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## **Zeno's thingness: on fetishism and bodies in Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno***

Paolo Bartoloni

### **Introduction**

The immediate reference in the title of this essay on Svevo's modernist masterpiece *La coscienza di Zeno*,<sup>i</sup> 'Zeno's Thingness', is, of course, to the inherent thing-like characteristic of the leading character, Zeno Cosini,<sup>ii</sup> whose very surname alludes to the inorganic world, to the sphere, that is, which seems to lack the specificity of a signifying construct and the self-reflexivity of humans. In Italian 'una cosa' or 'un coso' refers to a generic entity without significance, usually – but not exclusively – an object. 'Una cosa' is a universal term to signify something that either does not have a proper word, or something for which the proper word has been momentarily forgotten: 'mi passi quella cosa per favore'; 'che bella cosa!'. 'Un coso' is understood as a disparaging term, indicating lack of character and passivity, which is not without analogies to the inanimate world. 'Cosa' and 'coso' are inextricably connected since they both indicate and are used to mark a separation between ontology and epistemology, or that which exists (ontology), and that which provides knowledge about existence (epistemology).<sup>iii</sup> While epistemology is preoccupied with knowing the object in relation to a subject, initiating therefore a process of understanding according to a series of parameters, be they philosophical or scientific, ontology is concerned with the nature and the essence of the origin, and life as such. In the history of Western philosophy epistemology seems to be the privileged category of analysis, especially if one accepts the philosophical positions of Nietzsche and Heidegger according to whom the grave fault of metaphysical thought is precisely that of having

forgotten the essence of being by foregrounding epistemological imperatives based on the opposition between subject and object.<sup>iv</sup> The philosophical watershed represented by the philosophy of Descartes propelled to the centre of attention the *ego*, that is the human faculty to study the object of knowledge according to a rigorously scientific and rational approach. In so doing, philosophy from Descartes onwards placed a great emphasis on the subject and the methods it adopts to make sense of the world. This emphasis, some would claim, has inevitably pushed to the margins the suchness of the object, relegating it to a secondary level of inquiry. The result of the Cartesian turn is that ontology, and therefore ‘la cosa’ (the thing) of life becomes blurred, and is either considered too vague and speculative in the realm of rational epistemology, or celebrated as the pinnacle of the sublime, the mysterious and the magic in that of the arts and hermeneutics.

However, the mere fact of existing is not simply a negative tag characterizing a natural state of being as opposed to the active process of knowledge-making, which traditionally has been assigned to humans. The polarization of nature and culture is a strong Western opposition, which incidentally is also at the heart of Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno*, especially when pairing the educated, knowledgeable, yet allegedly passive and inert Zeno (culture), and the strong, ignorant and active Giovanni Malfenti (nature).<sup>v</sup> But paradoxically, in Svevo the search for knowledge – ‘la coscienza’ of being a human in the midst of an ever more complicated and complex universe – is perceived as weakness in relation to the natural agonistic will to power. Therefore ‘Coso’ in Svevo may induce some to equate it with the meditating yet irresolute character so typical of modern anti-heroes; those characters who, according to Debenedetti, are destined to interrogate life since modernity is the very cipher of suspicion and skepticism.<sup>vi</sup> Assuming that this is correct, epistemology

in *La coscienza* is then a curse that will eventually lead humans to annihilation and ruin, as alluded to in the last and ambiguous page of the novel. But, of course, this is a facile opposition, hiding complex and intractable concerns in which the difference between ontology and epistemology becomes blurred and even confused. To complicate the matter further, the humans that decree the end of the world in *La coscienza* are more akin to active scientists than passive *flâneurs*. By the same token, the intense and obsessive questioning that characterizes Zeno – and that appears to also denaturize humans by turning them into quasi-robotic entities (‘cose’) – leads him to reclaim the quintessential significance of natural life and evolution, ‘la cosa’. It appears that Zeno is illustrating two diametrically opposed conditions simultaneously; on the one hand he is saying that thinking and knowledge weaken individuals by moving them away from a natural evolution - they generate ‘ordigni’, and these ordigni are gradually separated from the body to the extent that the human body is forgotten, degenerating and becoming ill – and on the other he claims that these very humans plunged into thinking and knowledge will end up by regenerating life. If thinking and knowledge will destroy life through technologization, they will also save life. The ambiguity, indeed the indistinction, between ontology and epistemology in *La coscienza* is further testified to by Zeno’s apparent commercial success and finally achieved (or at least claimed) health at the end of the novel. But while Zeno might feel cured, deep down he knows that he inevitably and *naturally* belongs to that species which instead of evolving naturally transforms itself technologically through the aids of prosthetic gadgets and extensions. This, according to Zeno, is the great illness of human beings; an illness that cannot be cured, and that gradually turns humans from natural beings into ‘cose’; in other words, into semi-inorganic things, whose only hope is to arrive at communal suicide. It is at the indistinguishable

threshold of ontology and epistemology, which is also the zone in between ‘una cosa’ (the undefined, the generic, the unimportant) e ‘la cosa’ (the prominent, the mystery, the secret, the sublime) that Svevo’s narrative lingers. It is in this sense that thingness in the context of this essay also refers to ‘la cosa’, which, as opposed to ‘una cosa’, has far-reaching ontological implications; it is indeed the centre of a philosophical and literary debate that has preoccupied Western thought from its inception (Plato’s archetypes) to the twentieth century (Lacan’s notion of the real). While the surname Cosini is closer to the diminutive ‘coso’, and as such more akin to an indeterminate object – let us also remember that in *Senilità* Balli refers to his friend Emilio Brentani with the epithet ‘quel coso lì’<sup>vii</sup> the very thingness of *La coscienza di Zeno* has strong psychoanalytic overtones, which are more akin to that compulsory drive marking the notion of ‘la cosa or, in Lacanian terminology, ‘das Ding’.

