Framing Narratives of Irony in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the use of irony in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. While both these novels can be said to be ironic, the manner in which the two writers choose to employ irony differs substantially. For the purposes of this study, Svevo's tropological irony will be distinguished from Musil's representational irony. Tropological irony consists in a series of dramatic reversals that the protagonist's views of himself and of the world undergo in the course of the novel. The analysis of tropological irony exposes Svevo's powerful critique of psychoanalysis, both as a theory of the psyche and more importantly, as a therapy designed to identify and treat various neuroses. I argue that this critique starts with Svevo's ironic subversion of the two meanings of *coscienza*, "consciousness" and "conscience," and constitutes the background against which Zeno's most important reversal, from illness to health, unfolds.

Unlike tropological irony, representational irony is primarily formal in nature. Dissatisfied with the illusory sense of order and cohesion that the narrative conventions governing the historical-realist novel of the nineteenth century create, but aware at the same time that no writer can completely step outside the existing patterns of narrations, Musil resorts to representational irony as a way out of this impasse. His strategy entails a double movement, of simultaneous affirmation and negation, which can be shown to replicate, on a larger scale, the same paradoxical dynamics present in the structure of irony as a trope. To illustrate how representational irony operates in Musil's novel, my dissertation proves how the notion of narrative frame is concomitantly affirmed and undermined.

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Abbreviations

D	Robert Musil, *Diaries 1899-1941*
E	Italo Svevo, *Epistolario*
GW	Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke*, 2 vols.
MwQ	Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, 2 vols.
O	Italo Svevo, *Opere*
PS	Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul*
T	Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, Vol. I

Introduction

The objective of this dissertation is to analyze the structure of the ironic narratives in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*) and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*). Although irony is common to both works, their narratives differ in the way irony is applied and used. Thus, while irony in Svevo is tropological, in Musil it is representational.[1] The essence of the Svevian tropological irony lies in a dramatic reversal of the protagonist's view of himself, of the others and the world, and of his relation with others and the world. Almost everything Zeno happens to believe, the initial assumptions upon which he constructs his worldview, whether these assumptions concern his health, his self-confidence, or his insights, they are eventually undermined in the course of the novel.

The domain of representational irony, on the other hand, is the form of the novel, rather than its subject matter. As such, representational irony is seen as the product of Musil's struggle with formal innovation, especially narrative. Dissatisfied with traditional, realist narrative, Musil sought a new form in which his ideas and objectives could find proper expression. Representational irony is the solution to this conundrum, the skillful ploy to reconcile the tension inherent in narrative discourse.

The difference between the two types of irony can be situated in the critical distance that separates them. In Svevo, the author and the reader stand above the

[1] In establishing this distinction, I am indebted to Wladimir Krysinski's analysis of the dialectical and intertextual function of irony in the modern novel. Krysinski distinguishes between what he identifies as tropal irony, a rhetorical device operating at sentence level, and what one might call discursive, structural, or systematic irony, which requires the space of the entire text to develop.

protagonist to define how the world is always other than the way Zeno sees it. In Musil, the narrator invites the reader to join him at a critical distance to his own narrative project. He is telling a story, narrating it, yet often disrupting it to encourage us to see, with him, how narrative alone is insufficient, illusory. Musil's technique of fragmentation plays a pivotal role in this scenario, and so does the notion of essay. Not only does Musil break the continuity of the narrative flow by inserting numerous essays or essayistic nuclei into the corpus of the story, the novel itself is styled after the formal principles of the essay.

This difference is clear when we take a closer look at how their ironic narratives unfold. As for Svevo, the second (figurative) meaning of the word "irony" listed in *The Oxford English Dictionary* describes accurately the nature of tropological irony: "A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things" (VIII: 87). This is what the French call "ironie du sort," irony of fate. I have defined tropological irony as a reversal, and narrative reversal in *Zeno's Conscience* takes various shapes and forms. The most obvious one features Zeno as the protagonist in a two-step movement. Zeno is first described holding a certain belief about himself, about those around him, or about the world in general. As time goes on, both Zeno's view of himself and his worldview undergo a radical adjustment: nearly everything that Zeno initially believes or says is disproved by subsequent narrative events. In the end, the opposite of what he believed, his opinions and pronouncements, turn out to be true.

In stark contrast with the other characters (Malfenti, Guido), Svevo portrays

Zeno as a misfit, as the one who is "sick" and longs for the health that others supposedly enjoy. The irony of *Zeno's Conscience* consists in revealing, precisely, by a turn of the ironic narrative that the opposite is true: Zeno's illness is only imaginary. Characters like Malfenti and Guido who are depicted, initially, as paragons of health, die. Moreover, the world that Zeno believed to be healthy and rational turns out to be "diseased" to the core. For the most part, characters in Svevo's third novel are not what they seem at first. Augusta, Ada's ugly sister, who is invisible to Zeno at the start, eventually proves to be the best wife for him. On the other hand, Ada that Zeno desires and wants as his future wife, catches a disease that literally disfigures her beautiful appearance.

Similarly, Guido, Zeno's archrival in the novel, who appears to symbolize all the qualities a man ought to possess, who marries Ada, and who seems to be the hero of the novel, to Zeno's anti-hero, turns out to be a failure, not only financially but also as a man. His accidental suicide makes Zeno the hero and the stronger and healthier of the two. Zeno will salvage the business and save the family from a disgraceful bankruptcy. This reversal of fortune as well as the way in which the world that Zeno judges according to appearances always turns out to be the opposite of what he believes constitutes the essence of the ironic narrative of Svevo's novel, which I am calling tropological irony.

The other thesis I propose in this dissertation is that Svevo employs narrative, tropological irony as a means to formulate his ante and post litteram critique of psychoanalysis. The two exegetic chapters on *Zeno's Conscience* will explore this inextricable connection in detail. In chapter I, I shall examine how Svevo undermines the two meanings of *coscienza*. In this sense, central to Svevo's ironic

subversion of conscience-as-awareness are the notions of self-observation and enhanced awareness. Contrary to the standard Freudian narrative, which asserts the therapeutic effects of self-observation as well as of an expanded awareness, Svevo emphasizes the negative impact they have on Zeno. In doing so, he clearly suggests that both of these concepts are, in reality, the opposite of what psychoanalytic theories predicted they were going to be. As far as conscience-as-moral-awareness is concerned, Svevo uses primarily, but not exclusively, the episode of Zeno's extramarital affair with Carla as a pretext to subvert the second meaning of *coscienza*. The essence of this second ironic dismantling consists in Zeno's predisposition to disengage from his conscience and act precisely against its directives. Although he is fully aware that his actions have a moral dimension and wants, at least declaratively, to do good, he ends up doing what he knows he is not supposed to be doing. There also comes a stage in Zeno's relationship with Carla when he manages to silence the voice of his conscience. This is undoubtedly the pinnacle of Svevo's irony, for now *coscienza* signifies the absence of conscience.

In Chapter II of my dissertation, I shall address the question of Zeno's imaginary illness and its relevance for the notion of tropological irony. The most important reversal in Svevo's third novel is arguably that of the protagonist, who discovers in the end not that disease is a conviction, that is, purely a creation of one's mind—he has known that all along (14/605)—but that at least for him, health is quite literally a matter of personal choice. He can choose to be sick, or he can choose to be healthy. Or better still, he can choose not to care at all whether he is healthy or sick. For a long time, Zeno has chosen to be sick. Illness has

become a convenient raison d'être for him, and by extension, for the novel as well. However, that is hardly Zeno's last word on the matter. The lesson Svevo teaches Zeno is the lesson anyone who has experienced irony firsthand has learned, namely, that things rarely are what they appear to be. The protagonist's name may suggest immobility, but that is just one of Svevo's countless ironies in the novel, for Zeno is definitely not impervious to change. The end of the novel finds Zeno totally cured; however, not of any of the diseases his doctors thought he was suffering from but of his long-lasting and harmful obsession with health and sickness. In his newfound wisdom, Zeno eventually understands that it is an error to mistake life for sickness, as Doctor S. does. Not only is Zeno healed, he has also become an entirely different person.

From the closing entries in his diary, the effigy of a radically changed Zeno emerges: it is that of a shrewd, strong businessman, poised to take full advantage of the chaotic markets during World War I and make a fortune. He has now turned into the exact replica of Giovanni Malfenti, his much-admired surrogate father, whom he was trying hard to emulate. It is often argued that Zeno Cosini is the older brother of Alfonso Nitti and Emilio Brentani, the protagonists of Svevo's previous two novels, *A Life* (*Una Vita*) and *As a Man Grows Older* (*Senilità*), respectively. Passivity, immaturity, characterlessness, and a deep-seated inability to translate the content of their inner life into action would constitute the common features of this family resemblance. Such a view, however, completely disregards Zeno's dramatic reversal as the narrative unfolds, the fact that he ends up being a man *with* qualities. Therefore, it can be said that Svevo's third novel, by ironically undermining the values that characterize his earlier work, is uniquely different

from both *A Life* and *As a Man Grows Older*.

Whereas Svevo sets up a protagonist and a world only to deconstruct them by submitting them to irony, Musil's method is somewhat different. The world described in *The Man without Qualities* appears demystified from the beginning, with an anti-hero, Ulrich, who is and will remain a man without qualities. While Svevo's protagonist believes that he is the only one without qualities and seeks to acquire those qualities from others, Musil's non-hero, Ulrich, holds no illusions about his qualities and those of others, nor a belief in traditional values. In Musil, through Ulrich, we are treated, among many other things, to a critique of historical events—in this case, the last year of the Dual Monarchy—that lays bare the shortcomings of those events. By inventing the Parallel Campaign, Musil wants to show how Kakania lives up to its name. The name Kakania, which Musil sarcastically coined, comes from the abbreviation of the German phrase *kaiserlich und königlich*, or *k. & k.*, "Imperial and Royal," used to designate, between 1867 and 1918, one of the most peculiar administrative and political unions of all times, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

Musil, however, brilliantly undercuts the seriousness of this constitutionally sanctioned adjective by making it resonate with the childishly euphemistic vulgarism "kaka." It should also be noted that the term Kakania evokes in a burlesque way the pastoral and picturesque, yet thoroughly utopian, world of Arcadia. The name itself illustrates perfectly Musil's ironic subversion of first appearances: initially, Kakania calls to mind something noble, a proud kingdom that must have been blessed with imperial and royal attributes; at the same time, though, it has a background hint of "kaka" and of false claims to Eden-like idyll.

Austro-Hungarian Empire, as seen by Musil, was a hotbed of contradictions, a country that literally functioned in accordance with the self-contradictory principles of irony: "Liberal in its constitution, it was administered clerically. The government was clerical, but everyday life was liberal. All citizens were equal before the law, but not everyone was a citizen. There was a Parliament, which asserted its freedom so forcefully that it was usually kept shut" (MwQ I 29) ["Er war nach seiner Verfassung liberal, aber es wurde klerikal regiert. Es wurde klerikal regiert, aber man lebte freisinnig. Vor dem Gesetz waren alle Bürger gleich, aber nicht alle waren eben Bürger. Man hatte ein Parlament, welches so gewaltigen Gebrauch von seiner Freiheit machte, daß man es gewöhnlich geschlossen hielt" (GW I 33)].

Unfinished, and most likely unfinishable, Musil's novel loosely depicts the events that happen during the year's leave of absence that the main character decides to take from his life as a response to a deep existential crisis. With few exceptions, *The Man without Qualities* is set in Vienna, but as Matthias Luserke-Jaqui and Philip Payne point out, there are no reasons to consider it strictly a novel about the imperial capital city (320). The time represented in the plot, had Musil finished his work as he wished, extends from the summer of 1913 to the fateful summer of 1914. This time frame is decisive not only for Ulrich but, in hindsight, for the Austro-Hungarian Empire as well, for it marks the beginning of its end: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, Emperor Franz Joseph's nephew and heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, precipitated the onset of World War I, which in turn, led to the demise of the Imperial and Royal Monarchy. Usually, a period so brief

yet so generously supplied with world-shaping events would entice writers to direct their attention and energy exclusively toward the cornucopia of historical facts, but Musil was not an ordinary writer. His goal was not to compose a historical-realist narrative, at least not in the traditional sense of the word, about the vanishing of an entire country, an empire no less.

Musil broached this subject in a 1932 note published posthumously. Under the heading "Comprehensive structural idea" ("Umfassende Aufbaugedanken"), he wrote: "The immanent depiction of the period that led to the catastrophe must be the real substance of the story, the context to which it can always retreat as well as the thought that is implicit in everything" (MwQ II 1748) ["Immanente Schilderung der Zeit, die zur Katastrophe geführt hat, muß den eigentlichen Körper der Erzählung bilden, den Zusammenhang, auf den sie sich immer zurückziehen kann, ebensowohl wie den Gedanken, der bei allem mitzudenken ist" (GW I 1855)]. This passage seems to be running counter to what I have just argued, but actually it is not; indeed, in this regard, it must be added that Musil's view of what "period" meant, far from remaining confined to pure historical events, was rather comprehensive: "All the problems, like search for order and conviction, role of the Other Condition, situation of the scientific person, etc., are also problems of the time and are to be regularly presented as such" (MwQ II 1748) ["Alle die Probleme wie Suchen nach Ordnung u. Überzeugung, Rolle des aZ., Situation des wiss. Menschen usw. sind auch Probleme der Zeit u. haben abwechselnd als das geschildert zu werden" (GW I 1855)]. Even the story of the Parallelaktion, which comes to the forefront in Part II, where the novel arguably gets as close as it can ever get, but not *too* close, to a traditional narrative, and

which still retains some importance in Part III, is used by Musil as one sign of the times among many others, to further his own literary agenda. "Especially the Parallel Campaign is to be presented that way" (MwQ II 1748) ["Insbesonders die // ist als das zu schildern" (GW I 1855)], Musil urges in the same paragraph.

Closer inspection reveals the paradoxical nature of *The Man without Qualities*. The novel appears to be a historical-realist narrative, but it is not. It utilizes narrative conventions of the traditional novel, simply because it cannot do without them, since, to quote Paul Ricoeur, "[a] leap beyond every paradigmatic expectation is impossible" (*Time and Narrative II* 25). At the same time, it finds ways to subvert them. The essence of representational irony in Musil, then, consists in this twofold movement of assertion and subversion, affirmation and negation. Such a seemingly contradictory undertaking is achieved by way of what Krysinski calls the "ironic disarticulation of representation" (5-8). In this sense, the technique of fragmentation, or as Krysinski puts it, borrowing the term from Friedrich Schlegel, of "permanent parabasis" (2) becomes crucial. In Musil's novel, a story is told, or at least it is attempted to be told, yet with a disposition that reminds one of the ancient drama-chorus, the narrator frequently interrupts his account in order to reflect, comment, or criticize.

It can be said, therefore, that Musil undermines narration at the very same time he employs it, by interpolating digressive passages into the narrative flow. These range from lyrical intermezzos to essays of various lengths and on various topics. The use of analepsis, or flashback, which cleverly breaks the chronology of the storied events, further destructures the narrative edifice (Jonsson 108-09). To compound the difficulty, Musil never surrenders to the demand for what

Jonsson calls a “consistent temporal order” (115), a firm chronological framework that would help readers to navigate the troubled waters of the novel. It should therefore come as no surprise that Musil himself announced in an exposé of his intentions for what he thought was going to be the second volume of *The Man without Qualities* that “the technical problem of the book could be characterized as the attempt to make a story at all possible in the first place” (MwQ II 1745) [“das technische Problem des Buches ließe sich so bezeichnen als den Versuch eine Geschichte überhaupt erst möglich zu machen” (GW I 1844)].

In Musil’s second novel, parabasis can therefore signify, as Krysinski points out, fragmentation in its most literal sense. As such, it is intimately connected with the practice of essayism, being largely generated by the tension between pure narrative action and philosophical reflection. But parabasis may take a more subtle form, as Paul de Man’s outstanding reading of Friedrich Schlegel’s 1799 novel *Lucinde* demonstrates. In this more elusive materialization, which proves to be pivotal to my own interpretation of *The Man without Qualities*, parabasis is the effect of a double movement whose two constituent elements, affirmation and negation, are not only simultaneous but also radically incompatible. Representational irony is the parabasis that disrupts narrative structures and comprehension. According to de Man, such irony renders narrative illusion useless or ineffective (*Aesthetic Ideology* 178). It seems to be self-evident, however, that no such illusion can be destroyed unless it has been first activated. When carefully considered, irony appears to have a paradoxically dual structure, negating what it affirms and affirming what it negates. It consists of two opposing forces: a centripetal, unifying impulse that is counterbalanced by a centrifugal,

dispersive drive. Irony can be said therefore to manifest as a field of antithetical energies. In short, it asserts only to subvert. A paradoxical dynamics of this kind is already noticeable in the etymological sense of *είρωνεία*, "dissimulation," "pretence," which lies at the foundation of Socratic irony. Indeed, crucial to Socrates's technique is the simultaneous affirmation and negation of ignorance. As part of this strategy, a certain lack of knowledge is convincingly professed but only to be dismantled and exposed for what it has always been, namely, a clever feigning, a subterfuge.

How is this seemingly contradictory movement even possible? In other words, is representational irony feasible? To answer this question, let us first agree that no negation can be carried out in an axiological vacuum. One can negate only by referring to that which one is attempting to negate, by incorporating it into one's negatory discourse. In this sense, it can be argued that any act of negation necessarily entails an affirmation, buried deep within its inner workings. We could of course call this affirmation passive, but that would not change the fact that it is an affirmation nonetheless. It is true, however, that one might refute this claim by remarking that to refer to or to mention a certain value in my discourse does not mean to affirm that value at all; hence, one might conclude that the act of negation does not affirm that which it negates. However, what seems to be at stake here is not in the slightest a semantic reference but rather an ontological one. Suppose I posit that value A has become outdated and that it needs to be replaced by value B, which is superior in every respect to value A. By incorporating A into my negatory discourse, I affirm A, but not in the ordinary sense of upholding its validity or maintaining its truth; instead, by

making it part of my argument, I implicitly recognize the necessity of its existence. Indeed, everything that I can ever state about B is predicated on the existence of A. Thus, to negate value A is not only to affirm the cogency of a certain value B, but also, in a sense, to affirm value A, itself.

All these questions are similar to those that Musil encountered while trying to complete his magnum opus. *The Man without Qualities* was truly a work in progress, and Musil's concern with the question of formal innovation became evident when his posthumous papers, the *Nachlass*, surfaced (MwQ II 1766/GW I 1941).[2] Musil grew dissatisfied with the fact that the spirit of the age seemed to favour narrative action at the expense of other modes of representation, particularly reflection: "If I should be reproached with going in for too much reflection, then—without my wanting to go into the relationship between thinking and narrating—today there is too little reflection" (MwQ II 1767) ["Sollte man mir vorwerfen, daß ich mich zu sehr auf Überlegungen einlasse (Tb), so – ohne daß ich auf das Verhältnis Denken/Erzählen eingehen möchte –: heute wird zu wenig überlegt" (GW I 1941)]. In venting his frustration with the unreasonable demands of literary consumers, Musil wrote, "People want Ulrich to *do* something. But I'm concerned with the *meaning* of the action. Today these are confused with each other" (MwQ II 1764, emphasis in the English translation) ["Die Leute verlangen, daß U. etwas tut. Ich habe es aber mit dem Sinn der Tat zu tun. Heutige Verwechslung" (GW I 1940)]. As can be expected, he never hid his dislike of the popular forms of the present, most notably the historical-realist

[2] For a detailed chronology of Musil's works, see Peter Payne's preliminary note, "Musil's Principal Works," as well as his "Introduction: The Symbiosis of Robert Musil's Life and Works," both published in *A Companion to the Works of Robert Musil*, xv-xx and 1-49.

narrative: "Frame of mind directed against the present. Therefore, too, against narration, action . . ." (MwQ II 1765) ["Antiaktualitätsgesinnung. Darum auch geg Erzählen, Handlung . . ." (GW I 1940)].

In *The Man without Qualities*, the simultaneous affirmation and negation of narrative frame, more specifically, of those conventions that prescribe how novels are supposed to start and how to end, constitutes one of the most visible expressions of representational irony. My two chapters on Musil will examine thoroughly the intricacies of this momentous question. In chapter III, I shall argue that Ulrich, the man without qualities, is primarily a man without a frame (Rahmen), or form. The notion of frame in *The Man without Qualities* is understood as a constricting principle of cohesion and artificial harmony, the mechanism that creates the illusion of homogeneity and wholeness. As form-giving contrivances par excellence, frames have a marked tendency to engender consistent totalities by obliterating anything that seeks to escape their authority. Realist narratives, with their insistence on depicting the world and human experience "as they were," seem particularly predisposed to cover up any disparities that they may come across in their pursuit of mimesis. The coherence that realist fiction claims to possess can be said to be the product of deception. It is therefore not surprising that just as Ulrich resists being fully enclosed in a certain frame, or form, so does *The Man without Qualities*. These pressing questions notwithstanding, Musil was aware that writers did not have much of a choice but rather that they worked within a system of limitations, which consisted of the existing patterns of narration. He was cognizant of the fact that one could not dispose of narrative conventions altogether. Frames, structures, and paradigms

may be unavoidable, but they are to be employed with utmost caution and with the understanding that the order and comfort they promise to deliver is achieved by abuse and fraud. Musil's solution to this formal dilemma was to undermine the conventions he used in constructing his narrative. To the inescapability of form, he opposed the disrupting energy of representational irony. Though decisive for the fate of Musil's masterwork, form is shown to be the result of an entirely conventional decision on the part of the author.

Chapter IV will be devoted to an in-depth analysis of Musil's impressive feat. In this sense, special attention will be paid to the novel's opening chapter. The purpose of such a close reading is to prove that Musil places *The Man without Qualities* in a space of indeterminacy from the beginning, leaving it suspended between the necessity of form and the negation of this apparent inevitability. Musil knew that the most adequate response to the formal predicament he was facing did not lie in a radical act of innovation but rather in a more subtle strategy, which involved a thoroughly ironic blend of submission to the dictates of form and insurgency against those very same guiding principles. Thus, chapter I of the novel, "From which, remarkably enough, nothing develops" ("Woraus bemerkenswerter Weise nichts hervorgeht") admits of two mutually exclusive readings, neither of which is dominant in relation to the other. While in one of these readings the notion of narrative frame is affirmed, in the other, it is negated. Things are a little more complicated when it comes to the ending of *The Man without Qualities*, since Musil did not have the chance to complete his novel. It is virtually impossible to predict, based on the author's posthumous papers, how Musil was going to tie the elements of the story together and close his narrative.

