

Report by Kathleen Sunshine, Professor of Communications, Ramapo College of New Jersey on Professor Margaret Brose's presentation. "Italia Irredenta/Italy Unredeemed: On Being Jewish in Trieste the Work of Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba"

Initially, Professor Brose approached the writers Svevo and Saba obliquely by placing them in their geographical contexts. She regards the personal internal conflicts characteristic of these two renowned Jewish writers as reflective of the generally conflicted nature of the Jewish experience in Ferrara and Trieste, and thus began her discussion with "the tale of two cities. She noted that the Jewish writers of these two cities suffered from the "isolation of assimilation," a problem stemming from the fact that in both places, to varying degrees at varying times, the Jewish community was allowed to assimilate professionally and economically into the general population. At the same time, Jews remained apart as practitioners of their religion, always suffering personally and, as a community, from being the "other" in the midst of a larger population to which they both did not belong.

In Ferrara, the home of the Finzi-Continis, the status of the Jewish community fluctuated from ghettoization to liberal assimilation to re-ghettoization to power and assimilation to betrayal by racial laws and deportation. The internal conflict was most acute during the period of the Estes family domination, during which assimilation was the greatest; therefore the subsequent dramatic changes in position and status were experienced as even more of a tragic betrayal.

The situation in Trieste was most profoundly affected by the shift in government from Austro-Hungarian domination to Italian. The population in Trieste was polyglot, marked by religious schisms, with Christians and Jews in opposition with subsequent betrayals. Under the reign of Maria Theresa, and through the reign of Joseph II (1782), marked by the issuance of the Edict of Tolerance, Jews became increasingly significant forces in the banking industry and in commerce generally. In 1783, the segregated primary schools were opened, followed in 1784 by the opening of the ghetto gates. During the nineteenth century, Jewish significance in banking, commerce and insurance grew, in this important junction point between eastern and western Europe. There were 6000 Jews in 1910, fully assimilated, both economically and politically. But in 1938, the racial laws introduced basic prohibitions which destroyed all vestiges of their previous status. In '42 the temple was desecrated, and in '43-44, Jews were rounded up and deported. Now there are approximately 700 Jews remaining in Trieste.

The writings of both Svevo and Saba reveal the impact of the divided consciousness, internal confusion resulting from this oscillation and resulting chaos in the Jewish communities in these two cities. Maturing during periods of Jewish assimilation, both writers were not so much concerned with their Jewishness as they were with their identities within a more global context. Moreover, both reveal the strong influence of and interest in Freud and the concept of the analytic process itself. Their works also share an emphasis on self-portrayal as alienated, internally divided, and therefore paralyzed by personal "analytic-ness."

Svevo, born Aaron Schmitz in 1861, glorifies the anti-hero and his inability to act, paralyzed by the very act of thought itself. He produced novels, plays, and short stories. Married to his cousin, he suffered greatly due to the sickness of his son and converted to Catholicism. Product of a German Jewish mother and an Italian Jewish father, he went to Jewish school and between 12 and 17, was sent to Germany. He was quadrilingual, and although he studied extensively in university, he never completed his degree. He was influenced by French writers, particularly by “Bovarisme” in 1902, and Jules Gauthier’s notion that the self could be conceived through literary form, i.e. via romantic dreams of romantic lives, living in fantasy.

His central character reveals the influence of Joyce, Flaubert, and especially Freud. The interest in the paralyzed state is most evident in his novel, “Senility,” in which the central character, overly analytic and doomed to obsessiveness, finds that his very analysis of the parts of any issue prevents any possibility of an ultimate synthesis of thoughts. Svevo’s central character seems never to progress in time since the chapters constitute repetitive layered analyses of the same time period; they thus become a metaphor for the lack of progress- getting nowhere and thus presented as a demonstration of the failure of psychoanalysis. This character thus reveals particularly the influence of Freud on Svevo, as well as Joyce and Flaubert.

Generally, Freud was perhaps the greatest influence on Svevo, as well as Saba. He found a new framework with psychoanalysis and was interested in Freud’s theories of the subconscious, which informed his writing. He studied at Berlitz and with Joyce, in 1916, and though “Senility “ was self published to no acclaim in 1898, Joyce encouraged him to publish it in Paris, where it was well received, and then in Italian.

Svevo provoked the ire of the government with his overtly anti-Austrian novels dealing with characters universally inept, senile, trapped by money as a replacement for cultural values. Zeno, his central figure, is the model of the overanalytic man, paralyzed by thought and rendered impotent by his obsessiveness. Zeno is a businessman who goes through life dominated in every aspect by repetitiveness and compulsiveness. He seems to be moving through time but all chapters cover the same period. Each reveals him as paralyzed and ill. The illness has its own motion. His focus on sickness removes him from the normal movement of time and keeps him trapped in the perpetual present. Each chapter repeats the pattern of illness and inability to go forward. He tells the story of his psychoanalysis but fails at it. He keeps track of his “moral” pains, acting as a walking “moral scoreboard,” doing as he wants and then paying for it. He pays for his adultery, for example, by a physical ailment which leaves him limping through an endless series of urinalyses and electroshock treatments.