My intention in this essay is to argue that Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno* is a book about thingness, and yet this thingness assumes different tonalities and meanings, which are at time compatible and at times divergent, structuring the whole book according to semantic levels that although related can also be read separately. The thing in Svevo’s novel is of three kinds: 1) the female body; 2) Zeno’s own body; 3) the body of language. These three things as object of desire (female body), of knowledge (Zeno’s own body), and of indistinction (language as thing) criss-cross Svevo’s novel and lend it its famous ambiguity and complexity. What I propose to do in this essay is twofold; first I wish to provide a definition of thingness as a way of establishing the theoretical framework, second I will employ this framework to read selected passages of Svevo’s novel.

## **The Thing**

The thing invokes at one and the same time that which is eminently specific, ‘the thing of thought’ for instance, and that which is most indeterminate, ‘a thing’.<sup>viii</sup> As we have seen, Svevo was fond of the term thing. Let’s take a few samples from another of his writings, that wonderful short story full of things which goes by the title of ‘Una burla riuscita’: ‘E il riso anch’esso è una cosa sana e non cattiva’;<sup>ix</sup> ‘Desiderava addirittura di baciare le cose di cui scriveva’;<sup>x</sup> ‘Un romanzo ch’egli aveva pubblicato quarant’anni prima si sarebbe potuto considerare morto, se a questo mondo sapessero morire anche le cose che non furono mai vive.’<sup>xi</sup>

‘Thing’ is simultaneously a word that can evoke fullness and emptiness, presence and absence. It is at the same time a concept that has been often employed to draw a separation between the human and the non-human, and people and animals. It is supposed that an animal’s lack of the self-consciousness and subjectivity predicated on the production of discourse reduces it to the sphere of thingness. It follows, therefore, that ‘thing’ is understood, at least conventionally, as that which lacks self-expression, and whose experience, therefore, remains unsayable by the thing itself. Its experience, be it an animal, a plant or a mineral can certainly be represented but only through the mediation of human textuality. If we follow this conceptualization to its logical conclusion, we could state that one of the characteristics typical of the thing is that it does not have language; a language that is capable of symbolic and imaginative production.<sup>xii</sup> If read in this context, Cosini is far from being ‘un coso’ given that his narrative is the emblem of self-discovery and self-reflexivity. And yet this narrative, let us not forget it, is potentially mendacious, and written in a language, standard Italian, that in the hands and mind of Zeno leaves the real self Zeno behind, and constructs and creates a text which ends up living a life of its own, providing an epistemological experience of the potential zone rather than reality. It is in this sense

that Zeno's text is simultaneously 'una cosa' (an indeterminate thing, which is moreover treacherous and misleading) and 'la cosa' (the very passage to a fuller experience of being).

To recapitulate, the thing is external to the person and yet often in relation to it: a tool, a garment, an object, an animal. 'A thing' is ambiguous, while 'the thing' is inherently sublime, resplendent with a sense of mystery and secrecy that cannot be fully comprehended. The thing is available to us as the handiest of words and the least negotiable of concepts; as a word it can be everything and nothing, and as a concept it is the centre of an ontological discourse that still compels and baffles us. The thing is also the word that – more than others – links the abstractness of language with the tangibility of the world, bridging the gap between representation and reality, symbols and images. As such it occupies a threshold, and a space in-between presence and absence, imagination and productivity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the thing and thingness have been at the centre of philosophical and artistic discourse, shaping and informing the work of seminal thinkers. For the purpose of this essay I will focus on that discourse than more than other has important bearings on Svevo's novel, that is the ways in which psychoanalysis has investigated the category of thingness. In this context, I will illustrate Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Freud's analysis of 'the thing'. Lacan conducts this study in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where he zeroes in on 'the thing' (*das Ding*) starting from Freud's writing in the book *Entwurf* (literally 'outline', 'sketch'). The reason I have decided to discuss Lacan's writing rather than Freud's own work is twofold: first because it allows us the temporal perspective and distance to see clearly how the discussion of thingness in psychoanalysis has strong retrospective significance for the interrogation of literary works in general and Svevo's *La coscienza* in particular; second because it is in Lacan

that the thing is unambiguously connected to literary preoccupations which are directly linked to my own reading of Svevo's novel along the lines I described at the beginning of this essay, that is as a book articulated around the principles of desire, knowledge and indistinction. It is by modelling my theoretical hypotheses along Lacan's tripartite distinction that this essay may contribute to reconceptualize Svevo's novel and Zeno's autobiography/story in ways which, although related, move beyond traditional Freudian psychoanalytic categories, including the Oedipus complex.