However, one can easily imagine that Musil's greatest difficulty was to finish the novel in such a way that it did not become a totality. It is documented that over the years, Musil remained adamant in his deep resentment toward the creation and promulgation of ultimate and unchallengeable solutions: "My view of, or task I would set for, literature: partial solution, contribution to the solution, investigation, or the like. I feel exempted from having to give an unequivocal response" (MwQ II 1731) ["Meine Auffassung oder Aufgabensetzung der Dichtung: Partiallösung, Beitrag zur Lösung, Untersuchung odgl. Ich fühle mich einer eindeutigen Antwort enthoben" (GW I 1837)]. Elsewhere, he curtly reinforced his point of view: "Against total solutions" (MwQ II 1747) ["Gegen die Totallösungen" (GW I 1851)]. The most logical way to attain this goal, I argue, would be to remain consistent with the requirements of representational irony until the end. Hypothetically speaking, the closing chapter would feature a double movement of affirmation and negation, symmetrical to that articulated in chapter 1 of the novel.

This dissertation is the first extensive study to investigate comparatively the question of irony in *Zeno's Conscience* and *The Man without Qualities*. As Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski points out, critics and scholars have been reluctant to compare the novels of Svevo and Musil, preferring instead to use the work of Marcel Proust as the model against which both *Zeno's Conscience* and *The Man without Qualities* could be properly evaluated (101). One of the objectives of my dissertation is to show that there is much to gain from comparisons of this kind. Not only will the act of comparing throw a fresh light on the works involved, it will encourage us to reconsider the basis used for comparison as well. In this case,

irony is the bridge that unites the two novels, but many other similar connecting points can definitely be found and explored in an equally productive manner. Perhaps the most important novelty of this study is the distinction I make between tropological and representational irony. While it is certainly important to note that both works under consideration are ironic novels, it is even more important to recognize and conceptualize the noticeable difference between Svevo's tropological irony and Musil's representational irony. I am confident that my dissertation will shed light on the theoretical characteristics of this dissimilarity and provide enough textual evidence to substantiate it.

The study will also demonstrate the practical applicability of the two notions of narrative irony defined in it. Thus, tropological irony proves to be essential in explaining the full significance of the reversal that Svevo's protagonist sustains in the course of the novel, and as a result, it helps to amend some questionable aspects in the scholarship. On the other hand, representational irony, whose essence originates with Schlegel and holds to an overarching line leading to de Man and Krysinski, turns out to be vital for a correct understanding of Musil's innovative solution to his struggles with narrative form. Last but not least, my dissertation indirectly suggests that although they wrote their masterpieces at the height of modernism, both Svevo and Musil prefigure some developments that are now commonly associated with postmodern fiction. I am thinking especially of Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism—"a contradictory phenomenon, *one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts*, the very concepts it challenges" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 3, emphasis added)—which is strikingly similar to that of representational irony. While my dissertation does not aim to

establish Svevo's or Musil's affiliations with a certain literary movement or another, some of its findings may undoubtedly be used to show that both writers represent a key turn in the twentieth-century novel toward something more postmodern in its refusal to fit into existing all-encompassing conventions.

Chapter I

Narrative and Tropological Irony in *La coscienza di Zeno*

Both internal architecture and the special relationship upon which this formal sophistication is built distinguish *Zeno's Conscience* from Svevo's two previous novels. The novel consists of four distinct yet loosely connected parts whose progression defies chronology: Doctor S.'s short preface, Zeno's preamble to his autobiographical narrative, the autobiography proper, which includes five sections, and Zeno's diary notes collected under the heading "Psychoanalysis." Teresa de Lauretis is correct in observing that Svevo's third novel begins at the end, with the doctor's after-the-fact comment, and ends at the beginning, with the cataclysmic explosion sending the Earth back to a pre-planetary state (109). The alteration of the *fabula* in the *suzhet*, to borrow from the vocabulary of Russian formalism, is a common literary device, and it serves Svevo quite well because it places the novel in an ironic register from the outset. Doctor S.'s concise narrative is not a preface—at least, not in the sense the roguish psychoanalyst intends it to be. As will gradually become apparent, almost all the statements expressed in the brief pre-text will be proved wrong. It can be argued, therefore, that the preface sets the stage for its own dismantling. In fact, this relationship becomes a pattern, for it governs the succession of the other parts. Thus, Zeno's preamble is contradicted by the autobiographical account, which in turn is undermined both by Zeno's diary pages and by his second round of confessions.[1] The novel's principle of composition clearly differs from those at work in *Una Vita* (*A Life*) and *Senilità*

[1] I am referring to the unfinished project on which Svevo was working shortly before his death. It consisted of two fragments, "The Old Old Man" ("Il Vecchione") and "An Old Man's

(*As A Man Grows Older*), and this may have disconcerted Svevo's Italian readers even more. *Zeno's Conscience*, as Massimo Verdicchio writes, "consists of a series of paradoxes or ironic demystifications of order held together by the single ironic perspective of the author" (30). It is therefore reasonable to say that the novel undoes itself as it advances, that it attempts to neutralize the very essence of narrative, its forward movement from beginning to end. As such, it reminds us of Zeno of Elea's arrow that stands still *while* flying through the air. At the "end" of its course, there is no canonical story of Zeno, only the story of a perpetual self-subversion.

The increasing formal sophistication of Svevo's novels was not always appreciated. Giacomo Debenedetti constitutes perhaps the best illustration of "an illuminating case of blindness of an analysis rich in critical insights" (Minghelli 53). In her accurate assessment of Debenedetti's 1929 essay "Svevo e Schmitz," Giuliana Minghelli explains the reasons why readers treated the Triestine writer with indifference or even hostility most of his life. Debenedetti's interpretation is evidently biased not only by a marked nostalgia for nineteenth-century narratives, with their omniscient narrators, well-constructed plots, and robust characters, but also by the growing authority of Fascist rhetoric in the Italy of the time. This hypersensitivity to everything that Svevo stands for, as Minghelli points out, grows from the critic's own deep anxieties and frustrations. Instead of tackling Svevo's modernism head on, Debenedetti relocates his examination in the areas of race and gender, Jewishness, and femininity, which, in his view, thoroughly infuse

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Confessions" ("Le Confessioni del Vegliardo"), which were translated into English, along with three other short pieces and a three-act play, as *Further Confessions of Zeno*.

Svevo's narrative and characters. As a result, Svevo acquires all the negative values of an otherness that refuses to let itself assimilated and forever tamed and neutralized. Not all of Debenedetti's pronouncements are wrong; in fact, he is one of the first critics to uncover Svevo's unique hallmark. He does not like what he sees in Svevo, but that is because they do not speak the same language. Just like Musil's prose, Svevo's sounds uncannily ahead of his time: essentially posthumous writers, both of them are closer to us than they were to their contemporaries.

A good place to begin a discussion about tropological irony in *La coscienza di Zeno* is the novel's title.[2] Generally, titles create certain expectations in readers, but Svevo masterfully undermines those expectations through irony. It is entirely legitimate to assume that a novel with a title such as *Zeno's Conscience* deals primarily with the inner workings of the protagonist's conscience. This seems to hold true especially in the case of a work that consists largely of an autobiographical narrative whose basic premise is to provide a truthful account of one's life, no matter how painful, awkward, or potentially compromising its details can become. Conscience, loosely defined as a person's moral compass, is believed to play a crucial role in this deliberate act of self-revelation, because

[2] Incidentally, the only two existing English translations have different titles. First published in 1930, Beryl de Zoete's version, *The Confessions of Zeno*, emphasized the process of self-disclosure around which, as far as the translator was concerned, the novel revolved. This version enjoyed numerous editions until 2001, when William Weaver's new translation, *Zeno's Conscience*, appeared. In his seminal article on irony in Svevo's third novel, published long before the second translation became available, Massimo Verdicchio pointed out that de Zoete's title is indicative of a serious misconception about the very substance of the novel (28). This is true; as will be shown later in the chapter, Zeno cannot seem to be able to engage in and carry out a genuine confession, even when he wishes to do so. By contrast, Weaver's title is clearly the better one, not because it is a literal translation of the original, but because it allows Svevo's ironic play to unfold as intended.

conscience supposedly dictates that honesty is always desirable.

When talking about conscience in Svevo's novel one must not forget its allusions to Freud and to the view that conscience, which essentially arises from an Oedipus complex (*The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis* 472), is a component of the super-ego and therefore must be distinguished from it. This differentiation may sound rather abstract, and perhaps even somewhat artificial to the layman, and there is evidence to suggest that Freud was well aware of the possibility of confusion. In detailing the nature of the relationship between the super-ego and the ego, he conceded that nonspecialists were still allowed to refer to the former as conscience, as long as they did it "quietly" (487). Freud's insistence on setting conscience apart from the super-ego stems from his desire to provide a better picture of the duties that conscience has to perform. Thus, in order for conscience to accomplish its work, it requires the cooperation of self-observation, an activity that does not fall within the scope of its responsibilities. It should be noted that in the Freudian architecture of the psyche, self-observation and conscience work closely together: self-observation is an indispensable ingredient for the critical activity of conscience, so before conscience can pass judgment on the pursuits and desires of the ego, the psyche as a whole has to go through a process of self-observation (487). "[T]he observing," Freud contends, "is only a preparation for judging and punishing" (486).

Ultimately, conscience could be described as the internal awareness of the moral boundaries that regulate one's behaviour. There is a right way and a wrong way of doing things, and it is the pressing task of conscience to assist the ego in making the right decision in fluid, real-life situations. As Freud points out,

"[c]onscience is the inner perception of objections to definite wish impulses that exist in us" (*Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* 28). Elsewhere, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he states that, "conscience is a function which we ascribe, among other functions, to [the super-ego]. This function consists in keeping a watch over the actions and intentions of the ego and judging them, in exercising a censorship" (83). In *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Charles Rycroft defines conscience as follows: "*Either* a person's system of moral values *or* that part of a person which he experiences as voicing moral values" (25). Acting fundamentally as a counterforce attuned to the principles of right and wrong, conscience diligently seeks to keep the ego's desires in check. But, as Freud explains in his 1933 lecture "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," the duties of conscience are not confined solely to denying the ego the pleasure it so persistently seeks. This happens because conscience alone cannot always successfully preclude certain behaviours, perceived as being morally inappropriate, from taking place. Put differently, while conscience is most certainly vested with the power of veto, as it were, the prohibition issued may sometimes lack the intended perlocutionary effect. Thus, when the internal veto fails to become external action, it is the responsibility of conscience, as an integral part of the super-ego, to elicit feelings of remorse. In Freud's own words,

> I feel an inclination to do something that I think will give me pleasure, but I abandon it on the ground that my conscience does not allow it. Or I have let myself be persuaded by too great an expectation of pleasure into doing something to which the voice of conscience has objected and after the deed my conscience punishes me with

distressing reproaches and causes me to feel remorse for the deed.

(*The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis* 486-87)

All these preliminary observations are necessary to understand properly the irony implicit in the title of Svevo's third novel. First of all, however, a few words need to be said about the difficulty that the original title poses for the English translator, because these remarks have far-reaching implications for my interpretation. In Italian, *coscienza* has two primary meanings: (i) "consciousness," that is, "the state of being conscious," "awareness," and (ii) "conscience," in the moral sense discussed above.[3] In English, on the other hand, the incidence of meaning (i) is relatively so low that practically speaking, it can be safely ignored.[4] C*onscience*, then, has come to be associated in English, almost without exception, with the realm of ethics. It is worth mentioning, though, that the Italian original, *La coscienza di Zeno*, means both "Zeno's Awareness" and "Zeno's Conscience." It is clear by now that facing a tough decision, William Weaver definitely made the right choice when he translated the novel's title as *Zeno's Conscience*. In any event, not only does Svevo skilfully capitalize on the two meanings of *coscienza*, he uses irony to expose the hidden inconsistencies between them, especially as they refer to a Freudian framework.

As indicated, self-observation contributes decisively to the judging activity of conscience. Furthermore, because of the objectivity involved in self-observation,

[3] Interestingly, but not quite surprisingly, this also happens in other Romance languages, such as French and Romanian, where dictionaries list "consciousness," or "awareness," as the primary meaning of the word—*conscience*, in French, *conștiință*, in Romanian—while "moral awareness" appears as the second meaning. In these languages, therefore, the title of the novel captures the double meaning of *coscienza*, which remains somewhat obscure in English.

[4] For instance, *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists all the senses that lack moral overtones after those entailing ethical connections. Moreover, quite a few of these meanings are normally used in rather specialized contexts, or else they are rare and obsolete.

one of the stated goals of psychoanalytic therapy is to stimulate the patient's appetite for such an activity, which Freudians sometimes differentiate from more narcissistic introspection (Rycroft 87). Along with the capacity for self-observation, key to an effective therapy, there is also the subject's increased self-awareness. Indeed, the favourable outcome of psychoanalysis is predicated on the analyst's competence to make the patient aware of the mental processes that unfold in the depths of his or her unconscious. In order to shed as much light as possible on the patient's unconscious, the greatest obstacle that the analyst has to overcome is the patient's resistance to analysis. To quote Freud, "[t]he analysis aims at laying bare the complexes which have been repressed as a result of the painful feelings associated with them, and which produce signs of resistance when there is an attempt to bring them into consciousness" (*Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* 148). Elsewhere, Freud describes the theory of psychoanalysis as follows: "The whole of psychoanalytic theory is in fact built up on the perception of resistance exerted by the patient when we try to make him conscious of his unconscious" (148). As for this resistance, Freud recognizes that it genuinely represents a bête noire of the analyst: "The overcoming of resistance is the part of our work which requires the greatest time and the greatest trouble" (162). In explaining the function of insight in psychotherapy, Anna Freud also acknowledges the analyst's responsibility to promote the development of self-observation and awareness as means to convert the unconscious into the conscious: "Self-observation and awareness of what goes on are capacities normal to the mature ego. Analysts try to help the patient make use of these capacities and extend them into the unconscious area of the mind" (*The Technique of Child*

Psychoanalysis: Discussions with Anna Freud 69).

Long before having his protagonist involved in therapy, Svevo reveals Zeno's penchant for self-reflection. Notable, for instance, are the passages describing the five agonizing days Zeno spends away from the Malfenti household, a time during which he does a lot of soul-searching, painstakingly examining his intentions, actions, and beliefs. At the end of the ordeal, when Ada asks him, out of pure courtesy, to attend the séance conducted by Guido at her house, Svevo shows Zeno caught off-guard by the invitation: "I neither answered nor thanked her. I had to analyze that invitation before accepting" (111) ["Non risposi né ringraziai. Dovevo analizzare quell'invito prima di accettarlo" (O 685)]. A few hours later, in one of the most dramatic scenes of the novel, shortly after Ada unequivocally rejects Zeno's love and he apologizes for whatever trouble his acts may have caused her, we witness Zeno as he is overwhelmed by the urge to step outside reality and delve deep into his own psyche for comfort: "For a moment I closed my eyes, to be alone with my soul and to see how much peace it had now gained" (133) ["Io chiusi per un instante gli occhi per isolarmi con la mia anima e vedere quanta pace gliene fosse derivate" (703)]. Struck by a fleeting moment of illumination, Zeno quickly extricates himself from self-scrutiny: "I stopped analyzing myself, because I could see myself whole" (133) ["Io cessai dall'analizzarmi perché mi vidi intero!" (703)]. Here, Svevo makes Zeno speak in psychoanalytic parlance, in which "whole" may refer to the ideal situation when, following therapy, the patient is able to extend the boundaries of his conscious so far into the unconscious that it renders it irrelevant.

Nevertheless, very few things in Svevo are what they initially seem to be, and

that is exactly what happens here. The short-lived clarity that Zeno believes he has achieved is imagined, rather than genuine, and it represents just the first movement in a carefully orchestrated ironic dynamic. The climax of this particular episode, which is in fact very much an anti-climax, takes place when Alberta turns down Zeno's marriage proposal mere minutes after an appalled Ada declined to reciprocate Zeno's feelings. This example of irony constitutes a perfect illustration of how Svevo brilliantly turns the tables on the allegedly undeniable advantages of self-observation. Indeed, instead of praising its healing properties, he actually considers self-observation as a source of suffering and unhappiness. For example, when Zeno spends most of those fateful five days away from Ada buried in self-reflection in hopes of finding some peace of mind, the result he obtains is exactly the opposite:

> The introspection I achieved in my study, from which I anticipated solace, only made clearer the reasons for my despair, exacerbated to the point of tears. I loved Ada! I didn't yet know if that was the right verb, and I continued my analysis. I wanted her not only to be mine, but to be my wife . . . I wanted all of her, and I wanted all from her. In the end I concluded that the verb was correct: I loved Ada. (96) [Il raccoglimento ch'io mi procurai nel mio studiolo e da cui m'aspettavo un sollievo, chiarí solo le ragioni della mia disperazione che s'esasperò fino alle lacrime. Io amavo Ada! Non sapevo ancora se quel verbo fosse proprio e continuai l'analisi. Io la volevo non solo mia, ma anche mia moglie . . . Io la volevo tutta e tutto volevo da lei. Finii col concludere che il verbo fosse proprio quello: io amavo Ada.

(673)]

It soon becomes apparent, however, that Zeno's decision to do whatever it takes in order to win Ada's heart backfires. This undoubtedly is Svevo's ironic way of saying that self-observation as a therapeutic practice is at best overrated. At worst, it is just plain wrong. It has already been shown that self-examination, for which Zeno has an obvious weakness before he undergoes a full ironic reversal, does little to boost one's progress toward health, but Svevo's allegations go even further. Shortly after his marriage to Augusta, Zeno discovers, not without a sense of authentic surprise, his wife's robust health. This awareness does not occur as a result of sustained self-scrutiny, the way Freudian theory predicted it would happen, but rather when its dominance has significantly declined. "During our engagement," Zeno observes, "I hadn't even glimpsed [Augusta's] health, because I was totally absorbed in studying myself first and, after myself, Ada and Guido. The glow of the oil lamp in that drawing room had never reached Augusta's thinnish hair" (156) ["Durante il fidanzamento io non avevo neppur intravvista quella salute, perché tutto immerso a studiare me in primo luogo eppoi Ada e Guido. La lampada a petrolio in quel salotto non era mai arrivata ad illuminare gli scarsi capelli di Augusta" (723)].

Similarly, and contrary to one of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis, Svevo disputes the view that an increased self-awareness proves to be beneficial for those who strive for it. As a matter of fact, he claims that it has disease-inducing effects. One can easily find plenty of textual evidence to back up this statement. In the chapter "My Father's Death," Svevo defines the dissimilarity between the father and the son precisely along the line that separates those who are perhaps

overly conscious from those who do not quite care about being aware of themselves and of the world: "My yearning for health had driven me to study the human body. He, on the contrary, had been able to dispel from his memory any thought of that frightful machine. For him the heart did not beat and there was no need to recall valves and veins and metabolism, to explain how his organism lived" (34) ["Il mio desiderio di salute m'aveva spinto a studiare il corpo umano. Egli, invece, aveva saputo eliminare dal suo ricordo ogni idea di quella spaventosa macchina. Per lui il cuore non pulsava e non v'era bisogno di ricordare valvole e vene e ricambio per spiegare come il suo organismo viveva" (622)]. For Svevo, clearly, there is a direct causal relationship between developing an obsession with human anatomy, which naturally produces an increased awareness of one's underlying somatic processes, and the emergence of disease. Thus, while Zeno views himself as perpetually sick, the father is absolutely content with himself, fully enjoying his blissful ignorance: "He lived in perfect harmony with the way he was made, and I must believe that he never exerted any effort to improve" (33) ["Egli viveva perfettamente d'accordo sul modo come l'avevano fatto ed io devo ritenere ch'egli mai abbia compiuti degli sforzi per migliorarsi" (622)].

Giovanni Malfenti, whom Svevo constructs to act as a father figure for Zeno, displays remarkably similar qualities. Again, the opposition between the substitute father, a man of "few ideas" (62) ["poche idee" (646)], and his adopted son revolves around the former's serene unawareness and the latter's unhealthy hyperawareness: "Having gone through two university departments, I was fairly cultivated . . . He, on the contrary, was a great businessman, ignorant and active. But from his ignorance he drew strength and peace of mind, and I, spellbound,

would observe him and envy him" (62) ["Io ero abbastanza còlto essendo passato attraverso due facoltà universitarie . . . 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" (646)]. Zeno's strong desire to emulate his future father-in-law eventually turns out to be true. In the last chapter of the novel, when the reversal of Zeno's condition is complete, he does actually resemble Malfenti: he is now a healthy and successful merchant who has completely abandoned his longing for ever-greater self-awareness: "It was business that healed me and I want Dr. S. to know it . . . Like all strong people, I had in my head a sole idea, and by that I lived and it made my fortune" (434) ["Fu il mio commercio che mi guarí e voglio che il dottor S. lo sappia . . . Come tutte le persone forti, io ebbi nella mia testa una sola idea e di quella vissi e fu la mia fortuna" (951)].

Perhaps the best example of Svevo's conviction that an augmented *coscienza*-as-awareness of one's corporeality literally interferes with the normal functioning of the body, thus creating the ideal conditions for the disease to occur and develop, can be found in the Tullio episode. In a novel filled with sick people and doctors possessing different levels of expertise, Tullio stands out. Not only is he not frightened at the prospect of having to live with a literally crippling disease for the rest of his life, he actually fully embraces his affliction. For Tullio, sickness has truly become his second nature. Tullio's presence in the narrative as a whole remains fairly limited, and this may suggest that he serves primarily as an embodiment of Svevo's view according to which excessive awareness is intimately connected with disease. Judged superficially, Tullio's part in the

narrative edifice appears to be marginal, but that could not be further from the truth. In fact, one can safely posit that Svevo introduces him in the novel because he wants to create a mirror image of Zeno. Tullio speaks and acts like a Zeno who has not undergone a dramatic transformation, that is to say, like a Zeno whose fate has not been subjected to an ironic reversal. Svevo describes Tullio as being quite loquacious about his disease, but this bizarre volubility does not necessarily set him apart from other sick people who populate the novel. Consider, for instance, Enrico Copler, one of Zeno's ailing friends. Copler exhibits a comparable urge to chat about his illness: "With the two sick men there [Copler and Malfenti], we all spent a very merry afternoon. They talked about their sicknesses, which provide the greatest diversion for the sick, while the subject is not too sad also for the healthy who are listening" (170) ["Fra' due malati si passò un pomeriggio lietissimo. Si parlò delle loro malattie, ciò che costituisce il massimo svago per un malato ed è una cosa non troppo triste per i sani che stanno a sentire" (735)].

