peristaltic action (he used that adjective so many times that I have never forgotten it) was rather sluggish. He administered also a certain acid that ruined me; ever since then, I have suffered from excess acidity.

When I realized that on his own he would never arrive at discovering the nicotine in my blood, I decided to help him, expressing the suspicion that my illness could be attributed to this cause. With some effort he shrugged his heavy shoulders: "Peristaltic action . . . acid. Nicotine has nothing to do with it!"

Seventy applications of electricity followed, and they would continue to this day if I hadn't decided seventy were enough. Expecting no miracles, I still hurried to those sessions in the hope of persuading the doctor to forbid me to smoke.

I wonder how things would have turned out if my resolve had been strengthened then by such a prohibition.

And here is the description of my illness that I gave the doctor: "I'm unable to study, and even on the rare occasions when I go to bed early, I remain awake until the small hours strike. So I vacillate between law and chemistry because both these disciplines involve work that begins at a set time, whereas I never know at what hour I may get up."

"Electricity cures any form of insomnia," my Aesculapius averred, his eyes always on the dial rather than on the patient.

I went so far as to talk with him as if he were equipped to understand psychoanalysis, into which, timidly and precociously, I had ventured. I told him of my unhappiness with women. One wasn't enough for me, nor were many. I desired them all! In the street my agitation was immense; as women went by, they were all mine. I looked them up and down, insolently, out of a need to feel myself brutal. In my mind I undressed them, leaving only their boots on, I took them into my arms, and I let them go only when I was quite certain that I had known every part of them.

Sincerity and breath wasted! The doctor was gasping: "I certainly hope the electrical treatments will not cure you of that illness. The very idea! I would never touch a Ruhmkorff* again if I had reason to fear such an effect."

He told me an anecdote that he considered delightful. A man suffering from my same illness went to a famous doctor, begging to be cured, and the doctor, after succeeding perfectly, had to leave the country because otherwise his former patient would have had his scalp.

"My agitation isn't the good kind!" I cried. "It comes from the poison that surges through my veins."

*Heinrich Daniel Ruhmkorff (1803–77), inventor of an electrical device, a "coil," popular around the end of the nineteenth century.

With a heartbroken expression, the doctor murmured: "Nobody is ever content with his lot."

And to convince him, I did what he was unwilling to do, and I examined my disease, reviewing all its symptoms. "My distraction! It also prevents my studying. I was in Graz preparing for the first state examinations, and I made a careful list of all the texts I would require until the last examination was over. Then, as it turned out, a few days before the examination I realized I had studied subjects I would need only several years later. So I had to postpone the exam. True, I had studied even those other things only scantily, thanks to a young woman in the neighborhood who, for that matter, conceded me little beyond some brazen flirtation. When she was at her window, I could no longer keep my eyes on the textbook. Isn't a man who behaves like that an imbecile? I remember the little, white face of the girl at the window: oval, framed by fluffy, tawny curls. I looked at her and dreamed of pressing that whiteness and that russet gold against my pillow."

Aesculapius murmured, "Flirtation always has something good about it. When you're my age, you won't flirt anymore."

Today I am certain that he knew absolutely nothing about flirtation. I am fifty-seven, and I'm sure that if I don't stop smoking or if psychoanalysis doesn't cure me, my last glance from my deathbed will express my desire for my nurse, provided she is not my wife and provided my wife has allowed the nurse to be beautiful!

I spoke sincerely, as in Confession: a woman never appeals to me as a whole, but rather . . . in pieces! In all women I loved feet, if well shod: in many others, a slender neck but also a thick one, and the bosom, if not too heavy. I went on listing female anatomical parts, but the doctor interrupted me.

"These parts add up to a whole woman."

I then uttered an important statement: "Healthy love is the love that embraces a single, whole woman, including her character and her intelligence."

At that time I surely hadn't yet known such a love; and when I did encounter it, it was unable to give me health; but it's important for me to remember that I identified disease where a man of science found health, and that later my diagnosis proved true.

In a friend who was not a physician I then found the person who best understood me and my disease. I derived no great advantage from this association, but in my life it struck a new note that still echoes.

This friend was a gentleman of means who enriched his leisure with study and literary projects. He talked much better than he wrote, and therefore the world was never to know what a fine man of letters he was. He was big and heavyset, and when I met him he was undergoing a strenuous cure to lose weight. In a few days he had achieved a considerable result, so that in the street everyone came up to him, hoping to enhance their own feeling of health, in contrast to his obvious illness. I envied him because he was capable of doing what he wanted, and I remained close to him for the duration of his cure. He allowed me to touch his belly, which shrank every day, and, in my malevolent envy, wanting to sap his determination, I would say to him: "When your cure's over, what's going to happen to all this skin?"

With great calm, which made his emaciated face comical, he replied: "In two days' time, massage therapy begins."

His cure had been planned in every detail, and he would certainly respect every date.

I developed a great faith in his wisdom, and I described my disease to him. I remember this description, too. I explained to him that I thought it would be easier to renounce eating three times a day than to give up smoking my countless cigarettes, which would require repeating the same wearisome decision every moment. Having such a decision on your mind leaves no time for anything else; only Julius Caesar was able to do several things at the same moment. True, I am not asked to

work, not while my accountant Olivi is alive, but why is a person like me unable to do anything in this world except dream or scratch at the violin, for which he possesses no talent?