Lacan writes that the thing is at the centre of the work of art yet external to it;<sup>xiii</sup> it is that which propels art and makes art possible by remaining utterly other from art. Lacan employs the work of the potter as an example to introduce the relation between art and its propulsive cause. The original kernel of the work, that which brought about the becoming of the work itself, remains undisclosed not so much because of a metaphysical secrecy or a linguistic inadequacy to say it, but rather as a consequence of an inherent separateness that cannot be subsumed by the work. Let us take for instance Lacan's famous example of the jug. The modelling of the jug, that is its construction into a form, takes place from nothing, but more importantly retains the nothing from which it is produced by encasing it within itself. The jug as a finished object is empty, and yet it is precisely this emptiness that for Lacan is at the core of the jug's very existence and usefulness in that to be of use the jug must be emptied in order to be filled, emptied and filled again and so on. The jug as object, which is predicated on its ability to be used, is designed on a thing whose centre is a void.<sup>xiv</sup> For Lacan the thing of art is this void, the unsayable which inhabits every act of artistic creation.<sup>xv</sup> As such in Lacan the thing becomes a strong metaphor for the desire to reconnect with the void of the loss, be it God or the mother figure.<sup>xvi</sup> Art becomes, therefore, a process of sublimation, the purpose of which is that of

constructing fetishes and objects through which to contemplate the thing of art or the object of desire. Of course, this is a false hope insofar as the object is a mere simulacrum of the thing, while the thing itself stays invisible yet present.<sup>xvii</sup> It is precisely this invisibility within presence that distinguishes Lacan's discussion of art and the fetish from Plato's famous attack on art as the process of inane repetition and mimesis of reality. While for Plato art reproduces only the external and superficial traits of reality, for Lacan art plunges deep into the core of the real, inside the thing of reality itself that is.<sup>xviii</sup> It follows that if for Plato truth, the real, the origin is forever external to art, for Lacan they are in art yet simultaneously outside it.<sup>xix</sup> Art introduces, therefore, the possibility of satisfying the pleasure principle (*principe du plaisir*) by conjuring up objects that can be constructed as fetishes, the contemplation of which will go some way towards filling the void left by the unsayability and absence of 'the thing' – the desire for the mother for instance. It simultaneously nourishes the reality principle (*principe de réalité*), through a cognitive impulse to present the unrepresentable, and to say what cannot be said. This, as Agamben writes in the *Coming Community*, is the experience of the non-linguistic in language.<sup>xx</sup> It is, in other words, the presence of an extra-linguistic thing, the 'thing as such', which although necessary to the work of art, and in a constant relation to it, is always already external to it. The reality principle, which I have also called the knowledge principle, treats the thing not as object of possession but as the thing of investigation.

At this stage we must emphasise one further passage, which characterizes the work of Lacan. When in *Seminar VII* Lacan attempts to describe the thing he confronts a linguistic problem, in that in French the idea of 'thingness' is somewhat limited by the strictures of the semantic field in which only one word is available for 'thing', *chose*. The same is true for Italian, *cosa*, and English, *thing*. It is different,

though, for German in which the concept of thingness is further distinguished through the use of *das Ding* and *die Sache*. Lacan stresses the difference by claiming that *die Sache* is nothing other than *das Ding* after it has been submitted to the articulation into discourse. *Die Sache*, in other words, is the result of a process of transformation of *das Ding* through the use of language. It is the attempt to represent the thing that turns it into *die Sache*, into an ‘object’, one could say, in which what is left is only an appearance of the thing.<sup>xxi</sup> As the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni once wrote, the thing is destined to disappear in language,<sup>xxii</sup> but not so much as an utter absence as the ‘other-inside’. The distinction between ‘thing’ and ‘object’ is therefore an essential one, denoting a manipulation and a transformation of the thing. It is also essential to stress that this transformation is brought about, at least in Lacan, by language.

By determining the passage from thing to object, language enables the writing or speaking subject to turn the thing into an object of possession, a fetish that can be readily crystallized into gratifying shapes and forms. This does not mean, though, that the thing disappears in language as it turns into the object. The thing remains in language as the utterly other, as the excess that defies representation.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is through this process which is simultaneously of exclusion and inclusion – the thing is excluded by being internalised – that language itself assumes some of the characteristics of the thing, and that, to a certain extent, language becomes itself a thing or, in other words, language as such. The trait of language as such is that of renouncing the traditional communicative role that is conventionally connected to language. This is a language that no longer represents something other from itself and outside itself. It is a language, rather, that continuously turns on itself in self-perpetuating motion, which is marked by infinite deferral and openness.

It is instructive that a novel written between 1919 and 1922 could present in a simultaneous occurrence the thing turned into object (the female body), the thing itself (the dissected body), and language as thing (narrative indistinction).

### **The Pleasure Principle**

Psychoanalysis, and the relationship between Zeno and his parents play a crucial role in Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*.<sup>xxiv</sup> Zeno's mother died when he was in his adolescence ('mia madre era morta quand'io non avevo ancora quindici anni.' CZ, 33), leaving a large gap in the life and imagination of Zeno. His father dies when Zeno is about 30. While the death of the mother is accompanied by the vague proposition to lead a laborious and productive life ('da quel momento doveva iniziarsi per me una vita seria e di lavoro.' CZ, 33), that of his father unhinges Zeno, bringing him to the edge of a physical and psychological breakdown ('la morte di mio padre fu una vera, grande catastrofe. Il paradiso non esisteva più ed io poi, a trent'anni, ero un uomo finito!' CZ, 33) The boy Zeno writes poetry to honour his mother, and aspires to a life of success so that his mother, whom he believes still lives, although far away, can take pride in his successes. The man Zeno knows that his father has gone forever, and that he has been left alone with nobody to please or to rely upon in case of necessity. These two worlds, the world of adolescence and the world of adulthood, are all of a sudden reunited in the experience of total loss and emotional loneliness that engulf Zeno. The rest of Zeno's narrative can be read as his attempt to fill the space left vacant by the disappearance of the mother and the father. The figure of Giovanni Malfenti is clearly and explicitly represented as the surrogate father figure *par excellence*, and his aura of *Pater familias* is so strong and all-encompassing that Giovanni's family, including his four famous daughters, acquires a symbolic value