Tullio, however, elevates cohabitation with disease into an art. In a crucial passage of the novel, Svevo talks about Tullio's favourite pastime, which, unsurprisingly, is his sickness. Like Zeno, he develops a keen interest in human anatomy, becoming relatively proficient in the area of the body that directly interests him. It should be quickly noted, though, that Tullio's deeper understanding of the pathological condition afflicting him, his hyperawareness of disease, if you will, does not alleviate his suffering. Ironically enough, it causes Zeno a very real, long-lasting physical pain, instead. Here is the passage, quoted in full:

> Tullio had resumed talking about his illness, which was also his chief

hobby. He had studied the anatomy of the leg and the foot. Laughing, he told me that when one walks at a rapid pace, the time in which a step is taken does not exceed a half-second, and that in that half-second no fewer that [*sic*] fifty-four muscles are engaged. I reacted with a start, *and my thoughts immediately rushed to my legs*, to seek this monstrous machinery. I believe I found it. Naturally I didn't identify the fifty-four moving parts, *but rather an enormous complication went to pieces the moment I intruded my attention upon it*. I limped, leaving that café, and I went on limping for several days. For me, walking had become hard labor, also slightly painful. That jungle of cogs now seemed to lack oil, and in moving, they damaged one another reciprocally. A few days afterwards, I was assailed by a more serious illness . . . that diminished the first. But even today, as I write about it, if someone watches me when I move, the fifty-four muscles become self-conscious and I risk falling. (105, emphasis added) [Tullio s'era rimesso a parlare della sua malattia ch'era anche la sua principale distrazione. Aveva studiato l'anatomia della gamba e del piede. Mi raccontò ridendo che quando si cammina con passo rapido, il tempo in cui si svolge un passo non supera il mezzo secondo e che in quel mezzo secondo si muovevano nientemeno che cinquantaquattro muscoli. Trasecolai *e subito corsi col pensiero alle mie gambe* a cercarvi la macchina mostruosa. Io credo di avercela trovata. Naturalmente non riscontrai cinquantaquattro ordigni, *ma una complicazione enorme che perdette il suo ordine dacché io vi ficcai la*

> *mia attenzione*. Uscii da quel caffè zoppicando e per alcuni giorni zoppicai sempre. Il camminare era per me divenuto un lavoro pesante, e anche lievemente doloroso. A quel groviglio di congegni pareva mancasse oramai l'olio e che, movendosi, si ledessero a vicenda. Pochi giorni appresso, fui colto da un male piú grave . . . che diminuí il primo. Ma ancora oggidí, che ne scrivo, se qualcuno mi guarda quando mi muovo, i cinquantaquattro movimenti s'imbarazzano ed io sono in procinto di cadere. (680-81)][5]

A few comments are in order here. First of all, this is the second time Svevo has Zeno describe the human body or a part of it as a device, a "macchina", that in spite of its high structural sophistication, or maybe precisely because of it, frightens observers greatly, instead of bringing them peace of mind. This remark is important because it aligns with everything that has been said so far. Indeed, at the heart of one's terrors often lies what eludes explanation or comprehension. What the mind cannot apprehend, the mind fears, especially the mind itself. In the above passage and elsewhere in *Zeno's Conscience*, Svevo suggests that despite the mind's best efforts to grasp itself or the world, there will always be something that escapes its natural impulse to conquer and make it its own. In other words, there will always be a part of the unconscious that remains forever outside the

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[5] In trying perhaps to make the whole passage sound more consistent and capture the spirit rather than the letter of the original, Weaver comes up with an interesting solution to the problem posed by the verb *imbarazzare*. Commonly referring to a physical process, *imbarazzare* may be translated as "prevent" or "hinder." It also has a figurative meaning, "putting someone in distress, perplexity." However, using *self-conscious*, which conveys, among other things, the sense of being ill at ease and of not flowing continuously or naturally, is not without merits. Verdicchio proposed an alternate translation, which stayed closer to the original, in his 1990 article on the novel. In Verdicchio's version, the last sentence reads as follows: "But even today, if anyone watches me walking, the fifty-four movements get tied up in a knot, and I feel like falling" (30).

scope of the conscious. Freud believed, quite optimistically, that he could heal a variety of mental disorders by teaching his patients how to gain access to their unconscious and address the conflicts that lay hidden there. Svevo, using Zeno as a decoy, begged to differ.

Encapsulated in this passage one can find the gist of Svevo's profound disagreement with Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Tullio's uncalled-for exposition on the highly complex processes involved in the proper functioning of the foot and the leg, even in the seemingly most mundane situations, does expand Zeno's awareness, but that in turn falls short of expectations. Far from contributing meaningfully to his wellbeing, it actually accomplishes the opposite of what it was supposed to do. In Svevo's fictional universe, an enlarged conscience-as-awareness does not promote healing but makes one literally sick. It is also worth pointing out that the nature of Zeno's sudden health problem following his chance encounter with Tullio validates the point that has just been made about Svevo's noticeable anti-Freudian stance. The fact that Svevo shows Zeno limping as he leaves the café is revealing because the whole scene immediately brings to mind a mythical character whose posthumous reputation has come to be closely associated with the work of Freud. Etymologically, the name Oedipus, *Οἰδίπους*, which means "swollen-footed," refers exactly to the part of the body that starts bothering Zeno as soon as he becomes aware of its intricate structure and exquisite functioning. It can be argued, then, that by making his protagonist assume the quintessential attribute of Oedipus, at a time when, on the contrary, Zeno should have actually freed himself from illness, Svevo ironically undermines the Freudian thesis that greater self-awareness can alleviate mental

suffering and consequently expedite healing.

As previously stated, a discussion about irony in *La coscienza di Zeno* could very well start with the novel's title. My working hypothesis in the beginning of this chapter was that Svevo uses irony to subvert both senses of *coscienza* when they occur in a Freudian framework. I have already shown how Svevo accomplishes the task he has set himself in regard to the first meaning, "conscience-as-awareness." I shall now turn my attention to the second meaning of *coscienza*, "conscience-as-moral-awareness," or simply "conscience," to investigate the way Svevo undermines this meaning. Zeno's conscience-as-moral-awareness comes to the foreground in the second half of the novel, most notably in the chapters "Wife and Mistress" and "The Story of a Business Partnership." In both these chapters, Svevo places Zeno in circumstances where a more visible involvement of his conscience in the decision-making process is required. As demonstrated by the title, "Wife and Mistress" documents Zeno's extramarital affair shortly after his marriage to Augusta Malfenti. It is a testament to Svevo's sharp sense of irony that he begins a chapter dealing with marital infidelity by having newlywed Zeno extolling the virtues of matrimony as well as those of his wife: "In my life I believed at various times that I was on the path to health and happiness. But never was this belief stronger than during the period of my wedding journey, and for a few weeks after our return home. It began with a discovery that stunned me: I loved Augusta and she loved me" (156) ["Nella mia vita ci furono varii periodi in cui credetti di essere avviato alla salute e alla felicità. Mai però tale fede fu tanto forte come nel tempo in cui durò il mio viaggio di nozze eppoi qualche settimana dopo il nostro ritorno a casa. Cominciò

con una scoperta che mi stupí: io amavo Augusta com'essa amava me" (723)].

One must not forget that this surprising revelation constitutes yet another ironic reversal, because it stands in direct contradiction to some of Zeno's earlier presuppositions about himself and the people around him. "Who could have foreseen this," Zeno marvels at the turn of events he is so incredulously witnessing, "when I was limping from Ada to Alberta, to arrive at Augusta? I discovered I had not been a blind fool manipulated by others, but a very clever man" (156) ["Chi avrebbe potuto prevederlo quando avevo zoppicato da Ada ad Alberta per arrivare ad Augusta? Scoprivo di essere stato non un bestione cieco diretto da altri, ma un uomo abilissimo" (723)]. This is a good example of what I have previously identified as tropological irony in Svevo's third novel. The essence of an ironic development of this kind lies in the complete inversion that Zeno's views undergo at key points in the narrative. Typically, the beginning of such an ironic sequence finds Zeno holding certain beliefs or making certain assumptions about the world and about himself. As time goes by, not only these beliefs and assumptions are simply disproved but the opposite of what Zeno initially expects to happen eventually comes to pass.

Take, for instance, Zeno's first impression of Augusta: "How could anyone have called her beautiful? The first thing you noticed about her was a squint so pronounced that if someone tried to recall her after not having seen her for a while, that defect would *personify* her totally" (70-71, emphasis added) ["Come avevano fatto a dirla bella? La prima cosa che in lei si osservava era lo strabismo tanto forte che, ripensando a lei dopo di non averla vista per qualche tempo, la *personificava* tutta" (653)]. Soon after the wedding, however, both Zeno's opinion

of Augusta and his understanding of their relationship are shown to have gone through a spectacular turnaround. To enhance the ironic effect, Svevo makes Zeno use the same word to convey essentially an antithetical idea. Rather than defining Augusta in relation to a physical imperfection, Zeno sees her as "the *personification* of health" (156, emphasis added) ["la salute *personificata*" (723)]. In much the same way, Zeno's first impression of Ada turns out to be completely unwarranted: "Instead of that lightning bolt [of a *coup de foudre*, my note], I felt a prompt conviction that this woman was the one I needed, the one who would lead me actually to moral and physical health through holy monogamy" (73) ["Quel colpo di fulmine, però, fu sostuito dalla convinzione ch'ebbi immediatamente che quella donna fosse quella di cui abbisognavo e che doveva addurmi alla salute morale e fisica per la santa monogamia" (655)]. Not only does Ada reject Zeno's love and marriage proposal, it is Augusta who, in the end, will take this demanding duty upon herself: "You, Zeno, need a woman who wants to live for you and help you. I want to be that woman" (136) ["Voi, Zeno, avete bisogno di una donna che voglia vivere per voi e vi assista. Io voglio essere quella donna" (706)].

It is not without importance, especially from the point of view of the current examination of conscience-as-moral-awareness in *La coscienza di Zeno*, that the protagonist of the novel associates the idea of health with that of a monogamous marriage. The beginning of the chapter "Wife and Mistress" is just one instance where Svevo's mastery of irony becomes manifest. As one ironic sequence comes to an end, with Zeno's realization that Augusta, rather than Ada, was the right woman for him to marry, another one begins. Freshly married and, by his own

admission, close to being healthy and happy as he could ever be, Zeno seems ready to enjoy his monogamous marriage to the fullest. However, it does not take long before his self-assurance is bluntly exposed for what it is: an illusion cleverly set up by a narrator who is determined to hold his main character captive in a thoroughly ironic universe. In dealing with such a universe, one would be well advised not to take anything for granted, for nothing in it is what it seems to be, including conscience-as-moral-awareness. Since the basic narrative mode in *Zeno's Conscience* appears to be ironic, it is not entirely unreasonable for the reader to assume that Svevo may have placed this key term in the title in an ironic frame of reference.

When it comes to conscience-as-moral-awareness in Svevo's third novel, the essence of irony consists in the fact that despite his claims to the contrary, Zeno almost always ends up working against his conscience rather than with it. The trouble with Zeno is that he wants to do good, or at least he thinks he wants to do good, but at the end of the day he finds himself doing exactly what he knows he should not have done in the first place. He recognizes very well for instance that engaging in an adulterous affair with Carla Greco is wrong, and yet he cannot help seducing her. Irony here can be said to measure the discrepancy between intention and reality, between what is professed and what is actually accomplished. A likely explanation for this could be Zeno's predisposition to disregard, minimize, or even ridicule the warning signals he receives from his conscience. In any case, one can easily test the validity of these claims by simply examining the way in which Zeno recounts the story of his love affair with Carla.

Right from the beginning, Svevo shows Zeno being more concerned with

finding excuses for his improper conduct than with taking actual measures to prevent it: "The battle with sin in some circumstances becomes very difficult because you have to renew it every day and every hour" (181) ["La lotta col peccato diventa in tali circostanze difficilissima perché bisogna rinnovarla ad ogni ora ed ogni giorno" (743-44)]. Finding excuses is a recurrent theme in "Wife and Mistress," and it stands as proof of the fact that Svevo has Zeno adhere to a rather peculiar view of conscience, which conveniently suits his needs. Consider for example the passage in which he reveals Zeno's perplexity at finding out that his infatuation with another woman does trigger some feelings of guilt. This moment occurs well before the relationship with Carla becomes illicit, and the first part of Zeno's soliloquy runs as follows: "Why should my desire have caused me any remorse, when it seemed actually to have arrived just in time to save me from the menacing tedium of those days? In no way did it harm my relations with Augusta: quite the contrary, in fact" (182) ["Perché il mio desiderio avrebbe dovuto darmi un rimorso quando pareva fosse proprio venuto a tempo per salvarmi dal tedio che in quell'epoca mi minacciava? Non danneggiava affatto i miei rapporti con Augusta, anzi tutt'altro" (744)]. According to Zeno, the guilt he experiences when thinking of Carla has no grounds, since his sexual appetite for a woman other than his wife appears to have benefitted everyone involved. Remorse, Zeno seems to imply, is clearly out of place in this case because, as far as he is concerned, no offense has been committed.

Svevo's brilliant irony emerges once again as he exposes Zeno's fallacious argument: "I spoke to [Augusta] now not only with the affectionate words I had always had for her, but also with those that, in my thoughts, were being formed

for the other. There had never been such a wealth of tenderness in my house, and Augusta seemed enchanted by it" (182) ["Io le dicevo oramai non piú soltanto le parole di affetto che avevo sempre avute per lei, ma anche quelle che nel mio animo andavano formandosi per l'altra. Non c'era mai stata una simile abbondanza di dolcezza in casa mia e Augusta ne pareva incantata" (744)]. By uncovering Zeno's twisted logic, Svevo not only portrays him as a self-centered individual, unaware of the impact of his actions on other people, he also comments on Zeno's rather loose, idiosyncratic understanding of how conscience is typically supposed to function.

Zeno, for instance, believes that the nagging voice of conscience can be effectively silenced not just by correcting one's behaviour to eliminate remorse but by overcompensating in other, generally less relevant areas of conduct: "I was always strict regarding what I called the family schedule. My conscience is so delicate that, with my present behavior, I was already preparing to attenuate my future remorse" (182) ["Ero sempre esatto in quello che io chiamavo l'orario della famiglia. La mia coscienza è tanto delicata che, con le mie maniere, già allora mi preparavo ad attenuare il mio futuro rimorso" (744)]. To be sure, Zeno's declaration of his "delicate" conscience is right out of Svevo's ironic repertoire and needs to be understood as such. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find proof suggesting that Zeno's conscience is puritanical or squeamish, namely, quick to react to moral offense; if anything, all evidence points to the opposite conclusion. This is not the first time that Svevo's ironic maneuvers disrupt Zeno's autobiographical narrative, and they serve an explicit purpose: to enclose Zeno's clearly biased and paradoxical account in an ironic, more impersonal framework

to alert the reader that when it comes to Zeno, things are not always what they seem to be.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that the story of Zeno's liaison with Carla cannot and should not be subsumed under the superficial designation of confession. A confession, at least in the most common sense of the term, necessarily entails the recognition of one's guilt, and that is never the case in "Wife and Mistress." As a matter of fact, Svevo constructs Zeno in such a way that he always appears to be unfit for confession. This is not because Zeno absolutely and unequivocally rejects the idea of confession—there are several moments, both in "Wife and Mistress" and "The Story of a Business Partnership," when, under the burden of guilt, Zeno comes very close to confessing to Augusta—he simply lacks the moral fortitude to admit frankly his wrongdoings.[6] All these aborted attempts at a confession are ultimately highly suggestive because they clearly indicate some sort of shortcoming in the way Zeno envisages the functioning of his conscience. The fact that Zeno occasionally experiences remorse is irrelevant as long as he fails to eradicate it through an act of genuine contrition.

Instead of having his protagonist speak in a straightforward manner about his misadventures, the way true confessions are made, Svevo describes Zeno's tendency to resort to preposterous rhetorical acrobatics in order to justify his actions and evade responsibility. To fully appreciate Zeno's circuitous style, the following passage needs to be quoted in its entirety:

[6] See for instance pages 194/754, 206/764, 207/765, 208/766, 243/795, 270-71/817-18, 305/846, and 321/859.

> That my resistance was not totally lacking is proved by the fact that I reached Carla not in one outburst, but by degrees. First, for several days I arrived only as far as the Public Garden, and with the sincere intention of delighting in that greenery that seems so pure in the midst of the grayness of the streets and houses that surround it. Then, not having had the good luck to run into her casually, as I had hoped, I left the Garden and walked until I was directly under her windows. I did this with great emotion, which recalled that delightful excitement of a youth approaching love for the first time. For a long while I had been deprived not of love, but of the thrill of rushing to it. (182) [Che la mia resistenza non sia mancata del tutto è provato dal fatto che io arrivai a Carla non con uno slancio solo, ma a tappe. Dapprima per varii giorni giunsi solo fino al Giardino Pubblico e con la sincera intenzione di gioire di quel verde che apparisce tanto puro in mezzo al grigio delle strade e delle case che lo circondano. Poi, non avendo avuta la fortuna di imbattermi, come speravo, casualmente in lei, uscii dal Giardino per movermi proprio sotto le sue finestre. Lo feci con una grande emozione che ricordava proprio quella deliziosissima del giovinetto che per la prima volta accosta l'amore. Da tanto tempo ero privo non d'amore, ma delle corse che vi conducono. (744)

On many other occasions, Svevo does not hesitate to lay bare Zeno's self-contradictory statements. A noticeable gap opens up between what is claimed and what is truly intended, and through this essentially ironic gap, one can easily discern Zeno's mischievous stratagem. No trick, such as feigning sincerity to

mask a deliberate duplicity, is too small or trivial if it brings Zeno close to his goal, to seduce Carla.

The greatest irony of all, at least in the context of my reading, lies elsewhere, in the passage that persuades whoever may come across it, that Zeno's conscience is alive and well. The "resistance" that Zeno is talking about unmistakably points to the common activity of a supposedly robust conscience whose primary duty is to warn and forbid. In making its decisions, the ego, to use a Freudian terminology, finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it has to deal with the persistent surge of raw instinctual drives coming from the id, while, on the other, a relentless voiceover pouring from above proclaims the harsh directives of the super-ego, "thou shalt not." What is at stake is precisely the ego's choice: either treat the prescriptions of conscience with indifference and move toward pleasure, largely associated with impulses of a sexual nature, or obey the orders of conscience and practice restraint, that is, resistance. Pleasure plays a key role not only in Freud's model of the psyche but also in the passage quoted a little earlier, and this takes us right to the heart of the matter.

The observant reader cannot miss the fact that Zeno's shrewd subterfuges are nothing but a cover-up meant to conceal what everybody already knows very well. More specifically, there is no room for conscience in the game Zeno plays. He tries his best at being convincing, but the result is exactly the opposite of what he intended. In the end, the vocabulary that Zeno employs betrays him: "great emotion," "delightful excitement," and "thrill of rushing to [love]" all leave little doubt about his true intentions. Rather than a prudent exercise in self-control, this voluntary deferral of pleasure constitutes a carefully staged procedure to enhance

the gratification Zeno seeks. The passage is emblematic not just for the chapter "Wife and Mistress" but also for the whole novel in that it purports to showcase Zeno's conscience only to have it vanquished.

It can be argued that Svevo depicts Zeno's relationship with his own conscience as ironic. A hilarious episode recounted in the chapter "Wife and Mistress" illustrates Zeno's penchant to ridicule the workings of his conscience, even though he initially gives the impression that he obeys its commands. During one of his thrill-seeking strolls, Zeno runs into his mother-in-law. One cannot overemphasize the irony of this awkward encounter, since the whole purpose of Zeno's daily walks is to give himself a better chance to meet the woman he plans to lure into becoming his mistress. In the passage, Zeno describes not only how his conscience responds to the incident but also how he deals with the response: "But just the sight of her was enough to make me feel the grip of my family again. I turned toward home . . . murmuring: 'Never again! Never again!' At that moment Augusta's mother . . . had given me the sense of all my duties. *It was a good lesson, and it lasted the whole day*" (183, emphasis added) ["Ma mi bastò di averla vista di sentirmi riafferrato dalla mia famiglia. Camminai verso casa mia . . . mormorando: 'Mai piú! Mai piú!'. In quell'instante la madre di Augusta . . . mi aveva dato il sentimento di tutti i miei doveri. *Fu una buna lezione e bastò per tutto quel giorno*" (745)].

This rather trivial episode epitomizes Zeno's ironic predicament. It includes all the major elements that make up the substance of Zeno's ironic relationship with his conscience. At first, he seems more than willing to comply with the authoritative directions of his conscience, but his resolution quickly fades and

Zeno ends up doing precisely what he vowed not to do, namely, to chase Carla and take full advantage of his higher position in the social hierarchy to seduce her. It soon becomes apparent that Svevo uses this ironic pattern—with relatively few shifts—as a paradigm for the entire Carla saga. In this ironic account, Zeno's status may be compared to that of a mere puppet at the mercy of a creator who, totally committed to the principles of irony, pulls the strings from behind the scene. This is well illustrated by what happens to Zeno when, in trying to maintain a safe distance from the charms of Carla, he is drawn, as if by a magic, to her apartment (183-84/745-46). Of course, no magic force is at work anywhere in the novel, or if it is, one should call it by its real name—irony.