The thinned fat man did not reply at once. He was methodical, and he first pondered for a long time. Then, with a learned mien that was rightfully his, given his great superiority in the field, he explained to me that my real disease lay not in the cigarette but in the decision-making. I should try giving up the habit without any resolutions or decisions. In me – he felt – over the course of the years two persons had come into being, one of whom commanded, while the other was merely a slave who, the moment surveillance weakened, flouted his master's will out of a love of freedom. This slave was therefore to be granted absolute freedom, and at the same time I should look my habit squarely in the face, as if it were new and I had never seen it before. It should not be fought, but neglected and forgotten in a certain way; abandoning it, I should turn my back on it nonchalantly, as on a companion now recognized as unworthy of me. Quite simple, really.

In fact, it did seem simple to me. It's true, moreover, that having then succeeded with great effort in dispelling all decisiveness from my spirit, I succeeded in not smoking for several hours, but when my mouth was cleansed and I felt an innocent taste such as a newborn infant must know, and a desire for a cigarette came over me, and when I smoked it I felt a remorse for which I renewed the decision I had tried to abolish. It was a longer way round, but it arrived at the same place.

One day that scoundrel Olivi gave me an idea: I would strengthen my resolve by making a bet.

I believe Olivi has always looked the way I see him today. I have always seen him a bit stooped but solid, and to me he has always appeared old, as I see him now, at eighty. He has worked for me and still works for me, but I don't love him,

because in my view he has prevented me from doing the work that he does.

We made a bet! The first one of us who smoked would pay, and then each would regain his own freedom. So the accountant, who had been imposed on me to keep me from squandering my father's legacy, tried to diminish my mother's, which I controlled freely on my own!

The bet proved extremely pernicious. I was no longer occasionally the master, but only a slave, the slave of that Olivi, whom I didn't love! I smoked immediately. Then I thought to defraud him by continuing to smoke in secret. But, in that case, why should I have made the bet? To smoke a last cigarette, I hastily sought a date that might have some attractive tie with the date of the bet, which I could somehow imagine had also been recorded by Olivi himself. But the rebellion continued and I smoked so much I became short of breath. To free myself of this burden, I went to Olivi and confessed.

The old man, smiling, collected the money and immediately took from his pocket a thick cigar, which he lighted and smoked with great gusto. I had no doubt that he had observed the conditions of the bet. Obviously, other men are made differently from me.

Just after my son's third birthday, my wife had a fine idea. She suggested I have myself confined for a while in a clinic, to rid myself of the habit. I agreed at once, first of all because when my son reached an age at which he would be able to judge me, I wanted him to find me stable and tranquil, and also for the more urgent reason that Olivi was ill and threatening to abandon me, hence I might be forced to take his place at any moment, and I considered myself ill-suited for such great activity with all that nicotine inside me.

At first we thought of going to Switzerland, the traditional land of clinics, but then we learned that in Trieste a certain Dr. Muli had opened an establishment. I sent my wife to see

him, and he offered to reserve for me a locked apartment where I would be guarded by a nurse, assisted also by other staff. As my wife told me about it, she smiled and even laughed out loud, amused at the idea of having me locked up, and I laughed heartily along with her. This was the first time she had participated in my attempts at treatment. Until now she had never taken my disease seriously, and she used to say that smoking was only a somewhat odd and not entirely boring way of life. I believe that after marrying me, she had been pleasantly surprised at never hearing me express any nostalgia for my freedom; I was too busy missing other things.

We went to the clinic on the same day Olivi told me that nothing could persuade him to stay on with me beyond the following month. At home, we prepared some fresh linen in a trunk, and that same evening we went to Dr. Muli's.

He welcomed us at the door, in person. At that time Dr. Muli was a handsome young man. It was midsummer; small, nervy, his lively, shining black eyes even more prominent in his sun-burnished face, he was the picture of elegance in his white suit, trim from his collar to his shoes. He roused my wonder, but obviously I was also the object of his.

A bit embarrassed, understanding the reason for his wonder, I said: "Of course. You don't believe in the necessity of the treatment, or in my seriousness in undertaking it."

With a slight smile, which somehow hurt me, the doctor replied: "Why not? It may be true that cigarettes are more harmful to you than we doctors admit. Only I don't understand why, instead of giving up smoking *ex abrupto*, you haven't decided simply to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke. Smoking is all right, provided you don't overdo it."

To tell the truth, in my desire to stop smoking altogether, I had never even considered the possibility of smoking less. But this advice, arriving now, could only weaken my resolve. I spoke firmly: "Since it's been decided, let me give this cure a try."

“Try?” The doctor laughed with a superior manner. “Once you undertake it, the cure must succeed. Unless you employ brute force to overpower poor Giovanna, you will be unable to leave here. The formalities to release you would take so long that in the meantime you would forget your addiction.”

We were in the apartment reserved for me, which we had reached by returning to the ground floor, after having climbed up to the third.

“You see? That barred door prevents any communication with the other part of the ground floor, where the exit is located. Not even Giovanna has the keys. To go outside, she also has to climb to the third floor, and only she has the keys to the door that was opened for us on that landing. In any case, there are always guards on the third floor. Not bad, eh? In a clinic originally designed for babies and expectant mothers?”

And he started laughing, perhaps at the thought of having shut me up among the babies.

He called Giovanna and introduced me. She was a tiny little woman of indeterminate age: anywhere between forty and sixty. She had small eyes, intensely aglow, and a cap of very gray hair.

The doctor said to her: “With this gentleman you must be ready to use your fists.”

She looked at me, studying me, turned bright red, and shouted in a shrill voice, “I will do my duty, but I certainly can’t fight with you. If you threaten me, I’ll call the orderly, a strong man, and if he doesn’t come at once, I’ll let you go where you like, because I certainly don’t want to risk my neck.”

I learned later that the doctor had given her this assignment with the promise of a fairly generous bonus, which had only increased her fright. At that moment her words irked me – fine position I had put myself in, and of my own free will!

“Neck, indeed!” I cried. “Who’s going to touch your neck?”