that will direct and lead Zeno's subsequent actions. Zeno's decision to marry one of the Malfenti's daughters, even before he meets them, is triggered by his firm intention to remain close to Giovanni Malfenti, and his choice of whom among the four girls he should marry is guided by a not too implicit desire to fill the gap left open by the death of his parents. It is no accident, therefore, that both Ada – the woman that Zeno has chosen – and Augusta – the woman that he will end up marrying – have traits that can be linked to the mother and the father figure. It would come natural to equate Augusta with the mother figure, and Ada with the father figure. As for Augusta, let us recall the passage in the chapter 'Il fumo' when Zeno, thinking of his mother's smile, writes: 'Quel sorriso mi rimase tanto impresso che lo ricordai subito ritrovandolo un giorno sulle labbra di mia moglie.' (CZ, 11) Of Ada suffice to quote a telling passage from 'La storia del mio matrimonio': 'Sembra dunque ch'io non abbia subito visto tutta la grazia e tutta la bellezza di Ada e che mi sia invece incantato ad ammirare altre qualità ch'io le attribuii di serietà e anche di energia, insomma, un po' mitigate, le qualità ch'io amavo nel padre.' (CZ, 73) The reality is more complex and ambiguous than what we are led to believe, and especially in relation to Ada, the female character that more than others in *La coscienza* represents at one and the same time the prohibition, the other, but also the centre of Zeno's life and writing. If Ada may be linked to the father figure, she can also be readily connected to the mother figure ('L'adornai, le prestai tutte le tante qualità di cui sentivo il bisogno e che a me mancavano, perché essa doveva divenire oltre che la mia compagna anche la mia seconda madre che m'avrebbe addotto a una vita intera, virile, di lotta e di vittoria.' CZ, 80) Ada is the only individual that, by combining with Augusta, can complete the sense of emptiness left in Zeno by the death of his mother. For Zeno the mother is both comforting, loving and devoted (Augusta) as well as severe, disciplinary, and

firm (Ada); she is both desirable but unattainable (Ada) and forever accessible and available (Augusta). Ada, like the mother, is the prohibited and unreachable object of Zeno's desire, the void that continues to reproduce itself in spite of the character's countless attempts to possess it. And yet the drive that pushes Zeno to marry Ada, similar to his unconscious desire to employ his memoir in order to affect a reunion with the mother and the father, are devices which are destined to fail from the very beginning in so far as it is Zeno himself who intimately and secretly knows that this possession is unachievable. Zeno knows that he will never marry Ada, that he cannot marry her, but it is precisely because of this that he embarks on a determined yet clumsy and slapstick effort to win her over. The act of writing, which Zeno performs consciously, scrupulously and gradually with growing pleasure and satisfaction, will ultimately remind him that what he really wanted from Ada was to confess himself, and clear his bad conscience once and for all, which also means to bring himself face-to-face with the existential void characterized by the absence of the mother figure. It is no accident that the very last words of Zeno's diary in 'Storia di un' associazione commerciale' are thus:

Ada, dalla tolda del piroscrafo, salutava agitando il suo fazzoletto. Poi ci volse le spalle. Certo guardava verso Sant'Anna ove riposava Guido. La sua figurina elegante diveniva più perfetta quanto più si allontanava. Io ebbi gli occhi offuscati dalle lacrime. Ecco ch'essa ci abbandonava e che mai più avrei potuto provarle la mia innocenza. (CZ, 377)

As opposed to Zeno, who remembers everything but understands nothing ('ricordo tutto, ma non intendo niente.' CZ, 33. This key statement is omitted in the English

translation of 2001), Ada sees and understands all ('vedo e intendo tutto' CZ, 373).<sup>xxv</sup> She is the one that Zeno could open himself to, much more and more truthfully than he will ever be able to do in his own writing because she is diametrically opposed to him and yet so close to him. Ada is, in Lacan's word, the centre which remains always already external. Even the confession cannot take place because the thing, Ada, is forever unrepresentable; she is the non-linguistic in language. The only possibility of including her is by writing around and on her, and by continuing this writerly circumnavigation, which in the end will present Ada, as well as the mother figure, as the very excess of writing or as the pieces of a puzzle that will never be completed.

In pieces is also the female thing that turns into object of desire in Zeno's writing. Most of Zeno's erotic images are pieces of body. Of course this is not the dissected body, or the sadistically abused and dismembered body, as for instance one finds in Pasolini's *Salò*. These are, rather, delicate feet wearing dainty shoes, details of parts of the body, segments that come to achieve a quasi inorganic erotic titillation. But let us provide some examples: 'La donna a me non piaceva intera, ma...a pezzi! Di tutte amavo i piedini se ben calzati, di molte il collo esile oppure anche poderoso e il seno lieve, lieve' (CZ, 19); 'La donna vi ebbe un'importanza enorme [in Zeno's life]. Magari a pezzi, i suoi piedini, la sua cintura, la sua bocca, riempiono i miei giorni' (CZ, 396); 'Avevo sempre vivo il desiderio dell'avventura; quell'avventura che cominciava dall'ammirazione di uno stivaletto, di un guanto, di una gonna, di tutto quello che copre e altera la forma' (CZ, 167); 'In quella gabbia non v'era che un solo mobile, una poltrona e su questa sedeva una donna formosa, costruita deliziosamente, vestita di nero, bionda, dagli occhi grandi e azzurri, le mani bianchissime e i piedi piccoli in scarpine laccate delle quali, di sotto alle gonne,

sporgeva solo un lieve bagliore. Devo dire che quella donna mi pareva una cosa sola col suo vestito nero e le sue scarpine di lacca [...] Ed il bambino sognava di possedere quella donna, ma nel modo più strano: Era sicuro cioè di poter mangiarne dei pezzettini al vertice e alla base.’ (CZ, 386)