This is by now a quite familiar scenario: the more Zeno wants to resist the temptation to pursue Carla, in the early stages of the affair, or extricate himself from it later on, the deeper involved he becomes in the romantic and sexual relationship. As irony would have it, in running back and forth between Augusta and Carla, Zeno always seems to be out of sync with these events: while sleeping in the same bed with Augusta, he dreams of literally devouring Carla's neck while kissing it. Conversely, when holding Carla in his arms, the thought of Augusta fills his mind: "There, at Carla's side, my passion for Augusta was reborn completely. Now I would have had only one desire: to rush to my true wife" (211) ["Lí, accanto a Carla, rinacque intera la mia passion per Augusta. Ora non avrei avuto che un desiderio: correre dalla mia vera moglie" (768)].

The implications of Zeno's bizarre dream for my reading of Svevo, however, warrant a separate discussion. For the purposes of the current analysis, the narrative of the dream can be divided into two parts: the first part includes the

main body of the dream, while the second part features its conclusion. Here is the first part: “Not only was I kissing Carla’s neck: I was also eating it. But the neck was made in such a way that the wounds I inflicted on it with angry lust did not bleed, and with its slightly curved shape, the neck still remained covered by white, intact skin. Carla, sinking in my arms, seemed not to suffer from my bites” (193) [“non solo baciavo il collo di Carla, ma lo mangiavo. Era però un collo fatto in modo che le ferite ch’io le infliggevo con rabbiosa voluttà non sanguinavano, e il collo restava perciò sempre coperto dalla sua bianca pelle e inalterato nella sua forma lievemente arcuata. Carla, abbandonata fra le mie braccia, non pareva soffrisse dei miei morsi” (753)].

Up to this point, the meaning of the dream seems pretty straightforward, even for a layperson: since cannibalism can be viewed as the most extreme form of appropriation and ownership, it represents a fitting symbol for Zeno’s unquenchable desire to possess Carla. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of Zeno’s eroto-cannibalistic assault to leave visible marks on Carla’s immaculate neck transcribes into the dream as his growing frustration at not being able to make significant progress in seizing the object of his desire. Zeno himself, we are told, quickly grasps the meaning of his dream upon waking up in the morning: “Once awake, I was fully aware of the force of my desire and of the danger it represented for Augusta and also for me” (193) [“Non appena desto, ebbi la piena coscienza della forza del mio desiderio e del pericolo ch’esso rappresentava per Augusta e anche per me” (753)]. It would not be too difficult for a trained psychoanalyst to recognize, in full accordance with Freud’s theory of dreams, the dual structure of Zeno’s oneiric experience: on the one hand, the manifest content of the dream,

namely, the actual images of Zeno's eroto-cannibalistic act; on the other, its latent content, or Zeno's intense sexual craving for Carla. In his landmark study on dreams, Freud identifies this distinction as a revolutionary innovation brought by psychoanalysis to the study of dreams (381).

Starting with Freud, the focus of the investigation moves from the manifest content to the latent one: "It is from [this latent content] and not from a dream's manifest content that we disentangle its meaning" (381). The task of the analyst is to try to decipher the often-obscure operations, referred to as dream-work, whereby the dreamer converts the latent into the manifest (381). As Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "the dream-content [i.e., manifest content, my note] seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts [i.e., latent content, my note] into another mode of expression, whose character and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation" (381). Essentially, the interpretive work of the analysts consists in trying to undo the effects of the dream-work. As Rycroft puts it, "dream-interpretation is the reverse of dream-work" (40). The clarity of a dream does not necessarily make the interpretation easier; almost always, the encryption process follows intricate paths that position themselves in convoluted structures. In approaching these complex and occasionally treacherous configurations, analysts may find themselves at a loss as to how the apparently disconnected pieces of information can be made to fit together in order to interpret the dream's meaning. Not surprisingly, given the numerous impediments that an activity of this nature needs to overcome, psychoanalytic dream interpretation can get at times highly speculative. A classic example would be Freud's own two dreams, reported and interpreted in his study

(548-53). It takes Freud a long time to untangle the knots and reach the supposedly true latent content of these dreams, but some of the conjectures he makes sound forced or tentative. This is reflected in the use of some typical constructions of epistemic modality—"must have been," "must have had," or "must have gone"—to indicate likelihood rather than certainty.

As previously stated, this is not the case with Zeno's dream, where the latent content—Zeno's desire to seduce Carla—appears to be superficially concealed within the manifest content of the dream—Zeno's act of eroto-cannibalism. Because the two contents almost coincide, the process of interpretation does not require any specialized assistance. And then, there is the conclusion of the dream. Svevo's comical disposition takes over, strongly suggesting that the whole dream scene serves as a trapdoor, cleverly set up by the author for all those who might spend an inordinate amount of time searching for psychoanalytic clues throughout the novel. The concluding part of Zeno's dream unfolds as follows: "The one who suffered [from my bites], on the contrary, was Augusta, who suddenly arrived running. To reassure her, I said: 'I won't eat it all; I'll leave a piece for you, too'" (193) ["Chi invece ne soffriva era Augusta che improvvisamente era accorsa. Per tranquillizzarla le dicevo: 'Non lo mangerò tutto: ne lascerò un pezzo anche a te'" (753)]. Interestingly enough, Svevo chooses to conclude Zeno's dream in such a way that the legitimacy of a Freudian interpretation seems to be reinforced once again. In reality, Svevo skillfully undercuts it.

It is highly probable that blissfully unaware of what lies ahead, readers will do precisely what Svevo wants them to do: promptly identify the figure of Augusta as Zeno's own conscience, which, summoned by the moral transgression

it is witnessing, quickly rushes to the scene in order to try to contain it. By moving to an entirely different discursive register without warning, Zeno's hilarious reaction delivers a mortal blow to the urgency of the situation, and along with it—at least in the way Svevo orchestrates his narrative—to the hermeneutic ambitions of psychoanalytic dream interpretation. Indeed, it can be argued that Zeno's inability to get beyond the surface of Carla's white skin, despite his repeated quasi-aggressive attempts, constitutes perhaps an apt metaphor for the ironic condition of all analysts: the more they try to penetrate the depths of dreams, and by extension, the depths of the unconscious—since it was Freud who said that "*[t]he interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind*" (769, emphasis in the original)—the more they appear to be firmly stuck to their surface. While Zeno's dream gives the impression of validating Freud's celebrated definition in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the entire dream sequence in "Wife and Mistress" does not read like a homage to Freud's theory of dreams but rather like its caricature.[7] A brief episode from the chapter "Psychoanalysis" confirms it. In his first diary entry, dated 3 May 1915, Zeno tells the story of a dream he had while still seeing Doctor S. as a patient. This is a dream within a dream: Zeno the adult dreams himself as a baby dreaming to possess a "shapely woman" (409) ["una donna formosa" (930)] by ingesting her: "And the child dreamed of possessing that woman, but in the strangest way. He was sure, that is, that he could eat some little pieces at the top and at the base" (409) ["Ed il bambino sognava di possedere quella donna, ma nel

[7] According to Freud, "*a dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish*" (244, emphasis in the original).

modo più strano: era sicuro cioè di poter mangiarne dei pezzettini al vertice e alla base" (931)]. Here, once again, we encounter the familiar theme of cannibalism as a substitute for (sexual) possession.

To be sure, this is Svevo's irony at its best. To appreciate fully its implications, one has to consider the episode in its broader context. The main purpose of Zeno's diary notes is to destroy the credibility of psychoanalysis as a legitimate therapy, by showing that despite its claims to the contrary, the status of psychoanalysis will always be that of a pseudoscience. I shall come back to this point in the next chapter. For now, let it suffice to say that Doctor S. falls prey to the danger of over-interpretation, which, Zeno suggests, with impunity, to be very common among analysts. Dazzled by his own theoretical preconceptions, Doctor S. can only extract from Zeno's dream what he was conditioned to do: an explicit reference to an Oedipal desire that supposedly lies at the root of all neuroses. He could not be more wrong, of course. Quickly approaching the limits of his patience, Zeno correctly points out that Doctor S. holds the key to the dream almost literally in his hands: "I am amazed that the doctor, who, according to what he says, has read my manuscript so carefully, didn't recall the dream I had before going to see Carla. To me . . . as I thought it over, it seemed that this dream was simply the other one, slightly altered, made more childish" (409) ["sono stupito che il dottore che ha letto, a quanto ne dice, con tanta attenzione il mio manoscritto non abbia ricordato il sogno ch'io ebbi prima di andar a raggiungere Carla. A me . . . quando ci ripensai, parve che questo sogno non fosse altro che l'altro un po' variato, reso piú infantile" (931)]. The irony is that a mere dilettante turns out to be better at interpreting dreams than the skilled practitioner who is

unable to do what he routinely asks his patients to do, namely, remember. The moral of this story points to the pitfalls of investing in psychoanalysis with more prerogative powers than it may actually be entitled to. Hopelessly infatuated with the importance of their own monumental mission, as Svevo looking through Zeno's eyes sees it, advocates of psychoanalysis often appear to be painfully oblivious of any perils that might lie in wait for them.

In this chapter, I have argued that Svevo takes full advantage of the double meaning of the word *coscienza*, conscience-as-(self) awareness and conscience-as-moral-awareness. Not only does Svevo employ both these meanings, he also treats them ironically. In fact, a study of tropological irony in *Zeno's Conscience* could very well start by investigating the ways in which Svevo uses and simultaneously subverts the notion of conscience. This has been my primary concern in the current chapter. Intrinsic to the nature of tropological irony is the idea of reversal, which can be defined as a change from one state to the opposite state. As regards the first of the two meanings, conscience-as-(self) awareness, I have focused on Freudian concepts such as self-observation and increased awareness and I have demonstrated that Svevo resorts to irony to turn them completely upside down. For instance, contrary to one of the central doctrines of psychoanalytic theory, Svevo indicates that an increased awareness does not promote health, rather disease. With respect to the second meaning, the claim has been made that Svevo uses Zeno's extramarital affair with Carla as a pretext to examine critically the question of conscience-as-moral-awareness. I have pointed out that the essence of Zeno's ironic predicament lies in the fact that more often than not, he unwittingly ends up doing what he had not necessarily intended to do

or even committed himself to not doing. This ironic condition raises a few questions about Zeno's understanding of how conscience is supposed to function in specific real-life situations, and how one is expected to respond to the call of conscience. To this end, I have shown that Zeno displays a rather idiosyncratic understanding of this two-way process, in that he adjusts it in such a way as to suit his needs.

Chapter II

"Vorrei morire da sano dopo aver vissuto tutta una vita da malato": Zeno's Imaginary Illness[1]

In this chapter, I shall continue my analysis of tropological irony in *Zeno's Conscience*, with an emphasis on what is arguably the most important reversal in the novel, that of its protagonist. It is without question one of Svevo's supreme ironies to name the leading figure in his third novel after a renowned member of the Eleatic School whose equally famous paradoxes seek to demonstrate the impossibility of motion and therefore of change. Zeno's worldview, his beliefs about himself and others, undergoes a dramatic change over the course of the narrative that constitutes the main feature of tropological irony. Ironic structures of this kind are characterized by a marked dissymmetry between what is originally thought or asserted and what eventually comes to pass, and Zeno experiences such an antithetical development firsthand. As Verdicchio states with good reason, "Zeno is always the first victim of his pronouncements" (28).

Consider, for instance, the following two excerpts taken from the beginning of the chapter "The Story of My Marriage": "My life could provide only a single note with no variation . . . Throughout my life my friends maintained the same opinion of me, and I believe that I, too, since arriving at the age of reason, have not so much changed the notion I formed of myself" (61) ["La mia vita non sapeva fornire che una nota sola senz'alcuna variazione . . . I miei amici mi conservarono durante tutta la mia vita la stessa stima e credo che neppur io, dacché son giunto all'età della ragione, abbia mutato di molto il concetto che feci

[1] "I would like to die of health, after having lived a lifetime of illness."

di me stesso" (645)]. Zeno identifies this very Eleatic view of his own existence as the main reason behind his decision to start looking for a wife. Just a few lines down, he plunges into a digression meant to explain the most common misconception about marriage, the fact that it seems to provide occasion for a genuine change of the two parties involved, when in reality, it does not:

> The chosen companion will renew, improving or worsening, our breed by bearing children: Mother Nature wants this but cannot direct us openly, because at that time of life we haven't the slightest thought of children, so she induces us to believe that our wife will also bring about a renewal of ourselves: a curious illusion not confirmed by any text. In fact, we live then, one beside the other, unchanged, except for an acquired dislike of one so dissimilar to oneself or an envy of one who is our superior. (61) [La compagna che si sceglie rinnoverà, peggiorando o migliorando, la propria razza nei figli, ma madre natura che questo vuole e che per via diretta non saprebbe dirigerci, perché in allora ai figli non pensiamo affatto, ci dà a credere che dalla moglie risulterà anche un rinnovamento nostro, ciò che'è un'illusione curiosa non autorizzata da alcum testo. Infatti si vive poi uno accanto all'altro, immutati, salvo che per una nuova antipatia per chi è tanto dissimile da noi o per un'invidia per chi a noi è superiore. (645)]

These are perfect examples of pronouncements, which Zeno emits with unwarranted certainty, that will eventually come back to haunt him. In writing his opinions Zeno lends them an air of truth that they obviously lack: far from being authoritative and complete, they are unreliable and provisional. It should come as

no surprise, therefore, that later on, skillfully moved by Svevo's invisible strings, Zeno finds himself in the position to disprove his own previous opinions, seemingly unaware of the irony in these acts of rebuttal. In contrast to the two excerpts quoted earlier we find a surprisingly new statement at the beginning of the chapter "Wife and Marriage": "I discovered I had not been a blind fool manipulated by others, but a very clever man. And, seeing my amazement, Augusta said to me: 'Why are you so surprised? *Didn't you know this is how marriage is? Even I knew it, and I'm so much more ignorant than you!*'" (156, emphasis added) ["Scoprivo di essere stato non un bestione cieco diretto da altri, ma un uomo abilissimo. E vedendomi stupito, Augusta mi diceva: — Ma perché ti sorprendi? *Non sapevi che il matrimonio è fatto cosí? Lo sapevo pur io che sono tanto piú ignorante di te!*" (723)]. In less than four lines, Zeno contradicts both of his earlier statements: he changed his opinion of himself at some point in his adult years, and by way of an unexpected lesson in humility, he proves that he really had no idea what matrimony is all about. Furthermore, the person who claims to be ignorant, Augusta, proves to be more knowledgeable than the self-appointed expert, Zeno. This is a good example of Socratic irony.

Many times in the course of the novel, Svevo casts Zeno in the role of an unsuspecting character at the mercy of a universe governed by tropological irony. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall concentrate on just one of the many reversals that Zeno is put through, the one that takes him from a life defined by sickness to a life of sound health. Early in his autobiography, Zeno speaks not in uncertain terms about his strange relationship to illness: "Disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction" (14) ["La malattia, è una convinzione ed io

nacqui con quella convinzione" (605)]. By the time he arrives at the end of his narrative, Zeno paints a different picture: "I am cured! . . . I do not feel healthy comparatively. I am healthy, absolutely" (434) ["Io sono guarito! . . . Non è per il confront ch'io mi senta sano. Io sono sano, assolutamente" (951)]. To clarify what happens between these two antithetical moments, I shall examine the concept of imaginary illness by discussing two key passages in the chapter "Wife and Mistress." The first passage is taken from one of Zeno's several botched confession attempts to Augusta and prefigures some of the ideas in the second passage. The first passage runs as follows: "I don't know in what connection with the imaginary illness, I talked also about our blood, which flowed round and round, kept us erect, capable of thought and action and therefore of guilt and remorse" (208) ["Non so in quale connessione con la malattia immaginaria, parlai anche del nostro sangue che girava, girava, ci teneva eretti, capaci al pensiero e all'azione e perciò alla colpa e al rimorso" (766)].

The notion of "imaginary illness" comes from an earlier scene in the chapter, when Augusta calls Zeno in jest "but an imaginary sick man" (171) ["non . . . altro che un malato immaginario" (735)]. At the time, Zeno is conversing with his sick friend Enrico Copler on illness— he, incidentally, is the man who later introduces Carla to Zeno—and with his equally sick father-in-law, Malfenti. Both Zeno and Copler agree that imaginary sickness should be granted equal status with other, more respectable diseases: "In his nephritis . . . a warning sign from the nerves had been absent . . . whereas my nerves, on the contrary, were perhaps so sensitive that they were alerting me to the sickness I would die of some decades later. So they were perfect nerves and had the sole disadvantage of not

allowing me many happy days in this world" (172) ["Proprio nella sua nephrite era mancato . . . un avviso dei nervi, mentre che i miei nervi . . . erano forse tanto sensibili da avvisarmi della malattia di cui sarei morto qualche ventennio piú tardi. Erano dunque dei nervi perfetti e avevano l'unico svantaggio di concedermi pochi giorni lieti a questo mondo" (736)]. Zeno does not object when Copler refers to his, that is, Zeno's, imaginary sickness as a "disorder of the overexerted nerves" (173) ["disordine di nervi troppo laboriosi" (736)]. Zeno's paradoxical statement quoted above, which undoubtedly reminds readers of his renowned namesake Zeno of Elea, is yet another illustration of Svevo's superb sense of irony. Possessing nerves that perform flawlessly, it would appear, is not necessarily desirable, for they can and most likely will get you in trouble. Moreover, there is a good chance that the proud owner of such fine nerves will actually end up being diagnosed at some point as suffering from a certain, nerve-related disorder.

Remarkable as this paragraph may be, it is even more important to realize that defined in these terms, an imaginary illness is literally a neurosis.[2] In a Freudian context, the term describes the by-product of the frictions between the ego and its id (*Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* 117). Freud understands neurosis essentially as a defense mechanism: confronted with an instinctual demand made by the id, the ego, which construes the request as dangerous, denies it. But as

[2] Etymologically, *neurosis* comes from the ancient Greek word *νεῦρον*, "nerve." The Scottish doctor William Cullen first introduced the concept of neurosis in 1769. He used it in the plural form to designate a class of pathological conditions of the nervous system: "In this place I propose to comprehend, under the title of NEUROSES, all those preternatural affections of sense or motion, which are without pyrexia, as a part of the primary disease; and all those which do not depend upon a topical affection of the organs, but upon a more general affection of the nervous system, and of those powers of the system upon which sense and motion more especially depend" (330).

Freud observes, that is hardly the end of the story, because what has been repressed eventually returns (120). It should be noted first that in chasing Carla, Zeno goes through a similar scenario. One could argue that irony cures Zeno of his neurosis, or at the very least, it dramatically alleviates its impact. Nevertheless, it is not a coincidence that Zeno speaks of imaginary illness, of neurosis, in the same sentence in which he talks about guilt and remorse. Both guilt and remorse are the super-ego's close attendants during its habitual clashes with the ego. "Our moral sense of guilt," Freud states, "is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego" (*Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* 82). Conscience, as a function of the super-ego, is part and parcel of this twofold intrapersonal agon. I call it twofold because the conflict that sets the ego in opposition to the id appears to be directly determined by the one unfolding between the super-ego and the ego. It should therefore come as no surprise that judged from his restricted viewpoint, Zeno's speech satisfies the requirement of a genuine confession, since it accurately captures the substance of his inner turmoil: "[Augusta] didn't understand that this was all about Carla, but to me it seemed as if I had told her everything" (208) ["Essa non capi che si trattava di Carla, ma a me pareva di averle detto tutto" (766)].

In the second passage, Svevo describes Zeno's thoughts as he rushes home after a meeting Carla:

> There was no trace of remorse in me. Therefore I believe remorse is generated not by regret for a bad deed already committed, but by the recognition of one's own guilty propensity. The upper part of the body bends over to study and judge the other part and finds it deformed.

> The repulsion then felt is called remorse. Even in ancient tragedy the victim wasn't returned to life, and yet the remorse passed. This meant that the deformity was cured, and that the tears of others had no further importance. Where could there be any room for remorse in me, when, with so much joy and so much affection, I was speeding to my legitimate wife? For a long time I had not felt so pure. (214-15) [Di rimorso non v'era traccia in me. Perciò io penso che il rimorso non nasca dal rimpianto di una mala azione già commessa, ma dalla visione della propria colpevole disposizione. La parte superiore del corpo si china a guardare e giudicare l'altra parte e la trova deforme. Ne sente ribrezzo e questo si chiama rimorso. Anche nella tragedia antica la vittima non ritornava in vita e tuttavia il rimorso passava. Ciò significava che la deformità era guarita e che ormai il pianto altrui non aveva alcuna importanza. Dove poteva esserci posto per il rimorso in me che con tanta gioia e tanto affetto correvo dalla mia legittima moglie? Da molto tempo non m'ero sentito tanto puro. (771)]

Even a cursory examination of the passage reveals the presence of a peculiar type of narrative at work, what Gérard Genette in his 1980 study *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* calls "interpolated narrating" (217-18). What distinguishes interpolated narrating from the other three kinds of narrating identified by Genette (subsequent, prior, and simultaneous) is its complexity. Indeed, interpolated narrating may include two or occasionally even three types of narrating, and as a result, Genette argues, "the story and the narrating can become entangled in such a way that the latter has an effect on the former" (217). Autobiographies, both

non-fictional and fictional, as well as diaries, are particularly susceptible to employing interpolated narrating, because this technique provides the speaker with the opportunity to reflect upon, annotate, evaluate and re-evaluate, or downright question the ability to recollect truthfully past events. To be sure, the narrator engages in all these different activities *while* narrating the past; however, to record such intrusions of the "now" in writing, one has to switch from the tenses of the past to those of the present.

In our specific example, Svevo combines subsequent and simultaneous narrating, and the maneuver does yield notable results. I shall first isolate and then examine separately the two distinct fragments that make up the passage, each featuring a different type of narrating. This method will enable me to show how the two fragments work together to create meaning. The first fragment, of subsequent narrating, starts at the beginning of the passage and then proceeds, after a relatively sizeable hiatus, from "Where could there be any room for remorse in me" until the end of the paragraph. Remorse, or rather the complete lack thereof, is the main theme here, and Zeno expresses it in no uncertain terms. This constitutes a noteworthy development in the context of Zeno's affair with Carla: the voice of conscience appears to have been effectively silenced and the anxiety generated by its labour seems to have completely vanished. It is also at this point that under Svevo's masterful direction, irony reaches its pinnacle: Zeno's conscience has now become merely an absence, the pure manifestation of emptiness. That this moment of outstanding significance, where conscience fully coincides with its opposite, occurs precisely at the halfway mark of chapter "Wife and Mistress" cannot be considered accidental.