Svevo’s narrators are unreliable, unable to differentiate between truth and falsehood. Every written confession is a lie. The leitmotif of sickness versus health also becomes a metaphor for immorality versus morality: the sick/immoral functions outside of time while the moral/healthy functions in the present, a situation perpetually confronting the central figure who considers himself as perpetually “sick” and outside of time because of his moral degeneracy

The section entitled “Smoking” provides an illustration of this moral scoreboard and its impact on the control of time by virtue of his behavioral and therefore “moral” oscillation. Perhaps related to early experiences with both his oedipal connection with his mother and his subsequent conflict with his father, Svevo’s character repeatedly “stops” smoking; each time time he has a “last cigarette,” he has yet another opportunity to sin by relapsing and then once more exonerating himself yet again. Thus he controls the movement of time by an endless succession of “last cigarettes”- more lapses, exonerations and relapses which forestall any progression forward in time. De facto, he creates his own internal conflict and then suffers the subsequent paralysis through oscillation. His repetitiveness is as funny as it is awful.

Svevo’s “Hero” also controls time by “alphabetization” and is constantly trying to maintain a balance of pleasure and reality, punishment versus purification. His perpetual overanalysis continues to paralyze: awareness of the 54 muscular contractions which comprise a single step prevents him from walking. Overanalysis produces stasis.

In the end, however, he becomes “healthy”, acts more in time, functions as a successful businessman within the bourgeois Trieste world, perhaps as a result of the impact of WW I, separation from life and family. He can now act, cured and healthy,, healed by business. In relation to his literary context, Svevo perhaps demonstrates how all avant garde movements deconstruct surfaces. He is connected to literary modernism, to Woolf’s concept of time,, to Bergson’s artistic sensibilities and philosophical theories of time. He relates also to proto post-modernism, through his focus on the impossibility of the narrative and the disintegration of all movements. He struggles against the idea of determinism, considering sickness as compartmentalism. He considers man’s conquest of nature as leading to man’s dysfunction. Conflict is more interesting for him. Critics have speculated that Joyce’s character, Leopold Bloom, is based on Svevo himself.

Generally, Svevo is not a particularly Jewish writer. He writes outside of the Jewish and Catholic matrices, and his inner dividedness and turmoil is what connects him to the Jewish experience in the Italy of his time. It is the same fundamental internal division that links him with the poet Umberto Saba, who was born in Trieste in 1883.

Svevo’s contemporary, Saba, born Umberto Poli, also perceives himself as a secular Italian. He reveals a similar dividedness; son of a Jewish mother and an Aryan father, he was an auto-didact. Like Svevo, he focuses on self-humiliation and reveals the same structural obsession. He also enjoys illness, lives life as a marginal creature, also a failure of Freudian analysis. He seeks oblivion and even self-objectifies: obliterates himself by referring to himself in the third person. He considers illness the mark of his generation, the dark heart of Jewishness, self-fashioning with results identical to Svevo’s: the same structure, sense of obsession, marginality, isolation, exile and division of self.

His parents separated, father Catholic and mother Jewish. Thus he was fundamentally divided, Jewish versus Aryan, narcissistic, fundamentally vagabond. His mother was in the Trieste ghetto and he was raised by his wet nurse, whom he loved dearly. His Jewishness caused an internal schism, required clandestine meetings. He was fundamentally an “auto-didact,” reading on his own, studying major classics in his own

way(familiar with all poetry in *Il Canzonieri*), a clerk and businessman not a product of formal didacticism.

Saba's poetry is consciously anachronistic. Unrelated to contemporary literary movements, his words are drawn from classics and then violated and used differently. He reveals a desire for self-humiliation, and like Svevo, enjoyed being ill, the mark of his generation, the dark heart of Jewishness, self-fashioning with identical results, the same structure, same sense of obsessiveness. His work is marked by his marginality, isolation, exile, and division of self.

In 1902, Saba married a seamstress and published his first book, then ran a bookstore, and in 1920, was unrecognized, the confused Jewish son of a Christian. In '29 he began analysis and Freud helped with his affective ambivalence, though he remained compulsively autobiographical. In 1930, he enjoyed a poetic rebirth. He later writes about himself in the third person as Giuseppe Canamondrei, and in 1957, he and his wife died, claiming he never wanted laurels, only oblivion.

Saba's perception of the poet reflects his alienation; for him, the poet becomes a child, watching and listening rather than participating. His force is in inaction, marked by an instinctual love of the earth- a Franciscan love of human and animal communication, creativity, sense of connection, a "canticle of creatures- a Franciscan prayer for the humble things of the earth. Despite the possible banality of his lexicon, Saba declared that he loved trite words. His world view led him to exult in the utility and simplicity of creatures.

The poem, "The Goat", reveals these characteristics, perhaps initially by its shocking subject matter. He read the classics, but as here in this poem, he decontextualizes their language. Saba takes pleasure in answering the bleating of his female goat, a goat looking more semitic than a sheep, perhaps a scapegoat, or representative of the animal most commonly sacrificed. Phonosymbolically, he enters a conversation with her, creating a structure reminiscent of a sonnet. He sets a scene, internalizing the universality of experience, merging with the pain of the goat, converting their bond into communal suffering. In "The Sapling," Saba uses the simple natural imagery to bemoan the loss of promise and future hopes.

Professor Russell Valentino commented on the possible influence on both writers of the Slavic literary tradition, in which Trieste writers were likely to have been immersed because of their proximity to the Slavic culture of the east. He noted the wave of Russian writers translated in the 1920's, writers who also were very interested in issues of consciousness and unconsciousness- writers such as Kafka and Dostoevsky, in "Notes from Underground" He further observed that Trieste grew in population and importance as the Jews grew in political and economic influence. He also noted that the city was small in 1700 and by the end of the 19th Century, had grown to 200,000.