Let us remember here that Lacan introduces the possibility of thinking the body as the direct interface between humans and the thing when he describes the segmentation of the body through the many different parts and organs that it is made of. This is the experience of the *Entwurf*, the theory of an apparatus of neurons in relation to which the body remains exterior, exactly the same as the world outside (‘Car l’*Entwurf* est la théorie d’un appareil neuronique par rapport auquel l’organisme reste extérieur, tout comme le monde extérieur.’)<sup>xxvi</sup> The conceptualisation of the body as a thing is clearly connected with Lacan’s very definition of the thing as that which is ‘intimately exterior’.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In the passages quoted above from *La Coscienza* it is as if Zeno is cutting out for himself a space in which he can observe the body deprived of its thinking and feeling qualities. This is no longer a body that thinks and feels, but simply an object that can be contemplated and possessed. In Zeno’s erotic dreams the female body has turned into an interesting mixture of inorganic and organic matter, something that can be touched, looked at but also eaten. It is in this sense that what Zeno recounts is not without analogy to Paul Valéry’s concept of the fourth body as described by the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola in his essay ‘Il quarto corpo’.<sup>xxviii</sup> As opposed to the first body, which Valéry equates with the sense of our own presence, the second body, the image that the body reflects on surfaces, or that which is reflected in the photographic and cinematographic arts, the third body, the dissected body, the fourth body is the area of indistinction between the real body and the imagined body. The

fourth body is, as Perniola argues, a conceptual construct which has the capacity to re-connect the body to the notion of the inorganic in which what counts is not so much the actual body but the dynamics that the actual body enacts with what covers it. The desire that this indistinction evokes is not only that of unveiling the body but also that of experiencing the body as fabric, leather, silk and wool in an interaction where the separation between object and person, commodities and life is blurred.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **The Knowledge Principle**

As the title claims, *La coscienza di Zeno* is a book about self-discovery (and/or self-deception), and self-reflexion; a writing exercise that the leading character Zeno Cosini conducts on the advice of his soon-to-be psychoanalyst, the famous – or infamous according to points of view – Dr S. Dr S. cannot start the treatment immediately since he has to leave Trieste for a period of time. In order not to waste precious time, he suggests that his patient, Zeno, prepares himself for the psychoanalytic treatment by writing a diary of his life, starting from the very beginning. Zeno had approached Dr S. because of his perceived illness and the supposedly incurable obsession with smoking. In other words, Zeno wants to give up smoking but in spite of his many and reiterated attempts he has failed so far. As Zeno himself writes in his diary: ‘Solo noi malati sappiamo qualcosa di noi stessi.’ (CZ, 157) Illness is an access to knowledge or rather, the entrance into a journey of self-discovery.<sup>xxx</sup> It is Zeno’s supposed illness that leads him to psychoanalysis, and it is again his illness, which he will never cure himself of, that will continue to push forward the narrative.

That Zeno is not cured is obviously stated in the last chapter of the novel, ‘Psychoanalysis’. Let us start from the ambiguous yet revealing claim that: ‘La

miglior prova ch'io non ho avuto quella malattia risulta dal fatto che non ne sono guarito' (CZ, 379), which is a beautifully crafted way to say that complete health is far from being an ideal state. This seems to be corroborated by the affirmation made a few pages later that: 'Io amavo la mia malattia.' (CZ, 393) This claim establishes a binding relationship between illness and subjectivity, which in the case of Zeno is also a binding relationship between his body and his mind. It is in this sense that Zeno's treatment of his own body is reminiscent of Valéry's description of the First body, that is the perception that we have of our own corporeal existence. What happens in Zeno, though, is that this body acquires the status of a thing, which living of its own accord, enters into a continuous dynamic interaction with the other in itself, that is Zeno's subjectivity or mind. It is as if Zeno's body is the excess, which although being an integral part of Zeno, is always already external to him. This, which recalling Lacan's thought could be termed as internal externality, is apparent from the outset when Zeno's mind appears to float away from his body: 'Il mio pensiero mi pare isolato da me. Io lo vedo. S'alza, s'abbassa...' (CZ, 6) The ways in which Zeno writes this sentence in the context of his attempts to arrive at the required contemplation to write his diary is comical and successfully ironical. Irony is indeed one of the most significant traits of *La coscienza di Zeno*. But mind you, the body is also the 'spaventosa macchina' (CZ, 35) of which Zeno writes in the second chapter of the novel, 'La morte di mio padre'. The only way to come to terms with this horrific machine is by studying it, that is by keeping it close and yet at a remove, simultaneously near and far.

It is interesting to note here that the body as thing to be studied and dissected not so much in an amateurish exercise in scientific anatomy as in a knowledge-making experience is echoed in one of the great books of contemporary Italian