For a while Zeno is able to strike the right balance between Augusta and Carla. After all, the title of the chapter is "Wife *and* Mistress" (emphasis added) ["La moglie *e* l'amante"]. This amoral duality embodies the ideal state in which a man without conscience such as Zeno would like to live indefinitely. The turn of the twentieth century, however, proved to be less than enthusiastic about amoral utopias of this sort, and in a hilarious scene, Svevo shows Zeno denouncing the social order of his time for not accommodating the legitimate wishes of married men to have occasional mistresses: "It should have been capable, I felt, of allowing a man to make love now and then (not always), without his having to fear the consequences, even with women he doesn't love at all" (214) ["Mi pareva avrebbe dovuto essere tale da permettere di tempo in tempo (non sempre) di fare all'amore, senz'aver a temerne delle conseguenze, anche con le donne che non si amano affatto" (771)]. If conscience seems to be directly responsible for the feelings of guilt and remorse one experiences, then by the same token, the absence of conscience, or non-conscience, should be heralding the dawn of a new life in which psychological disorders of all kinds could very well become obsolete. This is exactly the fate that Svevo assigns, alas, only temporarily, to his protagonist. Referring to his anxiety-free self at that time, Zeno compares it to an oasis where guilt and remorse have no place:

> For me and for my health, it would have been very grave if all my long affair with Carla had proceeded in eternal agitation. From that day on, as a result of this esthetic beauty, things progressed more calmly, with the slight interruptions necessary to rekindle my love for Carla and my love for Augusta. True, my every visit to Carla meant an

> infidelity to Augusta, but all was soon forgotten in a bath of health and of good intentions. (237-38) [Per me e per la mia salute sarebbe stato gravissimo se tutta la mia lunga relazione con Carla si fosse svolta in un'eterna agitazione. Da quel giorno, come risultato della bellezza estetica, le cose si svolsero piú calme con le lievi interruzioni necessarie a rianimare tanto il mio amore per Carla, quanto quello per Augusta. Ogni mia visita a Carla significava bensí un tradimento per Augusta, ma tutto era presto dimenticato in un bagno di salute e di buoni propositi. (790)]

While the meaning conveyed in the first fragment is pretty straightforward, things get a little more complicated in the second fragment of simultaneous narrating. Though from a purely formal perspective the first two sentences in the passage are placed close together, their respective contents belong to two different temporal orders. Once Zeno has made it very clear that his infidelity with Carla no longer came with a burden of guilt and remorse, he moves from the past of narrated actions to the present of reflection and comment. This quick temporal shift is essential and needs to be understood correctly. Since Zeno gets involved in his autobiographical project by authorial decree, Svevo allots him a double function: narrator of the story and, at the same time, its protagonist. It is worth noting that the switch from one kind of narrating to the other also marks a switch from one protagonist to another. The Zeno who writes "Therefore I believe," namely, the protagonist of simultaneous narrating, is not the Zeno whose lack of remorse was just documented in the preceding sentence. Indeed, one of the most visible examples of tropological irony in Svevo's third novel is the fact that

despite what his name may suggest, Zeno can and eventually does change.

Unlike the early Zeno, the later Zeno has become acquainted with psychoanalysis, which he finds not necessarily abstruse but “very boring” (5) [“molto noioso” (598)]. The image Zeno-as-narrator uses to get his point across as he speculates on the source and nature of remorse, that of a metaphorical body whose upper part conveniently leans over in order to keep the lower part in check, immediately calls to mind Freud’s description of the relationship between the super-ego and its ego. According to Freud, it is precisely the severity with which a strict ego seeks to subordinate the ego that gives rise to the sense of guilt (*Civilisation and Its Discontents* 70). In Zeno’s view, remorse cannot be said to be the after effect of a wrongful or inappropriate behaviour, because if it were, the argument goes, he would definitely have felt its presence on his way back home from Carla. Freud, however, believes otherwise. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he cautions against using *remorse* and a *sense of guilt* “too loosely and interchangeably” (83).

A detailed presentation of Freud’s argument lies outside the scope of the current chapter; it is nevertheless critical to explain briefly how he distinguishes between these two notions. As opposed to remorse, which occurs only after a bad action has been carried out, the sense of guilt comes into play *ante factum*. This happens, Freud argues, because it makes little to no difference to the super-ego whether the misdeed has actually been perpetrated or only intended: both act and thought are judged by the same (harsh) measure. Since the super-ego has the power of infinite knowledge within the universe of the psyche, it is virtually impossible to keep anything hidden from it. Even if one actively resists answering

the call of one's instincts, one is made to feel guilty simply for harbouring them. To differentiate this pre-emptive sense of guilt from the guilt one experiences *post-factum*, Freud identifies the latter as remorse: "When one has a sense of guilt after having committed a misdeed, and because of it, the feeling should more properly be called *remorse*. It relates only to a deed that has been done, and . . . it presupposes that a *conscience*—the readiness to feel guilty—was already in existence before the deed took place" (78, emphasis in the original).[3] *Civilization and Its Discontents* was published roughly seven years after *Zeno's Conscience* and two years after Svevo's death, so one cannot interpret Zeno's ruminations on remorse as an overt Svevian critique of the Freudian distinction between the sense of guilt and remorse. What stands out, however, is a strange similarity in wording: the noun phrase Freud uses to characterize conscience—"the readiness to feel guilty"—greatly resembles Svevo's construction "one's own guilty propensity."

But there is a more subtle commentary on Freud concealed in the passage I have been looking at. Unfortunately and unintentionally, Weaver's translation obscures rather than clarifies the meaning, so I shall use the original as a primary guide for my analysis. Here is the pivotal sentence in the passage: "Perciò io penso che il rimorso non nasca dal rimpianto di una mala azione già commessa, ma dalla visione della propria colpevole disposizione." The first half of the sentence does not pose any real challenges for Weaver: "Therefore I believe

[3] In this paragraph, Freud establishes conscience as the necessary precondition in order for remorse to manifest itself. However, just a few pages later, he seems to contradict himself: "Remorse is a general term for the ego's reaction in a case of sense of guilt. It contains, in little altered form, the sensory material of the anxiety which is operating behind the sense of guilt; it is itself a punishment and can include the need for punishment. Thus remorse, too, can be older than conscience" (84).

remorse is generated not by regret for a bad deed already committed." The second half, however, is more problematic. This is one of those instances when a literal translation works better to translate the original. Remorse, Svevo insists through Zeno, comes to life (literally "is born") not through an act of "recognition of one's guilty propensity," as Weaver puts it, but rather through a vision, or an image, of that disposition. To understand how such a vision takes shape, we need to read further: "The upper part of the body," which undeniably stands for the super-ego, "bends over to study and judge the other part," namely, the ego, "and finds it deformed." Incidentally, the two actions mentioned here, "to study and judge," describe precisely the manner in which conscience, according to Freud, conducts its business (see above, page 21).

It is worth observing that the notion of guilty propensity evokes the Freudian concept of pre-emptive guilt, which is guilt for no other reason than the one that has been postulated by the super-ego. Thus, the ego is found guilty simply on account of its presumed deformity. The ego's tendency to feel guilty, even in those instances when such a feeling may not be warranted, signals its fundamentally subservient condition in relation to the super-ego. Under these special circumstances, the scenario in which the ego ends up inventing the images of its own guilt, perhaps to appease an ever-angry super-ego, sounds entirely plausible. A somewhat similar mechanism appears to be at work in the psyche of those individuals that psychoanalysis identifies as neurotics. Owing to a defective transformation of the Oedipus complex, the super-ego of the neurotic develops abnormally, becoming exceedingly strict. Freud explains the consequences of this malfunction as follows:

> His Super-Ego deals with his Ego like a strict father with a child, and his idea of morality displays itself in primitive ways by making the Ego submit to punishment by the Super-Ego. Illness is employed as a means for this "self-punishment." The neurotic has to behave as though he were mastered by guilt, which the illness serves to punish, and so to relieve him. (*Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* 127)

This seemingly endless cycle, in which guilt-as-punishment and illness are prerequisites for achieving relief, explains why neurotics go to great lengths to ensure that no one or nothing deprives them of the very source of their misery: "They complain of their illness, but they make the most of it, and when it comes to taking it away from them they will defend it like a lioness her young; there is no use in reproaching them with their contradiction" (126). A more accurate appellative for the paradoxical behaviour that Freud observed in his neurotic patients would be of course irony.

At this point, it should be noted that Svevo uses the Freudian account of the interaction between the super-ego and its ego as a pattern for the relationship between Doctor S. and Zeno. In evaluating analogies of this kind, however, one must proceed with utmost caution, for Svevo manipulates them to his own advantage. Indeed, the whole purpose of alluding to the founder of psychoanalysis, here and elsewhere in the novel, is to subvert the truth-value of Freudian theories rather than reinforce it. The most obvious common denominator of the two relationships in question is the fact that both evolve under the sign of subservience. Early in the chapter "Psychoanalysis," having just revealed his decision to give up therapy for good, Zeno depicts his submissiveness toward his

analyst as follows: “No stress is imposed on me any longer. I don’t have to force myself to have faith, or to pretend I have it. The better to conceal my true thoughts, I believed I had to show him a supine obsequiousness” (403) [“Non m’è piú imposto alcuno sforzo. Non debbo costringermi ad una fede né ho da simulare di averla. Proprio per celare meglio il vero mio pensiero, credevo di dover dimostrargli un ossequio supino” (926)]. Moreover, the fascination with which Zeno receives Doctor S.’s blatant misdiagnosis betrays a mordancy that is barely disguised as reverence: “And I didn’t become angry! Spellbound, I lay there and listened. It was a sickness that elevated me to the highest noble company. An illustrious sickness, whose ancestors dated back to the mythological era!” (403) [“Né io m’arrabbiai! Incantato stetti a sentire. Era una malattia che mi elevava alla piú alta nobiltà. Cospicua quella malattia di cui gli antenati arrivavano all’epoca mitologica!” (926)].

Closely connected with this asymmetric position, in fact, deriving directly from it, is the circular reasoning by which the party that regards itself as superior in the economy of the relationship judges the other. Doctor S. appears to believe that his patients in general and Zeno in particular suffer definitely from the Oedipus complex simply because they seek qualified help from an expert, who happens to be a psychoanalyst. Unsurprisingly, everything that Zeno says and does during his therapy confirm Doctor S.’s pre-established diagnosis. Similarly, the super-ego posits the ego’s guilt by virtue of its self-proclaimed superiority. In the end, both the analyst and the super-ego formulate their conclusion solely on the basis of their authority, whose legitimacy—like that of a genuine article of faith—they never distrust or even question.

Lastly, and most important, the third similarity that supports the idea of an analogy between the two relationships under consideration has to do with the process of visualization in which both the ego and Zeno find themselves involved at some point. As previously indicated, Zeno defines remorse as the repulsion felt when the ego, confronted by the super-ego, literally visualizes its own presumed deformity. It is as if the super-ego held a mirror in front of the ego, so that the latter could view and thus experience firsthand the guilt triggered by its supposed disfigurement. What the ego sees, or rather what it thinks it sees, may not necessarily be consistent with fact or reality. To put it differently, the malformation may be perceived, not real, merely the product of the ego's own imagination. Zeno, as portrayed in Svevo's work, displays a relatively similar creative disposition when asked by Doctor S. to delve inside his memory during therapy, in an exercise known as anamnesis. Analysts hold anamnesis in high regard: not only do they wholeheartedly believe in the beneficial effects of this procedure, they also commonly expect to be able to extract some valuable information about the etiology of various mind disorders from the patients' remembrance of their past. According to J. Jones,

> psychoanalysis is based on the belief, confirmed by facts, in the healing power of the uttered word, or more precisely of recollecting memories. In psychoanalysis . . . relating the contextual events that have triggered the neurotic symptoms is extremely important. The patient has to remember facts, happenings, and other events, of any kind, that may be related to the occurrence of the symptoms. (http://www.freudfile.org/psychoanalysis/anamnesis.html)

The therapy Doctor S. devises for Zeno works under an identical assumption. It is however not a coincidence that images, rather than words, take centre stage in Zeno's anamnesis. Svevo knows very well that *image*, *imagine*, *imagination*, and *imaginary* all come from the same root word, the Latin *imāgō*, "image," so he skillfully points to the implications of this etymological relatedness, namely, that images, as products of imagination, may well be, in whole or in part, imaginary. This possibility is quickly confirmed when Svevo, using Zeno's handwriting as a medium, discloses that the images his protagonist conjures from the past are in fact invented. He also makes sure to indicate that in creating those images, Zeno does not deliberately try to deceive Doctor S. "But inventing is a creation," Zeno insists, "not a lie" (404) [Ma inventare è una creazione, non già una menzogna" (927)]. And for a while, Zeno himself seems to be confident that his mental representations of the past are truthful: "My faith in the authenticity of those images persisted in my spirit, even when, quite soon . . . my cold memory discovered further details of that period" (406) ["La fede nell'autenticità di quelle immagini perdurò nel mio animo anche quando, presto . . . la mia fredda memoria scoperse altri particolari di quell'epoca" 928)].

In light of all the above, it is reasonable to conclude that within the framework of the novel, the therapy that Zeno undergoes under Doctor S.'s supervision functions as a pretext for Svevo to ridicule the claims made by psychoanalysis about its curative abilities. For instance, the manner in which Doctor S. handles the evidence gathered during his sessions with Zeno, as well as from Zeno's autobiographical account, reveals some problematic aspects, which seem to incriminate not only Doctor S.'s highly idiosyncratic understanding of

psychoanalysis but also the techniques and practice of psychoanalysis in general. During therapy, analysts gain valuable insights into the psyche of their patients and that is precisely why they can easily become the victims of their own success. Beguiled by what they take to be interpretive acumen, they may start seeing clues where there are none or mistake circumstantial evidence for conclusive proof. As Zeno shares with Doctor S. the images he has summoned from his past, the latter cannot contain his satisfaction with how the process of anamnesis is unfolding. However, as Zeno promptly points out, the analyst's contentment has no grounds: "And the doctor made notes. He said: 'We have had this, we have had that.' To tell the truth, we had had nothing more than graphic marks, skeletons of images" (405) ["E il dottore registrava. Diceva: 'Abbiamo avuto questo, abbiamo avuto quello.' In verità, noi non avevamo piú che dei segni grafici, degli scheletri d'immagini" (927)].

To be sure, one can still argue that Doctor S.'s flagrant errors have no bearings on psychoanalysis as a whole. In other words, the fact that a certain analyst, using unorthodox methods, to begin with, exhibits such crass incompetence in dealing with his patient does not necessarily imply that psychoanalysis as a psychotherapeutic theory and practice is entirely wrong. If anything, any deviation that is shown to perform ineffectively in the course of time only proves that its failure cannot be attributed to the norm from which it has strayed. And yet, one can find enough evidence in the text to suggest that the real target of Zeno's criticism, which, as it will soon turn out to be the case, replicate to a certain extent Svevo's, is psychoanalysis in general, not one of its unique incarnations. In the following passage, Zeno seems to refer specifically to his

personal experience, but the end of his diatribe leaves no doubt about who is in fact the actual addressee: "But now that I know everything, namely that [my therapy] was nothing but a foolish illusion . . . how could I bear the company of that ridiculous man, with that eye of his, meant to be penetrating, and that presumption that allows him to collect all the phenomena of this world within his great new theory?" (403) ["Ma ora che sapevo tutto, cioè che non si trattava d'altro che di una sciocca illusione . . . come potevo sopportare la compagnia di quell'uomo ridicolo, con quel suo occhio che vuole essere scrutatore e quella sua presunzione che gli permette di aggruppare tutti i fenomeni di questo mondo intorno alla sua grande, nuova teoria?" (926)].

As Zeno's disappointment with the outcome of his therapy escalating quickly, he decides, under Svevo's auctorial direction, to give conventional medicine one more chance. The tests that Dr. Paoli runs in order to reach a diagnosis provide Zeno with the opportunity to reflect on the scientific character of allopathic medicine. In stark contrast with psychoanalysis, which Zeno now unflatteringly calls "charlatanism" (415) ["una ciarlataneria" (935)], such medicine follows the protocols of the scientific method closely, employing empirical and measurable evidence. As such, it can be said to come as close to the truth as humanly possible:

> Paoli analyzed my urine in my presence. The mixture turned black, and Paoli became thoughtful. Here, finally, was a real analysis and not a psychoanalysis . . . In that test tube . . . all was truth. The thing to be analyzed was imprisoned in the tube and, remaining always itself, it awaited the reagent. When it arrived, the thing always said the same

> word. (415) [Il Paoli analizzò la mia orina in mia presenza. Il miscuglio si colorí in nero e il Paoli si fece pensieroso. Ecco finalmente una vera analisi e non piú una psico-analisi . . . In quel tubetto . . . tutto era verità. La cosa da analizzarsi era imprigionata nel provino e, sempre uguale a se stessa, aspettava il reagente. Quand'esso arrivava essa diceva sempre la stessa parola. (936)]

When compared to the early twentieth-century mainstream medicine, which adheres unconditionally to the principles of scientific method, psychoanalysis, in Zeno's view, at least, appears to cut a poor figure. The conspicuous absence of reproducibility, a critical component of scientific method, makes psychoanalysis look like a pseudoscience. Science, as defined by the American Physical Society,

> is the systematic enterprise of gathering knowledge about the universe and organizing and condensing that knowledge into testable laws and theories. The success and credibility of science are anchored in the willingness of scientists to expose their ideas and results to independent testing and replication by other scientists. (5-6, quoted in Sergey Fomel and Jon F. Claerbout).

As early as 1638, when he published his *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, Galileo Galilei was aware of the importance of reproducibility.[4] Galileo's detailed description of how he prepared and performed what was to become the well-known experiment of the inclined plane allowed Samuele Straolino, an Italian physicist, to reconstruct the original experiment almost 375

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[4] The standard English translation of Galilei's work is fully available in electronic format at http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/g/galileo/dialogues/complete.html

years later. Commenting on Galileo's thorough specifications for his experiment, Straolino makes the following observation: "Galileo states that his results have been obtained from experiments *repeated a full hundred times*. He probably realized that any measurement has to be reproduced without significant changes in the results" (317, emphasis in the original). As opposed to scientific medicine, Zeno writes in his diary entry dated 3 May 1915,

> [i]n psychoanalysis there is never repetition, neither of the same images nor of the same words. It should be called something else. Let's call it psychic adventure. That's right: when you begin such an analysis, it's as if you were going into a wood, not knowing whether you will encounter an outlaw or a friend. And even when the adventure is over, you still don't know. In this, psychoanalysis recalls spiritualism. (416) [Nella psico-analisi non si ripetono mai né le stesse imagini né le stesse parole. Bisognerebbe chiamarla altrimenti. Chiamiamola l'avventura psichica. Proprio cosí: quando s'inizia una simile analisi è come se ci si recasse in un bosco non sapendo se c'imbatteremo in un brigante o in un amico. E non lo si sa neppure quando l'avventura è passata. In questo la psico-analisi ricorda lo spiritismo. (936)]

But the devastating blow, which Zeno seems to be more than happy to deliver, is yet to come. Shortly after we are told that the protagonist has stopped seeing Doctor S., without formally calling off the therapy, Svevo orchestrates a chance encounter between Zeno and his analyst. This is highly ironic, for it directly contradicts Zeno's resolution, openly expressed on the previous page, not

to have anything to do with Doctor S. anymore, "not even to make fun of him" (416) ["neppure per deriderlo" (936)]. As expected, the analyst urges Zeno to continue his therapy, invoking its beneficial effects as a final argument. However, Zeno dismantles Doctor S.'s rather naïve confidence by stating that the opposite was in fact true: "I believe that, with his help, in studying my consciousness, I have introduced some new sickness into it" (417) ["io . . . credo che col suo aiuto, a forza di studiare l'animo mio, vi abbia cacciato dentro delle nuove malattie" (937)]. This is a typical example of tropological irony in Svevo's third novel, one of many, I might add, and it echoes Zeno's earlier remark, made in the beginning of chapter "Wife and Mistress," as he recounts his marvel at discovering Augusta's unexpected (for him) wellbeing: "I am analyzing her health, but I fail, because I realize that in analyzing it I convert it into sickness" (158) ["Io sto analizzando la sua salute ma non ci riesco perché m'accorgo che, analizzandola, la converto in malattia" (725)].

In the last chapter of the novel, therefore, another ironic cycle, perhaps the most important, comes to an end. Its origin can be traced back to the moment when Zeno, greatly annoyed that doctors, conventional doctors, that is, had been unsuccessful in their efforts to cure his mysterious pain, turned his hopes toward psychoanalysis. It is of course highly ironic that Zeno's profound dissatisfaction with scientific medicine eventually leads him back to Dr. Paoli, the archetypal embodiment of such medicine. Equally ironical, however, Doctor S.'s attempt to heal Zeno also turns out to be a miserable failure. The so-called therapeutic benefits of psychoanalysis, energetically praised by its proponents, have in reality adverse effects. The unintended consequence of Zeno's psychoanalytic therapy is,

ironically, more sickness rather than less.

Critics and scholars seem to be in agreement when it comes to Svevo's ambivalent relationship with Freud's work.[5] It is also well documented that Svevo himself questioned the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a medical practice. In a letter to Valerio Jahier dated December 10 1927, he wrote, "Freud was a great man, but more useful to novelists than sick people" ["Grande uomo quel nostro Freud ma piú per i romanzieri che per gli ammalati" (E 857)].[6] He went on mentioning briefly the deep disappointment suffered by a relative of his, for whom the psychoanalytic treatment had proved to be an unmitigated disaster.[7] This fiasco may also have shattered any traces of confidence in the healing powers of psychoanalysis that Svevo may still have harboured: "For the sake of accuracy, let me just add that, after years of treatment entailing heavy expenses, Freud himself dismissed his patient, declaring him incurable. I do admire Freud, but that verdict, after so much wasted time, left me with an impression of disgust" ["Per esattezza debbo aggiungere che il Freud stesso, dopo anni di cure implicanti gravi spese, congedò il paziente dichiarandolo inguaribile. Anzi io ammiro il Freud, ma quel verdetto dopo tanta vita perduta mi lasciò un'impressione disgustosa" (E 859)].