writing. I'm referring to Valerio Magrelli's *Nel condominio di carne*, in which Magrelli embarks into an investigation of his own body as thing. While it is not my intention to propose here a comparative analysis of Svevo's and Magrelli's writings, I believe that a close investigation of these two writers could offer useful critical insights into a literary tradition preoccupied with the relation writing-body-illness. Both in Svevo and Magrelli the body becomes a *tabula rasa* on which to inscribe the language of the hermeneus, that is the searcher seeking knowledge and understanding. We have already seen the passage in which Zeno relates illness and knowledge ('soltanto noi malati sappiamo qualcosa di noi stessi'). The supplement to this claim is found a few pages before: 'Vi sono delle giornate in cui vivo per la diatesi urica ed altre in cui la diatesi è uccisa, cioè guarita, da un'inflammazione delle vene. Io ho dei cassetti interi di medicinali e sono i soli cassetti miei che tengo io stesso in ordine. Io amo le mie medicine e so che quando ne abbandono una, prima o poi vi ritornerò.' (CZ, 136) Not only do we find here an allusion that might induce the reader to compare medicines and women through the verb 'abbandonare'; we also find Zeno's scrupulous attention to the products that bring him in direct relation with his body. In *Nel condominio di carne* by Magrelli, we find this sentence as an explanatory note to the narrative: 'Io non elencherò tutti i miei mali, peraltro trascurabili, ma solo quelli in cui si distingue meglio la natura metamorfica dell'organismo. [I mali] sono *tableaux vivants* e insieme grafici. Perché l'ho fatto? Per scoprire se per caso sono un mostro molto più complicato e fumigante di Tifone.'<sup>xxxix</sup> One could very well use this argument to explain Zeno's writing, given that up until the end he keeps on asking himself – and his writing – if he is truly a good or a bad person.

### **The thing as such: Language**

The language of Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* is a living thing, quasi-organic matter which pulsates with all the vagaries of a living entity: it is dynamic, assertive, mendacious, hypercorrect, correct and faulty.<sup>xxxii</sup> It is, further, a multifarious thing which continuously bites at itself in view of an internal antagonism which is never resolved. The cohabitation in one single house – as Heidegger would call it –<sup>xxxiii</sup> of Italian, the Triestine dialect and the grammatical and syntactic interferences of German is not, at least on paper, a happy one. Throughout the novel Zeno complains about the shortcomings of this impossible thing that he has, however, chosen to employ and practice. Let us observe Zeno, for instance, when, comparing himself with his friend/enemy Guido, he highlights Guido's perfect command of the Italian language by comparing it with his bastard language: 'Egli parlava il toscano con grande naturalezza mentre io e Ada eravamo condannati al nostro dialettaccio.' (CZ, 106) Zeno's languages are never in harmony, but always divided as they seem to inhabit different spheres of action and purpose to the extent that he often does not know which one to choose: 'Mi preoccupava tuttavia la quistione se in un'occasione simile avrei dovuto parlare in lingua o in dialetto.' (CZ, 94)

This irreconcilability generates the strange and amorphous linguistic amoeba that is Zeno's language. Like Zeno this is an open language, and yet precisely because of this, this language is alive and defies the strictures, the automatisms and the rigid rules of national languages. Rather than a language in-place – that is a national language recognized according to specific rules and regulations – Zeno's is a language out-of-place – that is a language that exceeds borders, be they national or grammatical.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It is only with this rich, and intractable language, that Zeno can embark on a narrative that simultaneously negates and asserts, and that treats truth and lies as the two faces of the same coin to the extent that truth and falsehood

becomes increasingly blurred and indeterminate. As Zeno himself says: ‘La parola doveva essere un avvenimento a sé per me e perciò non poteva essere imprigionata da nessun altro avvenimento.’ (CZ, 75) Together with the statement ‘ricordo tutto ma non intendo niente’, this one about language is, to my mind, one of the key passages in Zeno’s narrative. For Zeno Language is a sort of epoché, that is a moment that brings about a shock which questions our experience as habitual beings. It is a moment, and an opening that lives beyond but also informs any other moments. But, most of all, is free, attaining the liberty to become language as-such, which also means to be at one and the same time illuminating and misleading, sublime and ridiculous. ‘La parola’, as Zeno writes, ‘sa varcare il tempo’ (CZ, 325); and yet this very language is devious: ‘Una confessione in iscritto è sempre menzognera.’ (CZ, 380)

Zeno is his language and his language is Zeno to the extent that more harm could not be done to *La coscienza* than to amend its language in order to adhere to standard Italian, as did the editor Attilio Frescura before publishing the first edition of the novel with the editor Cappelli. What binds the pleasure principle (the female body), knowledge principle (Zeno’s own body), and the principle of indistinction (the language of Zeno), in an inextricable link is the fact that they are also inscribed onto paper: ‘Scrivendo, anzi incidendo sulla carta...’ (CZ, 46), and because of this they inevitably generate a fourth body, which is nothing other than the concrete reality of the book which exists beyond any possible doubt. As Zeno writes: ‘In verità, noi non avevamo più che dei segni grafici, degli scheletri d’immagini.’ (CZ, 381) In the end the book itself, Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno*, is simultaneously ‘una cosa’, that is a tangible object with its capital value and an enduring position in the Italian modern canon, e ‘la cosa’, that is a narrative in which the excess of language and things

continues to spill out uncontrolled by theoretical analysis and categorizations. It is a trace and the reality of a trace, and it is a document in which the discomfort and malaise of the modern person is paired by, and runs parallel to the very existence of a language whose body exceeds meanings, establishing the complex and uneasy co-existence of ontology and epistemology.

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<sup>i</sup> Svevo's extracts from *La coscienza di Zeno* are from I. Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno*, edited by Giovanni Palmieri (Firenze: Giunti, 1994). All further references are abbreviated to *CZ*, and are to this volume.

<sup>ii</sup> Palmieri relates Cosini to 'coso' with similar connotations to those articulated in this essay. See note on p. 104 of *CZ*, and especially: 'nel cognome di Zeno [...] si è istintivamente portati a leggere il diminutivo plurale di *coso*, la voce colloquiale con cui si designa la persona o l'oggetto indistinto che non si sa o non si vuole nominare altrimenti. In questo senso è molto probabile che questo strano cognome (peraltro

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realmente esistente) sia stato suggerito a Svevo dal titolo di un romanzo

autobiografico scritto da Alphonse Daudet nel 1868 e intitolato *Le petit Chose*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> On the difference between ontology and epistemology in relation to ‘thingness’, see the book by Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciar tracce* (Bari: Laterza, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Heidegger’s criticism of the metaphysical tradition is particularly present in his philosophical works after the so-called “turn” of the late 1930s, and especially in *On the Way to language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (san Francisco: Harper, 1982). On Heidegger and metaphysics see also Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1994), and my article ‘Renunciation: Heidegger, Agamben, Blanchot, Vattimo’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 6-1 (2009), 67- 92. As for Nietzsche’s criticism of metaphysics and epistemology, see especially *Genealogia della morale*, and especially the famous opening sentence “Siamo ingoti a noi medesimi, noi uomini della conoscenza”, which has less than a passing resemblance to Zeno’s writing, especially the sentence “ricordo tutto, ma non intendo niente” (CZ, p. 33). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogia della morale*, a cura di Giorgio Colli eazzino Montinari (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), p. 5.

<sup>v</sup> See especially CZ, p. 62: ‘Io ero abbastanza colto essendo passato attraverso due facoltà universitarie e poi per la mia lunga inerzia, ch’io credo molto istruttiva. Lui, invece, era un grande negoziante ignorante ed attivo. Ma dalla sua ignoranza gli risultava forza e serenità ed io m’incantavo a guardarlo, invidiandolo.’

<sup>vi</sup> ‘La narrativa precedente [the one before modernism] spiegava il mondo, le vicende umane, certe curve tipiche ed esemplari del nostro destino di viventi, trovandone le cause, a lume di logica e di raziocinio. La nuova narrativa, invece, vuole scoprire il senso di ciò che appare e di ciò che succede, il senso dei destini. Alla ricerca delle

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cause, sostituisce quella del senso delle cose. [...] la narrativa precedente era esplicativa, la nuova è *interrogativa*. [...] Ma perché la narrativa moderna assume questo carattere interrogativo? Perché l'uomo non sa perché è rotta la tregua tra lui e la società, tra lui e il mondo.' G. Debenedetti, *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Milano: Garzanti, 1971), pp. 514-515. My italics.

<sup>vii</sup> “Adesso vi conoscete tutti. Quel coso lì – disse il Balli accennando ad Emilio – lo vedrai al chiaro.” I. Svevo, *Romanzi*, edited by M. Lavagetto (Turin-Paris: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1993), p. 365.

<sup>viii</sup> For a general conceptualization of thing and thingness see also the special issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry, Thing Theory*, edited by Bill Brown, 28-1 (Autumn 2001).

<sup>ix</sup> I. Svevo, *I racconti* (Milano: Garzanti, 1985), p. 212.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>xii</sup> On the issue of production and representation in the context of individuals and objects see also Ferraris, *op. cit.*, and especially: ‘soggetto è ciò che ha rappresentazioni, oggetto è ciò che non ne ha, sebbene, ovviamente, possa essere rappresentato.’ P. 8. And again: “avere rappresentazioni è la condizione dell’agire e del pensare, che sono le caratteristiche generalmente attribuite ai soggetti.’ P. 20.

<sup>xiii</sup> ‘What we described as the central place, as the intimate exteriority or ‘extimacy’, that is the Thing’ J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, translated by Dennis Porter (London,: Routledge, 1992), p. 139. “Ce que nous décrivons comme ce lieu central, cette extériorité intime, cette extimité, qui est la Chose’. *Le Séminaire livre VII. L’Éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p. 167.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121, and p. 146.

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<sup>xv</sup> ‘By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.’ (1992), p. 150. ‘La création de la poésie consiste à poser, selon le mode de la sublimation propre à l’art, un objet que j’appellerai affolant, un partenaire inhumain.’ (1986), p. 180.

<sup>xvi</sup> ‘[...] the Sovereign Good, which is *das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good, and that there is no other good.’ (1992), p. 70. ‘[...] le Souverain Bien, qui est *das Ding*, qui est la mère, l’objet de l’inceste, est un bien interdit, et qu’il n’y a pas d’autre bien.’ (1986), p. 85.

<sup>xvii</sup> ‘The question of *das Ding* is still attached to whatever is open, lacking or gaping at the center of our desire.’ (1992), p. 84. ‘La question de *das Ding* reste aujourd’hui suspendu à ce qu’il ya d’ouvert, de manquant, de béant, au centre de notre désir.’ (1986), p. 102.

<sup>xviii</sup> ‘The function of this place [of poetry] is to contain words, in the sense in which contain means to keep – as a result of which an original distance and articulation are possible, through which synchrony is introduced, and it is on the foundation of synchrony that the essential dialect is then erected, that in which the Other may discover itself as the Other of the Other.’ (1992), p. 66. ‘La fonction de cette place est d’être ce qui contient les mots, au sens où contenir veut dire retenir, par quoi une distance et une articulation primitives sont possibles, par quoi s’introduit la synchronie, sur laquelle peut ensuite s’étager la dialectique essentielle, celle où l’Autre peut se trouver comme Autre de l’Autre.’ (1986), p. 81.

<sup>xix</sup> ‘[...] *das Ding* is at the center only in the sense that it is excluded.’ (1992), p. 71. ‘[...] *das Ding* est justement au centre au sens qu’il est exclu.’ (1986), p. 87.

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<sup>xx</sup> ‘The being-in-language of the non-linguistic’. G. Agamben, *The Coming*

*Community*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 103.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Lacan, especially p. 45: ‘*Sache* is clearly the thing, a product of industry and human action as governed by language.’ And again: ‘*Sache* and *Wort* are, therefore, closely linked; they form a couple. *Das Ding* is found somewhere else.’ ‘*La Sache* est bien la chose, produit de l’industrie ou de l’action humaine en tant que gouvernée par la langage.’ And again: ‘*Sache* et *Wort* sont donc étroitement liés, font un couple. *Das Ding* se situe ailleurs.’ (1986), p. 58.