What Svevo mistrusts is the widespread belief in a therapeutically based cure

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[5] See P.N. Furbank (177-82), John Gatt-Rutter (246-51 and 314), Naomi Lebowitz (29-72), Brian Moloney (60-63), Charles C. Russell (197-99), Elizabeth Schächter (135-55), and Beno Weiss (59-60).

[6] All translations from the *Epistolario* (*Epistolary*) are mine.

[7] The editors of the *Epistolario* identify this mysterious figure simply as "un nipote" (858) ("a nephew"). According to Gatt-Rutter, however, Svevo refers to Bruno Veneziani, his brother-in-law and friend of doctor Edoardo Weiss. It was Weiss who suggested that Bruno seek help from Freud himself after a certain doctor Victor Tausk, a Viennese colleague of Freud, had been unable to cure him of his homosexuality (247-48).

for various neuroses.[8] Just as in *Zeno's Conscience*, he subjects this conviction to sarcasm: "*From a literary point of view*, Freud is certainly more interesting. If only I had done a treatment with him. My novel would have been more complete" ["*Letterariamente* Freud è certo piú interessante. Magari avessi fatto io una cura con lui. Il mio romanzo sarebbe risultato piú intero" (E 859, emphasis in the original)].[9] This passage is taken from a letter of 27 December1927 and addressed to Jahier, who had himself expressed the wish to embark on psychoanalytic therapy. At the time, Svevo's third novel had already earned a well-deserved if belated recognition, despite the fact that it had been ignored by Freud and plainly rejected by Doctor Edoardo Weiss, a student of Freud and distinguished psychoanalyst in Trieste, who thought that *Zeno's Conscience* was more or less irrelevant for the field of psychoanalysis. This admittedly awkward biographical episode has acquired a life of its own in Svevo scholarship, so it deserves some attention.

The story goes like this: eager to be validated as a notable student of the unconscious, Svevo provided both Freud and Weiss with a copy of *Zeno's*

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[8] Naomi Lebowitz points out that Freud himself was not utterly consumed with fervour for therapy. This less known facet of Freud's personality downplays the clear-cut division between what is allegedly normal and what is not. No doubt, Svevo might have been more sympathetic toward this Freud who was "cautious of cure" (37).

[9] In his psychoanalytic reading of Svevo's third novel, Carlo Fonda cites both this passage and the one on page 857 of the *Epistolario* (see supra, page 74), as conclusive proof that psychoanalytic interpretations of *Zeno's Conscience* such as his own are not only possible but also desirable. He does not seem to mind the overwhelming amount of evidence that points to a contrary conclusion. Another notable psychoanalytically oriented study is that of Elio Gioanola, *Un killer dolcissimo: Indagine psicanalitica sull'opera di Italo Svevo*, whereas Giacinto Spagnoletti's *'La coscienza di Zeno' di Italo Svevo* underscores Freud's influence on Svevo's novel. The insistence with which some critics, conveniently ignoring Svevo's own critique of psychoanalysis, continue to produce Freudian readings of Svevo's last finished novel is in itself symptomatic, as Verdicchio points out, of how powerful is our desire of health (33). It substantiates the view that the activity of the reader or critic resembles in many ways that of the analyst's: "in some instances the reader-critic indeed has become the analyst and has placed both Zeno and Svevo's novel on the couch" (38).

Conscience, only to discover that his expectations were unfounded. Here is Naomi Lebowitz's interpretation of this sensitive circumstance in Svevo's life:

> When Weiss told him that his book had nothing to do with psychoanalytic theory, and when Freud failed to acknowledge the novel, he was disappointed, for he had fantasized a response from the great Austrian doctor: "It would have been a great day if Freud had telegraphed me: 'Thank you for having introduced psychoanalysis into Italian culture.'" (29-30)

The premise upon which Lebowitz constructs her narrative of the incident is that Svevo "was proud of what he assumed to be psychoanalytic ideas and structures in his novel" (29). While one can easily imagine Svevo being excited to receive feedback from Freud himself, to say that he "fantasized" about it may be an overstatement. Freud's silence did hurt him, only the reason may have been different: contrary to general opinion, Svevo did not necessarily wish to be recognized as the first psychoanalytic writer in Italian literature—that is just one of his typical self-ironies. He would have been pleased, though, to see that Freud understood the gravity of the problematic aspects hidden underneath the thick layer of irony. As far as Svevo was concerned, the therapeutic ambitions of psychoanalysis were to be regarded with skepticism, at the very least, since they could potentially damage irreparably the most precious attribute of human nature: "And why do we want to cure our illness? Do we really want to deprive humanity of what it possesses best?" ["E perché voler curare la nostra malattia? Davvero dobbiamo togliere all'umanità quello ch'essa ha di meglio?" (E 859)].

It would be prudent at this point to see what was Svevo's opinion on this

matter. As his wife, Livia Veneziani Svevo states in her monograph, the fact that some critics had already classified her husband as a psychoanalyst writer seemed to have bothered Svevo so much that he felt it was crucial for him and his work to settle the question once and for all (97/122). She then reproduces in full one of Svevo's unpublished manuscripts, in which he tells *his* side of the whole story:

> But there is a science which helps us to study ourselves. Let me say at once what it is: psychoanalysis. Don't be afraid that I shall talk too much about it. I tell you merely to warn you that I have nothing to do with psychoanalysis and I'll give you proof of it. I read some books by Freud in, if I'm not mistaken, 1908. It is now said that *Senilità* and *La Coscienza de Zeno* [*sic*] were written under his influence. As far as *Senilità* is concerned, it is easy for me to reply. I published it in 1899 [*sic*] and psychoanalysis did not exist then; or, in so far as it did exist, it was called Charcot. As for *Coscienza*, for a long time I thought I owed it to Freud, but it appears that I was wrong. Wait: there are two or three ideas in the novel which are actually taken entirely from Freud. The man who, not to attend the funeral of someone he called his friend who was really his enemy, followed the wrong funeral procession, is Freudian, and has a boldness I am proud of. The other man, who dreams of distant events, and in his dreams remoulds them as he would have liked them to be, is Freudian in style, as anyone who knows Freud will realize. It is a paragraph I would be proud of even if it didn't contain another little idea that I'm pleased with. However, for a long time I thought I'd written a work of psychoanalysis. Now I

have to say that when I published the book and looked forward to success . . . there was a deathly silence . . . Even a man with my experience of failure could not bear it: it took away my appetite and my sleep. At that time I ran into the only psychoanalytical doctor in Trieste, my good friend Dr Weiss, and, nervously, he looked me in the eye and asked if he was the psychoanalyst in Trieste whom I made fun of in my novel. It was soon clear that it could not be he because during the war years he had not been practicing psychoanalysis in Trieste. Reassured, he accepted my book, which I had inscribed for him, promising to study it, and to review it in a psychoanalytical journal in Vienna. For several days I slept and ate better. Success was at hand, because my work was going to be discussed in an internationally-known journal. However, when I saw him again, Dr Weiss told me that he couldn't write about my book because it had nothing whatever to do with psychoanalysis. I was upset by this; for it would have been a great thing if Freud had sent me a telegram saying: 'Thanks for having introduced psychoanalysis into Italian aesthetics' . . . Now I am no longer upset. We novelists play games with the great philosophies without really being equipped to expand them. We falsify them, but we also humanize them. The superman, when he arrived in Italy, was not exactly Nietzsche's. (97-98) [Ma c'è la scienza per aiutare a studiare se stesso. Precisiamo anche subito: la psicanalisi. Non temete che ch'io ve ne parli troppo. Ve ne dico solo per avvertirvi che io con la psicanalisi non c'entro e ve ne darò la

prova. Lessi dei libri di Freud nel 1908, se non sbaglio. Ora si dice che 'Senilità' e 'La Coscienza di Zeno' le abbia scritte sotto la sua influenza. Io publicai 'Senilità' nel 1898 ed allora la psicanalisi non esisteva o in quanto esisteva si chiamava Charlot. In quanto a 'Coscienza' io per lungo tempo credetti di doverla a Freud, ma mi pare mi sia ingannato. Adagio: vi sono due o tre idee nel romanzo che sono addirittura prese di peso dal Freud. L'uomo, che per non assistere al funerale di colui che diceva suo amico e ch'era in realtà suo nemico, ha seguito un altro funerale è freudiano con un coraggio di cui mi vanto. L'altro che sogna di avvenimenti lontani e nel sogno li altera come avvrebbe voluto fossero stati, è freudiano in modo come saprebbe fare chiunque conosca il Freud. È proprio un paragrafo di cui mi vanterei se non vi fosse dentro un'altra ideuccia di cui mi compiaccio. Tuttavia io credetti per lungo tempo di aver fatto opera di psicanalista. Ora debbo dire che quando pubblicai il mio libro da cui . . . m'ero atteso il successo, mi trovai circondato da un silenzio sepolcrale . . . Un uomo pratico d'insuccessi come sono io, non sapeva sopportare questo perché gl'insidiava l'appetito e il sonno. In quei giorni capita da me l'unico medico psicanalista di Trieste e mio ottimo amico, il dott. Weiss e, inquieto, guardandomi negli occhi domanda se il medico psicanalista di Trieste di cui m'ero burlato nel mio romanzo, fosse lui. Risultò subito che non poteva essere lui perché durante la guerra egli la psicanalisi a Trieste non l'aveva praticata. Rasserenato accettò il mio libro con tanto di dedica, promise di studiarlo e di farne

> una relazione in una rivista psicanalitica di Vienna. Per qualche giorno dormii e mangiai meglio. Ero vicino al successo perché la mia opera sarebbe stata discussa in una rivista mondiale. Invece, quando lo rividi, il dott. Weiss mi disse che non poteva parlare del mio libro perché con la psicanalisi non aveva nulla a che vedere. Alora mi dolsi perché sarebbe stato un bel successo se il Freud m'avesse telegrafato: 'Grazie di aver introdotto nell'estetica italiana la psicanalisi' . . . ora non mi duole piú. Noi romanzieri usiamo baloccarci con le grandi filosofie e non siamo atti a chiarirle. Le falsifichiamo, ma le umanizziamo. Il superuomo, quando arrivò in Italia, non era precisamente quello di Nietzsche. (123-24)]

In this passage, one can immediately recognize, and admire, Svevo's brilliant sense of irony. He starts by emphasizing that he has absolutely nothing to do with psychoanalysis, nonetheless, he is willing to admit that he has actually quite a lot to do with it, provided that everybody comprehends the special nature of his relationship to the philosophy he chose to incorporate in his work. Such a relationship necessarily develops on the artist's own terms, which may not be those that the philosopher had in mind. Ultimately, the point of the relationship is to foster the emergence of an opening in which the creativity of the artist can express itself fully, without having to worry about external restraints. "It is the artist's destiny," Svevo writes in the same text, "to be inspired by a philosopher whom he does not perfectly understand, and the philosopher's destiny not to understand the very artist he inspired" (99) ["Il destino vuole che l'artista venga ispirato dal filosofo ch'egli non perfettamente intende, e che il filosofo non

intenda lo stesso artista ch'egli inspirò" (125)]. Thus, what appears to be a regrettable misunderstanding is just an inevitable premise for the manifestation of genuine novelty: "This intimate relationship . . . renews the artist or at least gives him the warmth and feeling of something new, as would happen if it were possible to change part of the dictionary and give us new words purged of the mould and rust of age-long usage" (99-100) ["Questo rapporto intimo tra filosofo e artista . . . conquista all'artista un rinnovamento o almeno gli dà il calore e il sentimento della cosa nuova come avverrebbe, se fosse possibile, di mutare una parte di vocabolario e darci delle parole nuove ammuffite dalla loro antichità e dal loro lungo uso" (125)].

Consider, for instance, how this flexible aesthetic relationship allows Svevo to adopt an idiosyncratic view of psychoanalysis, which, as Schächter believes, does not shy away from unorthodox opinions, such as those of Wilhelm Stekel, one of Freud's collaborators until 1912. Svevo met Stekel personally in 1911, during a sojourn in Bad Ischl, and, one may safely assume, that he read his opus *Die Sprache des Traumes* (translated into English as *Sex and Dreams: The Language of Dreams*). Of this controversial contribution to psychoanalysis, which was to precipitate Freud's hostility toward Stekel, Gatt-Rutter notes that it "is a reductive, rigid and mechanistic application of Freud's ideas, offering a ready-made symbolic code for the interpretation of dreams never sanctioned by Freud" (248). Much has been speculated in connection with the identity of the person that served Svevo as a model for Doctor S.; perhaps, the easiest and most plausible option would be to think immediately of Freud's first name, Sigmund. Schächter, however, brings compelling evidence to support her hypothesis that Stekel's

nonconformist methodology, which made him an outcast in the eyes of his Viennese peers, played a decisive role in the way Svevo conceived Doctor S.'s eccentric attitude toward his profession.[10]

In this sense, the twisted relationship between the analyst and his patient in the novel could have been shaped as a mocking replica of what Stekel had to say on the subject. The mechanics of this interaction, as Stekel described it, is characterized by ceaseless confrontation, a series of collisions during which both analyst and analysand become subjects of a process of transference and counter-transference (Schächter 144). It is not difficult to see that the mutual antipathy between Zeno and Doctor S. transcribes Stekel's account, caricaturally. There are many other parallels, hard to overlook or to consider accidental: Zeno's return to the practices of traditional medicine, when searching for a reliable diagnosis in the laboratory of Doctor Paoli, as well as his self-confessed invention of images and dreams to satisfy Doctor S.'s appetite for relevant proofs are all devices by which the patient struggles to undercut the analyst's authority (Schächter 146-48). As such, they are minutely catalogued by Stekel and constitute a reservoir of inspiration for Svevo: "the impact of Stekel's work was instrumental in developing Svevo's parodic treatment of psychoanalysis which evolved into a satire of the medical profession as a whole" (155). Indeed, the figure of Doctor S. is a distorted reflection in the ironic mirror that Svevo skilfully manipulates in

[10] It should be noted, however, that Svevo was careful not to relate in any way doctor S. to Stekel. In 1927 he wrote to Valerio Jahier that, "having been acquainted with [Freud's] work, I did the treatment in solitude, without a doctor. If nothing else, from such experience came the novel. If there is a character in this novel that was constructed without knowing the person, then it is Doctor S." ["dopo aver conosciuta l'opera, io feci la cura nella solitudine senza medico. Se non altro da tale esperienza nacque il romanzo nel quale se c'è una persona fatta senz'averla conosciuta è quella del medico S." (E 858)]. To be sure, this does not prove anything, because one can imagine a host of motives why Svevo was reluctant to disclose Doctor S.'s real identity.

order to ridicule the curative aspirations of psychoanalysis: one could hardly think of a rule that the malicious doctor is not willing to violate.

The most glaring procedural breach occurs when he asks Zeno to prepare for the therapy by writing his autobiography: as Moloney shows, this flagrant deviation from the standard procedure blatantly disregards Freud's warnings that the methods eliciting the intrusion of conscious thinking must be avoided at all costs in the course of psychoanalysis. "The reason for this advice," Moloney concludes, "is simple. Freudian analysis depends very largely upon a process of free association; a deliberate and systematic process of recalling, on the other hand, allows the censorship mechanism to come into play" (70).[11] But the real danger comes from a different direction. According to Freud, who developed and applied this technique starting with 1892, it is extremely important for patients to be able to inhibit their critical faculty in order to give free rein to involuntary thoughts.[12] In clarifying the difference between the mental processes that take place in the mind of a person engaged in reflection and those occurring in the mind of a person involved in self-observation, Freud writes,

> In both cases attention must be concentrated, but the man who is

[11] In his article "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," Roy Schafer redefines how both the analyst and analysand are to deal with free association, once psychoanalysis ceases to be considered "an essentialist and positivist natural science" (25) and is regarded as "an interpretive discipline" (25). While both of these views are compatible with the Freudian conceptual framework, Schafer has chosen to base his theory on the latter. In this "alternative reading" of Freud (29), psychoanalysis may be defined as a narrative encounter between two participants involved in a dialogic situation. The analysand, no longer a passive observer of his or her own mind, who is coached "to associate freely and to hold back nothing that comes to mind" (38), becomes an "agent," a "thinker and constructor of emotional action" (38). This shift alters the manner in which the analyst supervises and interprets the analysand's narrative production during the process of free association. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of free association, see Schafer (38-40).

[12] Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, the translator and editor of *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess: 1887-1904*, indicates 1892 as the year in which the method of free association most likely became an integral part of psychoanalytic therapy (21).

> reflecting is also exercising his *critical* faculty; this leads him to reject some of the ideas that occur to him after perceiving them, to cut short others without following the trains of thought which they would open up to him, and to behave in such a way towards still others that they never become conscious at all and are accordingly suppressed before being perceived. The self-observer on the other hand need only take the trouble to suppress his critical faculty. If he succeeds in doing that, innumerable ideas come into his consciousness of which he could otherwise never have got hold. The material which is in this way freshly obtained for his self-perception makes it possible to interpret both his pathological ideas and his dream-structures. (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 175-76)

Considering all of the above, it would be counterproductive to expect, and to look for, a faithful reproduction of Freud's theories in *Zeno's Conscience*. Instead, the reader, professional or amateur, should take Svevo's openly avowed playfulness for what it truly is, an inherent trait of fiction writing. The game that Svevo plays in his third novel, as I hope to have convincingly demonstrated in these two chapters, is called, simply, irony.

We are in a much better position now to bring all these threads together and to begin clarifying the meaning of "imaginary illness" in Svevo's third novel. Its relevance for the notion of tropological irony in *Zeno's Conscience* will also be made clear. There seems to be a common misconception among critics and scholars about Zeno, and it may have something to do with the prevalence of the theme of illness in the novel. Indeed, for a long time, Zeno lives under the

impression that he is profoundly sick. His long time obsession with health, his almost desperate attempts to get rid of his various diseases, whose existence he always takes for granted, are all coping strategies designed to protect Zeno from his own deep-seated and ill-conceived belief that he was born into sickness, that he must be suffering from a mysterious disease that does not have an apparent cause but is just as inevitable. Some scholars go even further and draw a parallel between Svevo and his arguably most renowned character, Zeno Cosini. As previously indicated, Svevo saw illness as the most treasured feature of humanity, something that needed to be defended at all costs. He also unequivocally rejected the self-intoxicating morality of the Übermensch: "We are a living protest against the ridiculous concept of the superman, as it has been passed off (especially to us Italians)" ["Noi siamo una vivente protesta contro la ridicola concezione del superuomo come ci è stata gabellata (soprattutto a noi italiani)" (E 859-60)].

For Schächter, what brings Svevo and Zeno close together is the fact they both seem to be at ease with their condition. Thus, neurosis, acting as a protective screen, satisfies Zeno's escapist predispositions; by demeaning Doctor S.'s labour and findings, he sees his sickness as "a refuge from reality" (141). It is this peculiar fondness for disease that entitles Ghidetti to include Zeno in "the European family of 'inepts,' of 'superfluous men,' of 'men without qualities'" ["la famiglia europea di «inetti,» di «superflui,» di «uomini senza qualità»" (31)].[13] What these critics and scholars conveniently disregard is precisely the

[13] The alleged resemblance between Svevo and Zeno is at the heart of what critics and scholars have called the "Svevo case." Central is the issue of Svevo's frontier identity. Edouard Roditi, in his 1944 essay "Novelist-Philosopher: Italo Svevo," and Giuseppe Camerino, in both his studies, *Italo Svevo e la crisi della Mitteleuropa* and *Italo Svevo*, are among the most the most vocal

reversal that Zeno is going through as the novel unfolds, a turnaround that cannot be ignored.[14] Zeno's change of fortune is for all intents and purposes the embodiment of tropological irony, which, as I have indicated throughout, constitutes the cornerstone of Svevo's third novel.

Consider the following passage from the chapter "The Story of a Business Partnership," after Guido's unintended suicide, as Zeno makes an impressive business deal to erase the debts incurred by Guido's poor managerial decisions. Zeno's frame of mind foreshadows the one he exhibits after the reversal: "I was all health and strength. Health is evident only through comparison. I compared myself to poor Guido and I climbed, higher and higher . . . All was health and strength around me . . . At that moment there was in my spirit only a hymn to my

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proponents of the idea that Svevo's themes and style betray his strong bond with a Central European heritage. Another name that comes to mind is Massimo Cacciari, with his 1997 collection of essays *Posthumous People: Vienna at the Turning Point*. It all starts, of course, with Trieste's peripheral status in the context of Italian culture. A "city of paradox" (Schächter 5), Trieste remained under Austrian rule for more than 500 years (1382 to 1918). Svevo himself was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for 57 years and enjoyed, just as the city in which he lived, an easy access to Viennese culture. But are these sufficient arguments to proclaim Svevo a Central European author and situate him in the vicinity of other celebrated figures, such as Schnitzler, Kafka, and Musil, to name but a few? Lebowitz states that Svevo possesses a broader European identity, rather than a narrower Mitteleuropean one, so she flatly opposes this inclusion. As far as my dissertation is concerned, its primary objective is to compare two different types of irony in the novels under consideration, Svevo's and Musil's, without insisting on the shared cultural heritage of these authors. On Svevo and Trieste, see also Fonda (13-47), Gatt-Rutter (11-12, 74-77, and 275-78), Minghelli (6-14), Russell, and Schächter (5-64).

[14] According to Luca Curti, Debenedetti's influential study has profoundly shaped Svevo scholarship by associating Svevo's work with the theme of ineptitude: "The essay, entitled *Svevo and Schmitz*, is fundamental for several reasons: above all, it seems to me, for having introduced the most resistant of the critical categories applied to Svevo, that of 'ineptitude.'" (18, my translation)]. So pervasive is Debenedetti's influence that many years after him critics and scholars continue to define the three protagonists of Svevo's novels along more or less the same lines. Thus, Furbank states that "[i]n Zeno, the development of the 'senile' hero of *Una Vita* and *Senilità* is completed" (182). Weiss includes Alfonso, Emilio, and Zeno in the relatively large category of the *inetti*, "inept ones," but he is careful not to equate it with Jewishness, like Debenedetti did. Most of the qualities that these anti-heroes share are therefore not to be attributed solely to Jews, for they also describe the depressing condition of modern man in general (22-23). Gatt-Rutter argues that all three novels "center on indefatigable dreamers" (107), while Schächter calls Zeno the "older brother of Alfonso and Emilio" (125). Teresa de Lauretis also speaks of "three images of 'successive incarnations' of the same psychological substance" (94).

health and all of nature's: undying health" (392) ["Ero tutto salute e forza. La salute non risalta che da un paragone. Mi paragonavo al povero Guido e salivo, salivo in alto . . . Tutto era salute e forza intorno a me . . . In quel momento c'era nel mio animo solo un inno alla salute mia e di tutta la natura; salute perenne" (917)]. Some critics and scholars have insisted in portraying Zeno as a misfit and a weakling prone to sickness, but they have obviously ignored examples of a "healthy" Zeno, such as this one.