<sup>xxii</sup> ‘Le parole dissolvono l'oggetto.’ G. Caproni, *L’opera in versi*, a cura di Luca Zuliani (Milano: Meridiani Mondadori, 1998), p. 1596.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Perhaps Calvino wanted to express something similar when in the lecture ‘Esattezza’ he wrote: ‘La parola collega la traccia visibile alla cosa invisibile, alla cosa assente, alla cosa desiderata o temuta, come un fragile ponte di fortuna gettato nel vuoto.’ I. Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>xxiv</sup> There are several studies on Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno* and psychoanalysis, amongst them see, E. Mahler-Schächter, ‘Svevo, Trieste and the Vienna Circle: Zeno’s Analyst Analysed’, *European Studies Review*, 12-1 (1982), pp. 45-66; G. Palmieri, ‘La vera cura di Zeno e le sue opinioni’, *Strumenti critici*, 71-8 (1993), pp. 37-66; M. Lavagetto, ‘Correzioni su Zeno’, *Italo Svevo oggi*, a cura di Marco Marchi (Firenze: Nuoveedizioni Enrico Vallecchi, 1980), pp. 131-157. In his biography *Italo Svevo A Double Life*, John Gatt-Rutter provides a detailed analysis of Svevo’s encounter with psychoanalysis; see J. Gatt-Rutter, ‘The Encounter with Freud: 1908-1914’, *Italo Svevo a Double Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.

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237-266. More recently, the study of Svevo and psychoanalysis has been enriched by the essays by Brian Moloney, 'Neither Young Nor Easily Freudened: Italo Svevo and Psychoanalysis', and Elizabeth Schächter, 'The Anguish of Assimilation: The Case of Italo Svevo', in *Freud and Italian Culture*, ed. Pierluigi Barrotta, Laura Lepschy, and Emma Bond (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 31-49; and pp. 65-81.

<sup>xxv</sup> On the issue of memory and knowledge in *La coscienza di Zeno*, see D. Della Terza, 'Ricordo tutto ma non intendo niente': il conflitto tra intelligenza e memoria nel destino di Zeno', *Esperienze Letterarie*, 28-1 (January-March 2003), pp. 35-44.

<sup>xxvi</sup> 'For the *Entwurf* is, in fact, the theory of a neuronic apparatus in relation to which the organism remains exterior, just as much as the outside world.' (1992), p. 47.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See note 12.

<sup>xxviii</sup> M. Perniola, 'Il quarto corpo', *Ágalma*, 16 (September 2008), pp. 8-15.

<sup>xxix</sup> 'In questo caso il controcorpo sarebbe una esperienza sensoriale, anzi sinestetica, che si scatena al contatto con la stoffa; tale esperienza ha un carattere neutro, è un sex appeal dell'inorganico, perché si pone al di là della differenza tra i sessi.' (Perniola), p. 13.

<sup>xxx</sup> The discourse on illness and knowledge is vast, and represents one of the most enduring aspects of modernism, see for instance the reflection on the relation between conscience and illness in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and especially the last page whose apocalyptic tones are not too dissimilar to those found in the last page of *La coscienza*: 'We even find it a burden being human beings – human beings with our *own* real flesh and blood; we are ashamed of it, consider a disgrace and are forever striving to become some kind of imaginary generalized human beings. We are stillborn and we have long ceased to be begotten of living fathers – and this we find increasingly pleasing.' F. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground and The Double*,

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translated by Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 118. On Svevo and Dostoevsky, see M. Marchi, 'Dall'Imo del proprio essere', *Scritture del profondo. Svevo e Tozzi*, a cura di Marco Marchi (Trieste: Museo Sveviano, 2000), pp. 7-49, and especially pp. 16-17. On Svevo's writing and illness see G. Contini, 'Introduzione a I. Svevo', *La coscienza di Zeno* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Scuola, 1999), especially pp. XVI-XVII: 'Solo la malattia consente questo ininterrotto linguaggio della contraddizione e ne fa il proprio specchio'; G. Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia e suggestioni ecologiche nella *Coscienza di Zeno*', *Otto/Novecento*, 24-3 (2000), pp. 75-104; A. Lalanne-Olive, 'Svevo et le savoir médical', *Revue des études italiennes*, XXXIX -1-4 (1993), pp. 141-152; *Guarire dalla cura. Italo Svevo e i medici*, R. Cepach (ed.) (Trieste: Comune di Trieste, 2008); S. Carrai, *Il caso clinico di Zeno e altri studi di filologia e critica sveviana* (Pisa: Pacini, 2010).

<sup>xxxi</sup> V. Magrelli, *Nel condominio di carne* (Milano: Einaudi, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>xxxii</sup> On Zeno's language see G. Palmieri, *Schmitz, Svevo, Zeno. Storia di due biblioteche* (Milano: Bompiani, 1994); M. Lavagetto, *L'impiegato Schmitz, e altri saggi su Svevo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986); E. Saccone, *Commento a 'Zeno'* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1973).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The reflection on language as 'the house of Being' permeates Heidegger's work from 'Letter on Humanism' onwards. See for instance the essay 'The Nature of Language', in M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translation Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), especially p. 63.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> On the issue of language and place in *La coscienza di Zeno*, see R. Robinson, 'From Border to Front: Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* and International Space', *Journal of European Studies*, 36- 3 (September 2006), pp. 243-268.