Traces of Debenedetti's legacy can still be discerned in Svevo scholarship even today. Such is, for instance, the case of Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski's 2010 comparative study "Svevo's *Uomo senza qualità*: Musil and Modernism in Italy." Ziolkowski does not mention Debenedetti directly, although she does talk about the tendency of Italian critics and scholars to define Svevo's heroes in less than flattering terms, by using the utterly anti-heroic appellative of "inetti." She is right to distinguish Zeno from Alfonso and Emilio; nevertheless, she fails to ascertain the significance of Zeno's final metamorphosis, which turns him into a genuine man with qualities. Ziolkowski points out that Musil's second novel was well received in Italy, and that explains why Italian critics and scholars began referring to Svevo's protagonists as *uomini senza qualità*, "men without qualities" (83-84). However, despite the readiness with which the Musilian label is constantly applied to Svevo's three leading figures, Ziolkowski argues that no attempts have been made to clarify the basis for this designation (84). Her study, therefore, aims to fill a conspicuous gap in the scholarship. For example, she correctly observes that over the years, both Svevo and Musil clearly move toward an ironic mode of representation:

> Driven by its more open and playful protagonist, the form of *La coscienza di Zeno* is more experimental than Svevo's earlier works. Indeed, one of the transformations between both Musil's and Svevo's earlier work and their later work is their development of a more ironic, distanced, and humorous style. As Thomas Harrison (60) puts it, in Musil's case, 'What does change in the twenty-four years separating *The Man without Qualities* from *Törleß* is an attitude from visible and earnest distress to ironic pleasure in intellectual entanglement.' (85)

The basic premise of Ziolkowski's study, that Zeno can be accurately described as a man without qualities, is not correct in my view. One of the arguments she brings forward in support of her thesis is the protagonists' relatively similar reluctance to embrace a specific Weltanschauung, and only one (91). It is this unapologetically noncommittal attitude that distinguishes Zeno and Ulrich from the other characters in both works. In Svevo's third novel, the willingness with which Giovanni Malfenti, Guido Speier, and Zeno's own father adhere to a certain body of ideas and beliefs places them in direct opposition to Zeno. While Ziolkowski's assessment is certainly correct as far as the pre-reversal Zeno is concerned, it does not account for statements such as the one made by the post-reversal Zeno: "Like all strong people, I had in my head a sole idea, and by that I lived and it made my fortune" (434) ["Come tutte le persone forti, io ebbi nella mia testa una sola idea e di quella vissi e fu la mia fortuna" (951)]. Ziolkowski also questions the validity of Zeno's final belief that he has been healed: "Like their protagonists, Svevo's and Musil's novels are open, inconclusive, and without solutions. Protagonists who are open to all possibilities

make it difficult for a novel to end in any satisfactory way. In the end, Zeno declares himself 'cured,' but his statement has been repeatedly refuted"(97).

I have demonstrated, however, that once his ironic reversal is complete, Zeno loses his previous receptivity for various conceptions and perspectives, sticking exclusively to his desire to get rich. When proclaiming himself cured, as it will be shown later, Zeno does not speak of a certain illness or another, but rather of his obsession with both health *and* sickness. That does not mean he has suddenly and miraculously evaded all suffering and distress, only that he is no longer excessively preoccupied with the state of his health: "I suffer some pains, true, but they lack significance in the midst of my great health. I can put a sticking-plaster here or there, but the rest has to move and fight and never dawdle in immobility as the gangrenous do" (434) ["Io soffro bensí di certi dolori, ma mancano d'importanza nella mia grande salute. Posso mettere un impiastro qui o là, ma il resto ha da moversi e battersi e mai indulgiarsi nell'immobilità come gli'incancreniti" (951)]. In this regard, Verdicchio reminds us that

> the best proof that one is reading this novel with a certain degree of accuracy is in the awareness that its meaning is not what one thought it to be at first but always other and different in spite of our efforts. This is a reading based *not* on the professional knowledge of what we expect or know the novel to be but on the ironic Eleatic knowledge that things are never what they seem logically to be. (38)

Ironically, Svevo gives the reader a clue about the imaginary nature of Zeno's affliction early in the novel in the chapter "Smoke," where he defines, as I have indicated, that his disease is "a conviction" (14) ["una convinzione" (605)]. Zeno

claims to have been born with that conviction. On closer examination we could say that convictions are fundamentally creations of the mind. Just like mental images, convictions are the result of a process of ideation. As such, neither mental images nor convictions can be said to exist outside of the mind that has produced them, although they can easily generate external effects whose manifestations are not confined to the mind. Doctor S. declares Zeno cured mainly on the basis of some mental images that the patient himself invents during therapy. Similarly, as a result of his conviction that he is ill, Zeno experiences some very real pain in different areas of his body: in his leg and foot or in his right forearm and hip. These painful episodes are essentially somatic responses to some processes that take place exclusively in the mind and whose products, be they images or convictions, are not consistent with fact or reality. Just like the images that Zeno creates during his psychoanalytic sessions, Zeno's conviction about his illness is only an illusion. We can say, then, that while the source of Zeno's pain is imagined, that is, fictitious, the pain itself, as a physical reaction, is very real. This is the essence of Zeno's imaginary illness.

As mentioned earlier, Svevo disagrees indirectly, through Zeno's autobiographical writings, with the Freudian idea that bringing some of the unconscious processes into the light of one's awareness promotes health. According to Svevo, the contrary is true: an operation of this kind almost always ends up creating more suffering. Of course, Freud could have rebutted Svevo's criticism, just as Dr. Weiss did. But his objections would have completely missed the point. As shown, the task of a novelist is not to reproduce faithfully a certain philosophy or another. If he did that, and only that, the aesthetic value of his

creation would decrease significantly. Instead, as Svevo points out, it is the writers' duty to take liberties with the philosophy or theory he wishes to integrate in his work. This implies that he is entirely free to adapt the original as he sees fit, without having to worry about the irritation that the philosopher might feel when he confronts such an act of intellectual irreverence. In this sense, it can be argued that *Zeno's Conscience* is *not* a psychoanalytic novel, but it is definitely *about* psychoanalysis.

As irony would have it, despite Zeno's awareness of the imaginary nature of his illness, he cannot actually say it explicitly. In yet another excellent example of Socratic irony, it is the humble Augusta who literally utters the words "an imaginary sick man" (171) ["un malato immaginario" (735)]. This paradoxical mixture of ability and inability echoes another: as Ada becomes visibly sick, Zeno admits to have noticed a difference in her appearance but acknowledges his inability to identify the real cause of the change: "In short, I proved myself an excellent observer because I saw everything, but also a big ignoramus because I didn't pronounce the true word: illness!" (315) ["Insomma io mi dimostrai un magnifico osservatore perché vidi tutto, ma un grande ignorante perché non dissi la vera parola: malattia!" (854-55). Like Zeno of Elea, Zeno Cosini takes great pleasure in playing with paradoxes.

There is only one question left to clarify at this point. I have argued that Zeno's illness is fundamentally imaginary. However, this illness comes with some very real and painful physical reactions. As scientific medicine proves unable to solve the mystery of Zeno's affliction, he turns his hope toward psychoanalysis, which, supposedly, is better equipped to handle his hopeless case. But

psychoanalysis causes Zeno an even greater disappointment: not only does it fail to heal him, it actually misdiagnoses Zeno with a condition he never had—the Oedipus complex—and, then, cheerfully proclaims him cured. The absurdity of this situation, namely, that psychoanalysis heals the patient of an illness that it has itself invented, is not lost on Zeno.

In a typical Svevian or ironic fashion, the real solution to Zeno's health problems does not come from specialists, whether advocates of scientific medicine or psychoanalysts, but from an amateur, Zeno himself. The long-awaited breakthrough is recorded in his diary entry dated 26 June 1915:

> It would also be beautiful if someone now seriously invited me to sink into a state of semiconsciousness so as to be able to relive even one hour of my previous life. I would laugh in his face. How can anyone abandon a present like this, to go hunting for things of no importance? *It seems to me that I have only now definitively separated myself from my health and from my sickness*. (423, emphasis added) [Sarebbe anche bello che qualcuno m'invitasse sul serio di piombare in uno stato di mezza coscienza tale da poter rivivere anche soltanto un'ora della mia vita precedente. Gli riderei in faccia. Come si può abbandonare un presente simile per andare alla ricerca di cose di nessun'importanza? *A me pare che soltanto ora sono staccato definitivamente dalla mia salute e dalla mia malattia.* (942)]

The allusion to psychoanalysis and its methods at the beginning of the passage is transparent enough, but the truly important part comes at the end. The very last sentence formally marks the decisive turning point in Zeno's lengthy struggle

with his imaginary illness. When one manages to separate oneself *both* from one's health *and* from one's sickness, it simply means that one has finally stopped being obsessed with one's health. Just as disease is a conviction, namely a creation of one's mind, so is health. A few months later, on 24 March 1916, in the last entry of his diary, Zeno acknowledges this rather commonsensical truth *in writing*, and in doing so, he settles his account with psychoanalysis: "For a long time I knew that my health could reside only in my own conviction, and it was foolish nonsense, worthy of a hypnagogue dreamer, to want to reach it through treatment rather than persuasion" (434) ["Da lungo tempo io sapevo che la mia salute non poteva essere altro che la mia convinzione e ch'era una sciocchezza degna di un sognatore ipnagogico di volerla curare anziché persuadere" (951)]. One of Svevo's last ironies in the novel, arguably the cruellest one, is to have the protagonist know the solution to his most pressing problem and yet not allow him to act on it. But it is precisely this irony, no matter how heartless it may seem, that ultimately enables the story to unfold. *Zeno's Conscience* is not only an ironic novel; one can also say that it arises from pure irony, in the most literal sense.

Once Zeno comes to understand that psychoanalysis, far from being the answer it claims to be, is actually an integral part of the problem, the reversal he has gone thorough reaches its end point. As Verdicchio states on the function of psychoanalysis in *Zeno's Conscience*, it is itself the illness that it tries to cure: "Psychoanalysis . . . can be said to be symptomatic of man's real illness: his obsession with health . . . Man deludes himself when he thinks that he knows the origin of his illness and he can cure it and when he presumes that he has a right to health. Psychoanalysis is one way that these errors are perpetuated" (35). As

previously indicated, Zeno becomes at the end of the novel a younger version of Giovanni Malfenti, his cynical surrogate father, whose example he once sought to emulate: "At the moment I pocketed that money, my chest swelled, as I felt my strength and my health" (435) ["Nel momento in cui incassai quei denari mi si allargò il petto al sentiment della mia forza e della mia salute" (952)]. Contrary to his earlier belief that "absolute health is missing" (316) ["la salute assoluta manca" (856)], the new, post-reversal Zeno declares with great effusion that he is not healthy "comparatively" (434) ["per il confronto" (951)] but rather "absolutely" (434) ["assolutamente" (951)].

I hope to have shown that Svevo is a master ironist. Tropological irony, however, is not the only kind of irony that can be employed in a work of fiction. Musil's representational irony, which affects primarily the form of the novel, is more elusive than tropological irony; nevertheless, its achievements are equally impressive. It is my task in the next chapters to examine the workings of representational irony in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*.

Chapter III

To Frame or not to Frame: Inescapability of Form and Ironic Resistance in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*

The complex manner in which representational irony operates in *The Man without Qualities* requires a preliminary discussion of the formal challenges Robert Musil was facing while writing his novel. My working hypothesis, which I hope to prove in what folows, is that representational irony constituted an outstanding response to some very difficult and pressing questions about the meaning and usage of narrative conventions that confronted Musil at a time when the utility of such narrative devices came increasingly under fire from those novelists, Musil among them, who grew dissatisfied with the relatively narrow form of traditional historical-realist narrative of the nineteenth century. Unwilling to embrace fully the existing patterns of narration but unable to discard them altogether, Musil elected to use these conventions, but in doing so, he also found a way to subvert them. Musil's representational irony, I argue, consists in this twofold, self-contradictory movement, of simultaneous affirmation and negation, which can be shown to reproduce, at a formal level, the same paradoxical dynamics governing the structure of irony as a trope. Although there are numerous instances of representational irony in *The Man without Qualities*, I have restricted myself to studying the impact of representational irony upon the frame of Musil's second novel. While the purpose of chapter III is to explain why Musil saw fit to participate ironically in expectations and conventions of plot, narrative order, closure, and frame, the approach in chapter IV is more practical, aiming to illustrate how representational irony actually works in Musil's text.

There is something inherently undecidable about frames. As borderlines, they are hostile to dichotomous classifications: they seem to be equally inclusive and exclusive, of the inside and of the outside. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a frame initially designated an "advantage" or a "benefit," while in its verbal form it meant literally "to profit," "to be of service," "to gain ground," and "to make progress" (VI: 139-40). A closer look at the etymology of the word reveals the surprising kinship of *frame* and *from*, as their common source is the Old English *fram*, "forward" or "from." Later meanings of *frame* have retained the initial sense of something profitable, subsuming it under the more inclusive category of a spatial or temporal progression whose function is to institute form. Thus, to frame means to put in motion a number of operations with the explicit intention of gaining an "advantage," such as giving shape to a structure. Ultimately, frames are those passages that mark the end of disorder and the beginning of some sort of configuration. As Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* states, "Narrative can be considered a frame allowing for certain kinds of organization and understanding of reality" (33).

It is important to note how the initial meanings of *frame*, i.e., "advantage" and "incipience of a forward movement," reverberate in the today's definitions of (fictional) plot, thus indicating the intimate bond that ties these two words. Consider, for example, Peter Brooks's description of plotting: "that which makes a plot 'move forward,' and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning" (xiii). This perspective belongs to a more general, and relatively recent, tendency in the field of literary theory, one whose ultimate goal

is to highlight the reader's participation in the process of constructing meaning. As readers, we turn page after page, we "progress" along with the development of the plot, and in doing so we hope to obtain something in exchange. What triggers this constant advance and keeps us immersed in the workings of the text is the assurance of a gain that is supposed to reward our exertions. Plots, it appears, not only connect actions and intentions but also tend to bind readers to their configuration. However, no matter from what perspective we look at the problem, whether we consider the plot as the product of a solitary enterprise or as that of a joint venture, we come to realize that the long forgotten senses of *frame* have survived the passing of time. Today they inhabit words and practices whose meanings do not seem even remotely connected to those from which they have actually sprung.

Admittedly, one could attain benefits, albeit of different kinds, by designing various schemes and plots. Let us not forget that to frame is literally to plot. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records, with a degree of reluctance it is true, an earlier meaning of *frame* as "snare," citing Barclay's *Shyp of Folys*: "The deuyll . . . labours to get vs in his frame" (141). There are certain affinities between plots and traps as both rely on similar mechanisms: they are carefully contrived so as to absorb one into their frame, that is, to make one their captive or even their victim. Common to plots, literary or not, is their underlying deceptiveness, their built-in desire to take in, to enclose, to ambush. Consequently, it would not be too unreasonable to expose the essentially conspiratorial disposition of traditional narratives since their backbone, their internal arrangement, is a plot, or better yet a complot.

Plots, both as intrigues and literary constructs, function properly provided that one disregards the quintessence of their own status, the fact that they are mere machinations, cleverly worked out devices meant to cover their own tracks. No one is expected to question the validity of the meanings they convey, that is, to reveal their illusory condition. Frames are therefore not only regions where chaos, or at least what one perceives as a disorderly state, turns miraculously into order but also areas where some deception occurs: what seems to be a marvellous transformation is in fact just a mirage, an optical illusion, the end result of trickery. Musil suggests that in one of the more famous and much analyzed chapters, 122, suggestively entitled "Going Home" ("Heimweg"), of the first volume of *The Man without Qualities*. I shall come back to analyze at some length some of the key passages in that chapter. It is not without relevance that, in his *S/Z*, Roland Barthes considers the frame to be central to a certain literary practice: "To describe is thus to place the empty frame which the realistic author always carries with him . . . before a collection or continuum of objects which cannot be put into words without this obsessive operation" (54). Involved here is a different kind of illusion: the writer has access only to a system of codes rather than to the "reality" of the referent so that his copy cannot claim any alleged primacy. Caught in "the infinite circularity of codes" (55), the realist text is, according to Barthes, merely a pastiche. The advent of modernism has eventually rendered obsolete the "pictorial code in literary mimesis" (55) and, consequently, a certain way of using the frame.

Nevertheless, we might ask, can one easily dispense with the routine of framing or of being framed? To answer this question, let us take a quick look at a

crucial paragraph in Musil's aforementioned chapter. The chapter itself is placed at a critical juncture in the course of the novel: Ulrich has not only resolved to reject Arnheim's unexpected proposal to take up the position of his executive secretary but is about to read the telegram announcing the death of his father. These two apparently quite distinct incidents are in fact subtly correlated, and I shall discuss them as such in the next chapter. For the time being, let me just focus on what happens as Ulrich crosses a dark passage, carved out within the heavy materiality of Viennese architecture, which thus becomes literally his frame: "He knew that he would not accept Arnheim's offer, but now he merely felt like a phantom stumbling through life's gallery, dismayed at being unable to find the body it should occupy" (MwQ I 706) ["Er wuβte, daβ er Arnheims Antrag nicht annehmen werde; aber er kam sich jetzt nur noch wie ein durch die Galerie des Lebens irrendes Gespenst vor, das voll Bestürzung den *Rahmen* nicht finden kann, in den es hineinschlüpfen soll" (GW I 648, emphasis added)].

If one compares this English translation to the German original, one will immediately be struck by Sophie Wilkins' rendering of "Rahmen" as "body." While the translator's desire to be logical is legitimate—what else would after all such a bizarre specter search for but its material vessel—it is fairly obvious that the sense of the original text has been altered. What Ulrich seems to be short of is not a body, a corporeal container for a wandering spirit, but a frame to give him contour and substance. The distortion becomes clearly visible if one attends to Musil's "Theorem of Shapelessness" ("Das Theorem der Gestaltlosigkeit"), as he outlined it in his 1923 unfinished essay "The German as Symptom" ("Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom"). Here too, as in all his writing, Musil proved to

be ahead of his time. As a crisis-racked Germany gradually prepared to give in to the racially intolerant Nazi ideology, Musil put forward an intellectually courageous theory that went completely against the grain of the official doctrine of the day. Thus, Musil contended, there is nothing inherent in the human being that would allow anyone to discriminate among different races, let alone posit an alleged superiority of one race over another, since the deeper layers of our self are instead transcultural and transhistorical (PS 164, GW II 1368).

What then shapes and ultimately differentiates us comes not from the interior but from the exterior: "economic forms, political organization, all institutions, habits, remedies, books, actions, events" (PS 165) ["alles die Wirtschaftsformen, die politische Organisation, alle Institutionen, Lebensgewonheiten, Hilfsmittel, Bücher, Taten, Ereignisse" (GW II 1370)] to the point that "[a] person exists only in forms given to him from the outside" (PS 165) ["Der Mensch existiert nur in Formen, die ihm von auβen geliefert werden" (GW II 1370)]. This heterogeneous aggregate of external factors, whose fluid and hence ever-changing consistency is impossible to be ascertained with absolute precision, bears the indelible mark of a certain historical moment and as such inhibits any sweeping generalization about cultures and races. Were one to be totally removed from this frame, one's formlessness would at once be uncovered. Such a fundamentally amorphous subject, confronted with his or her disquieting lack of shape inevitably tries "to accommodate himself to forms, to take on the character, customs, morality, life-style, and the whole apparatus of an organization" (PS 168-69) ["sich in Formen zu passen, Charactere, Sitten, Moral, Lebensstile und den ganzen Apparat einer Organisation anzunehmen" (GW II 1374)]. But the subject is able to do so

because this apparatus interpellates him with the promise of a framework, that is, of a form, in what will nevertheless turn out to be a procedure whose degree of violence one should never underestimate or overlook:

> The terrible cruelty of our forms of political and economic organization, which do violence to the feelings of the individual, is so inescapable because this organization is all there is that offers the individual a surface and the possibility of expressing himself. For we may say that the human being first becomes human through the way he expresses himself, and society shapes forms of his expression. (It is really a symbiosis.) (PS 169) [Die ungeheure Grausamkeit unsrer politischen und wirtschaftlichen Organisationform, die den Gefühlen Einzelnen Gewalt antut, ist so unentrinnbar, weil diese Organisation zur gleichen Zeit dem Einzelnen überhaupt erst eine Oberfläche u die Möglichkeit eines Ausdrucks gibt. Denn man kann sagen, der Mensch wird erst durch den Ausdruck, und dieser formt sich in den formen der Gesellschaft. (Es ist eigentlich eine Symbiose.) (GW II 1374)]

In the "Posthumous Papers" ("Nachlass"), Musil insists on the violence associated with the act of being absorbed into a frame: "The individual . . . forms himself in the forms of society. He is violated and thus acquires surface. He is formed by the back-formations of what he has created" (MwQ II 1759) ["Der Mensch . . . formt sich in den Formen der Gesellschaft. Er wird vergewaltigt u. erhält dadurch Oberfläche. Er wird geformt durch die Rückwirkungen dessen, was er geschaffen hat" (GW I 1932)]. It is this process of interpellation that unfolds early in Chapter 122 of Musil's novel. Following Ulrich on his way home, the

reader watches as such an incident suddenly materializes and then fades away the moment the protagonist "passed into a district less grand and less oppressive" (MwQ I 706) ["sein Weg . . . in eine weniger drückende und groβartige Gegend gelangte" (GW I 648)]. Caught under the weighty pressure of the stony passageway, Ulrich becomes once again aware of his own essential shapelessness as the force of this material interpellation transmits to him a momentary anxiety. One must not forget that to interpellate is etymologically to interrupt. Not only does the reservoir of forms of this magnitude creep into Ulrich thoughts, thus interrupting their natural flow, but it also attempts to suspend what appears to be an unwelcome cavity in its own body.

This is not the first dramatic encounter to be staged between Ulrich—as a man without qualities, that is, without a frame or form—and the oppressive architecture of Vienna: much earlier in the novel the narrator depicts his protagonist as he stands before a church, contemplating its epic size. Instead of generating a justifiable aesthetic pleasure in the onlooker, as one might expect, this massive edifice, along with the urban design into which it is integrated, simply compresses the observer who thus turns into a "mere superfluous mist . . . a small, exhaled breath God has no time for anymore (MwQ I 136) ["ein überflüssiger Nebel . . . ein ausgestoβener kleiner Atemzug, um den sich Gott weiter nicht kümmert" (GW I 130)]. Understandably, one needs to keep some distance from such a siege and can do so by deferring one's natural desire to assume form. The fewer qualities one harbors, the more independent one becomes: herein lies Ulrich's resentment of frames. Stefan Jonsson writes that "for Musil, the ideal is a subjectivity that remains like a mere lifegiving breath,

ein Atemzug. The nightmare is a subjectivity fixed by qualities, by an imputed character, or by a disciplinary social machinery that reduces it to a docile body, which, obediently assuming its place and renouncing its desires, becomes a lifeless rock" (75).

Later in the novel, the motif of this utter contrast resurfaces: "Within the frozen, petrified body of the city [Ulrich] felt his heart beating in its innermost depths" (MwQ I 162) ["In dem erfrorenen, versteinten Körper der Stadt fühlte [Ulrich] ganz zu innerst sein Herz Schlagen" (GW I 153)]. The barely noticeable pulse of life, which stubbornly penetrates the crushing mass of urban artifacts, signifies Ulrich's resistance to the interpellation of the framework, to the desire for form that such a clash between the individual and his or her milieu necessarily brings about. Much to the surprise, or sometimes even the irritation of his circle of acquaintances, the man without qualities escapes the numerous ambushes of form, be they in the disguise of different ideologies, discourses, or causes. In his study *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de siècle Vienna*, Jacques Le Rider places this deliberate rejection in the greater context of the triple crisis that characterized Viennese modernity, that is, of identity, of the traditional male – female differentiation, and of Jewishness (1): "As the unity of the person and the 'classical subject' broke down, Robert Musil's man without qualities stood out as the man who refused all hasty identifications and remained in suspense, perennially receptive (41).

In a world whose centrifugal forces threaten to render it shapeless, the characters centrally or just peripherally affiliated with the Parallel Campaign look for their salvation in the ready-made frames that they find available around them.

The Parallel Campaign itself is an enterprise that reflects and magnifies its animators' deepest apprehensions, projecting them onto the giant screen of the whole nation. Leinsdorf, Diotima, and Arnheim look for the great idea, that is, for an ultimate principle of cohesion, a framework the size of the whole empire, which could stop its inescapable devolution. Without being fully aware of it, their activity, which does not move past the stage of a perpetual tentativeness, is an attempt to emulate the labour of a plotter.

Among the posthumous papers of the work in progress that was *The Man without Qualities*, one may find, almost buried within the vast accumulation of drafts, sketches, chapter studies, and reflections, a powerful statement: "The walls of the streets radiate ideologies" (MwQ II 1759) ["Die Mauern der Straβen strahlen Ideologien aus" (GW I 1932)]. This terse sentence with its quasi-aphoristic undertone may also be found in "The German as Symptom," where Musil explores the ideology's significance for life in general. Ideology, defined in a rather abstract fashion as "intellectual ordering of the feelings; an objective connection among them that makes the subjective connection easier" (PS 174) ["gedankliche Ordnung der Gefühle; ein objektiver Zusammenhang zwischen ihnen, der den subjektiven erleichtert" (GW I 1379)], appears to be a set of internalized prescriptions that includes, but is not restricted to, philosophical and religious discursive units whose function is to organize our participation in the world.

As such, Musil states, ideology brings a positive contribution to our life, acting as a decisive component in the complex process of understanding ourselves, the others, and ultimately the world we live in. It is an "act of faith, of

imagination, of acceptance" (PS 174) ["Akt des Glaubens, der Phantasie, der Annahme" (GW II 1380)] that underlies essentially the whole spectrum of human activities from the purely physical ones, such as moving an arm, to the most ambitions operations of the mind, such as constructing scientific theories (1380, 174). The present as Musil perceives it takes the form of an enormous agglomeration of various ideologies in which none of its constituents actually predominates. It is what Musil calls an "inexpressible multiplicity" (PS 175) ["unausdrückbare Vielspältigkeit" (1381)], whose elements "fly around in the air, as it were" (PS 175) ["fliegen sozusagen in der Luft herum" (GW II 1381)].

It goes without saying that ideology is part and parcel of the amalgam of forms that fill the subject with content. Architecture too occupies a central position in the framework of a certain age, hence the abundance of reflections that feed off the substantial impact urban landscapes have upon subjectivity in *The Man without Qualities*.[1] But if walls, streets, and air alike are saturated with beliefs, principles, and doctrines, it is perhaps because someone seems to be in dire need of them. As indicated earlier, many of the characters in Musil's novel are keen on associating themselves completely with one ideology or another, expedient convictions that end up being indistinguishable from their own identities. Fin-de-siècle Vienna was after all the place where several mass movements such as Pan-Germanism, Christian Socialism, and Zionism were born and flourished. Generally, all historians and scholars who have studied those turbulent times agree that the collapse of Austrian liberalism in the 1870s was

[1] For a detailed investigation of the relationship between subjectivity and the modern city in Musil's novel, see Stefan Jonsson (60-96).

pivotal to the emergence and success of politicians such as Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, and Theodor Herzl.[2] The changes that these leaders produced on the Austrian political scene led to the gradual rejection of the underlying liberal principles of secularism, capitalism, and rationalism. Since Schönerer, Lueger, and Herzl were actually progenies of Austrian liberalism, Carl E. Schorske feels compelled to interpret their political insurgence from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Musil himself witnessed the impatience of many of his contemporaries, their readiness to identify with a source of meaning and, above all, their yearning for resolutions. As early as *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906), he exhibited a particular interest in some of the ideological incarnations of the post-liberal era. Reiting, with his not-so-innocent disposition to manipulate other students, and Beineberg, who seeks to find an escape from the alleged crisis of Western rationalism in a distorted form of Oriental mysticism, personify easily recognizable types that had already become functional in Central Europe. Todd Kontje notes that the code of behavior applicable within the walls of the boarding school replicates well-established social conventions. It is therefore disturbing that Reiting and Beineberg are never disciplined for their transgressions: "The fact that they remain unpunished implies that their actions are not so much opposed to the values of their parents as they are revelations of darker forces that lie beneath the veneer of [society]" (251). Social order in fin-de-siècle Austria, Kontje suggests, displays a certain degree of pretense, an ability to induce the semblance of

[2] See Allan Janik and Stephe Toulmin (33-66), Stefan Jonsson (217-62), Jacques Le Rider 1993 (11-29), David S. Luft 1980 (1-22) and 2003 (13-36), Carl E. Schorske (116-80).

normality even when its texture tends to unravel. The novel itself is full of literal and figurative passageways, portals that lead one into the dark depths of a world not yet prepared to ascertain its own weaknesses.

Much later, as he was trying to complete his second novel, Musil wrote, "Of the desire of youth today to find a resolution, etc. 'Resolution': a synonym for deed. Likewise: 'conviction.' This is what lends significance to Hans Sepp and his circle . . . Today . . . people want resolutions, yes or no" (MwQ II 1748) ["An Wunsch der heutigen Jugend, Entscheidung zu finden usw. Entscheidung: ein Synonym für Tat. Ebenso: Überzeugung. → HS. u sein Kreis erhalten von hier Bedeutung . . . Heute . . . man will Entscheidung, Ja u. Nein" (GW I 1856)]. Musil designed *The Man without Qualities* in open defiance of such passionate expectations. The text with its intricate surface, its appeal for partial solutions, and an unworkable closure, constantly frustrate the craving for ultimate (re)solutions and truths. Clearly, narratives may be conceived as instantiations of various ideologies, and some critics, such as Barthes in his *Mythologies*, have exposed the intimate bond between the demands of ideology and the codes of realist narrative. Lately, it has become obvious that literature is far from being what its practitioners and consumers have long believed it to be: a translucent interface or a straight, hence unproblematic, mediation between reality and the text.

As Catherine Belsey states, "There is no unmediated experience of the world; knowledge is possible only through the categories and the laws of the symbolic order" (45). But as these laws are rather conflicting, Belsey shows, it naturally follows that ideology will direct its repressing energies at trying to impose a harmless uniformity. Inherent in any ideology therefore is its predisposition for

suppression. Here is how Belsey describes it in her reading of Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses":

> Ideology obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing mode of production. (57)

There is a striking similarity, Belsey claims, between the ways ideology and the realist text as its "crystallization" (104) deal with the contradictions they come across: both simulate completeness and uniformity by erasing the fractures in their formation. To achieve this goal, realism has an efficacious instrument at its disposal: narrative closure (104). For Barthes, this is yet another facet of an exemplary clash: "disorder is supplementary, it is what is forever added on without solving anything, without finishing anything; order is complementary, it completes, fills up, saturates, and dismisses everything that risks adding on: truth is what completes, what closes" (S/Z 76).

Belsey's description of the delusional force of both ideology and realist text echoes Ulrich's own opinions about the nature of personal happiness; these in turn take us to one of the central issues of *The Man without Qualities*. More often than not, Musil argues, the feeling of inner harmony has a fraudulent character as the contradictions that afflict one's existence are not solved but repressed. It is as if people prefer to make all these disruptions vanish into thin air instead of tackling them head on. They choose to do so, Musil suggests, because they can make use

of a powerful device: narrative order. It is not unintentional that these considerations act as a mediating path between the scene describing Ulrich's encounter with the form-giving apparatus and his reflections on narrative, in chapter 122 (MwQ I 706-09/GW I 647-50), for they are all related.

Thus, shortly after leaving the passage behind, Ulrich finds himself meditating on his own past life, wondering whether some sort of harmony is indeed achievable, when he comes up with a rather surprising analogy:

> Happiness, after all, depends for the most part not on one's ability to resolve contradictions but on making them disappear, the way the gaps between trees disappear when we look down a long avenue of them. And just as the visual relationships of things always shift to make a coherent picture for the eye . . . and the gaps close up and the scene as a whole ends by rounding itself out, so it is with the invisible connections which our minds and feelings unconsciously arrange for us in such a way that we are left to feel we are fully in charge of our affairs. (MwQ I 707-08) [Denn der Menge nach ist es ja beiweitem nicht die Hauptvoraussetzung des Glücks, Widersprüche zu lösen, sondern, sie verschwinden zu machen, wie sich in einer langen Allee die Lücken schlieβen, und so, wie sich allenthalben die sichtbaren Verhältnisse für das Auge verschieben . . . Lücken sich schlieβen und endlich das Ganze eine ordentliche glatte Rundung erfährt, tun es eben auch die unsichtbaren Verhältnisse und werden von Verstand und Gefühl derart verschoben, daβ unbewuβt etwas ensteht, worin man sich Herr im Hause fühlt. (GW I 649)]

One will right away notice that the trees arranged alongside avenues do appear to the observer, when looked at from a distance, in the shape of a vegetal archway, a frame in its own right, which in turn creates the false impression of a green tunnel. What the gaze then perceives is a series of uninterrupted lines, a homogeneous whole, whose consistency is nevertheless the result of an optical illusion—a simulacrum, in other words, but a convenient one to be sure, as Musil repeatedly points out.

The same analogy re-emerges toward the end of Part III of the novel, during the last great session of the Parallel Campaign to be directly recorded by the narrator, when Ulrich in one of his typical pensive states exposes once again people's keen desire to reach an agreement with themselves, regardless of means and costs: "[Man] . . . believes in ideas not because they are sometimes true but because he needs to believe . . . Because he must have an illusion to stop up the gap between the walls of his life, through which his feelings would otherwise fly off in every direction" (MwQ II 1126) ["Der Mensch . . . glaubt an Ideen, nicht weil sie manchmal wahr sind, sondern weil er glauben muβ . . . Weil er durch eine Täuschung das Loch zwichen seinen Lebenswänden verstopfen muβ, durch das seine Gefühle sonst in alle vier Winde gingen" (GW I 1037)]. In his 1988 study, Philip Payne too noted that the walls in Musil are a suitable metaphor for ideology: "Here the image of the wall expresses the notion of a corpus of familiar ideas, beliefs and habits of mind with which a person's inner world has been furnished" (177). However, he does not go one step further to see the conspicuous ability of the walls, be they of stone or just of trees, to induce the illusion of continuity and homogeneity, in short, how they function as compelling symbols

for form-giving narrative frames.

The tendency to see things and processes in their wholeness, rather than as separate bits and pieces, may be explained psychologically. Thus, the formation of such all-inclusive entities, the leap from a number of distinct components to a qualitatively different totality, Musil claims elsewhere, is a basic psychological operation that assists one in completing one's daily tasks (PS 84, GW II 1219).[3] It is with the support of such "mentally economizing arrangements" (PS 84) ["geistig-ökonomischen Vorkehrungen" (GW II 1219)] that one is able not only to reduce the complexity of one's actions but also to remove the potentially unpleasant aspects built into some of their constitutive units.

For instance, a rather neutral phrase such as "'root-canal treatment'" (PS 85) ["Wurzelbehandlung" (GW II 1220)], conceals several procedures whose explicit nature may entail a sense of discomfort if tracked sequentially in their progression as distinct stages of a unitary process. Comfort seems to be the product of suppression. Musil illustrates this denial of partition with yet another example: a picture hung on a wall will soon end up being "swallowed up" (PS 85) ["verschluckt" (GW II 1220)] by the wall. The synthetic, that is, incorporating force of the wall annihilates the analytic, that is, disruptive, resistance of the picture, thus rendering it invisible (PS 85, GW II 1220).

But this series of analogies may be taken even further. As Barthes and Belsey

[3] In a subsection of his 1931 essay "Literati and Literature: Marginal Glosses" ["Literat und Literatur: Randbemerkungen dazu"] entitled "The Significance of Form" ["Die Bedeutung der Form"], Musil discusses the relationship between form and content in literature, with a particular focus on poetry (PS 83-89, GW II 1218-25). It is quite evident that Musil draws on the terminology of Gestalt psychology with which he, as a psychology student, was thoroughly familiar. For the immediate purposes of his demonstration, Musil employs the notions of "whole," "gestalt," and "form" as if they were identical, though he warns his readers this is not quite so.

have noted, realist narrative is predisposed to cover up disparities, to cancel out interspaces it comes across for the sake of delivering a harmonious entirety. The coherence such a construct displays is nevertheless fallacious and illicit. It is an illusion somewhat similar to the mirage generated by the two parallel lines of trees whose branches embrace in a Gothic-like structure. The plot of realist narrative may be defined as a solid framework, a configuration that occupies seemingly empty spaces only to flood them with meaning. This concatenation of discrete elements imposes the law of a unitary logic as it weaves its way out from a beginning to an end. Since both the beginning and the middle not only come before but also anticipate the end, the closing segment is deemed to be the key of the whole text, sometimes quite literally as is the case of detective stories.

Aristotle was of course the first to note the implications that the end holds for the integrity of the design preceding it. Here is how Paul Ricoeur re-reads this earliest and quite influential definition in his *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*: the end is "that action which concludes a course of action in the story told, unravels an intrigue, explains the surprising turn of fortune, or seals the hero's fate by a final event that clarifies the whole action and produces in the listener the catharsis of pity and terror" (3). Ricoeur's is essentially a condensed definition of the plot as Aristotle outlined it in his *Poetics*, which says a lot about the significance of the end for the entire architecture of the plot. To cover the rich spectrum of functions that are customarily associated with the concept of end, one is expected to resort to almost all the other constituents of the plot in ways that

one could not do were one to define, say, the beginning.[4] Implied in such descriptions is the idea that no portion of the plot, much less the end, may ever be subtracted without thus disintegrating the narrative's own raison d'être.

We have now seen that the form-giving apparatus of fin-de-siècle Vienna challenges Ulrich's shapelessness, his status as a gap in the consistency of the system, by making him feel a sudden urge for a framework. It is as if this aggregate of forms tries to obliterate everything that does not adhere to its own principles: intervals of difference, hiatuses of any kind, are to be wiped out, absorbed into the texture of one gigantic repertoire of forms. It has now become obvious that the two passages that come one after another early in chapter 122 speak of one and the same theme: the propensity of frames, as containers of form, to engender consistent totalities by eradicating anything that escapes their authority. This in turn may trigger a countermovement, the refusal to surrender unconditionally to such a demand. These are central concerns in *The Man without Qualities*, and they create the axis around which both its form and content gravitate.

Thus, Ulrich is constantly reminded that he is supposed to inhabit a frame, that he must appropriate some qualities. This is a particular case of Musil's celebrated distinction between "reality" and "possibility" (MwQ I 10-13) ["Wirklichkeit" and "Möglichkeit" (GW I 16-18)]. It is only to a superficial approach that possibility appears to be the obverse of reality, the way absence stands in opposition to presence. As such, one would simply be tempted to discard

[4] See for example Ricoeur's own definition of the beginning: "no action is a beginning except in a story that it inaugurates" (3).

it as a deficiency not worthy of attention. Possibility, however, is a site full of potentialities rather than a space of nothingness. Its latent energies are, according to Musil, "nothing but realities as yet unborn" (MwQ I 12) ["nichts als noch nicht geborene Wirklichkeiten" (GW I 17)]. There is of course no place in Vienna for such departures from the consistency of form: Ulrich himself, as shown, perceives this external coercion weighing on him almost physically. This is because, unlike the possibilists (Möglichkeitsmenschen), the realists (die Menschen des Wirklichkeitssinns) lack the "ability . . . to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not" (MwQ I 11) ["Fähigkeit . . . das, was ist, nicht wichtiger zu nehmen als das, was nicht is" (GW I 16)].

It is not, however, that Ulrich completely rejects the necessity of form, as it is clear to him that one cannot remain totally devoid of any form, but he definitely has a difficult time in deciding *what* form to choose. Convictions, beliefs, moral principles, ideas generally require unreserved acceptance as if each and every one of them "were final and complete" (MwQ I 269) ["vollendet wäre" (GW I 250)], something Ulrich is not willing to concede: "He suspects that the given order of things is not as solid as it pretends to be; no thing, no self, no form, no principle, is safe, everything is undergoing an invisible but ceaseless transformation" (MwQ I 269) ["Er ahnt: diese Ordnung ist nicht so fest, wie sie sich gibt; kein Ding, kein Ich, keine Form, kein Grundsatz sind sicher, alles ist in einer unsichtbaren, aber niemals ruhenden Wandlung begriffen" (GW I 250)].

In any case, he is not the radical skeptic Walter or Diotima take him to be. In what was to become the posthumous papers, the laboratory of his creative exertions, Musil wrote, "Man without qualities against deed: The man who is not

satisfied with any of the available solutions" (MwQ II 1748) ["MoE geg. Tat: Mann dem keine der vorhandenen Lösungen genügt" (GW I 1856)]. And elsewhere, he added: "Against total solutions. Ulrich is, finally, one who desires community while rejecting the given possibilities" (MwQ1747) ["Gegen die Totallösungen . . . U. ist zum SchluβVerlangender nach Gemeinsamkeit, bei Ablehnung der gegebenen Möglichkeiten" (GW I 1851)].

There are other gaps in Vienna to be sure, besides Ulrich. Not quite surprisingly, however, the vast collection of forms that the imperial capital is cannot fill up these vacant areas with content either but rather hides them behind sophisticated architectural figures. This is not because they refuse to be shaped—as a matter of fact they are insatiable when it comes to forms—but simply because they cannot be given any substance at all: what we have here is gaps of a different category. They are usually associated with the aristocratic side of the Austrian political apparatus and as such symbolize the void that has already occupied the entire country. As Luft writes in *Robert Musil and the Crisis of European Culture*, "[f]or Musil, Austria was the pure type of the purposelessness and vacuousness of European politics in 1913" (120). Emptiness inhabits the very heart of the empire, the Hofburg, that is, the Imperial Palace. When Ulrich, following his father's advice, visits Count Stallburg, who is supposed to introduce him to the key figure of the enterprise that will soon be known as the Parallel Campaign, "He ascertained that he was walking through a vast shell with little content; the great public rooms were almost unfurnished, but this empty taste lacked the bitterness of a great style" (MwQ I 84) ["Er stellte fest, daβ er durch ein groβes Gehäuse mit wenig Inhalt gehe; die Säle waren fast unmöbiliert, aber dieser leere Geschmack

hatte nicht die Bitterkeit eines groβen Stils" (GW I 84)]. Count Stallburg himself receives Ulrich "inside a great hollow prism" (MwQ I 84) ["in einem groβen hohlen Prisma" (GW I 84)].

This also holds true for Count Leinsdorf's mansion. Seen through the eyes of the narrator, it looks like a giant empty frame, a remarkably hollow structure: "A high-ceilinged room stood around him, and this in turn was surrounded by the huge empty spaces of the anteroom and the library, around which, shell upon shell, further rooms, quiet, deference, solemnity and the wreath of two sweeping stone staircases arranged themselves" (MwQ I 91) ["Ein hohes Zimmer stand um ihn, und dieses war wieder von den groβen, leeren Räumen des Vorzimmers und der Bibliothek umgeben, um welche, Schale über Schale, weitere Räume, Stille, Devotion, Feierlichkeit und der Kranz zweier geschwungenen Steintreppen sich legten" (GW I 90)]. Moreover, as the narrator observes sarcastically, it is not the refinement of this beautiful manor, the elegance of its ornaments bursting with history, that strikes the eye of the Viennese but rather "the mellow grayish hole made by the archway breaking the otherwise solid façade of the street, a surprising, almost exciting recess in whose cavernous depth gleamed the gold of the braid and the large knob on the doorkeeper's staff" (MwQ I 92) ["nur das weiche graulicheTorloch in der sonst festen Straβe, eine überrachende, fast erregende Vertiefung, in deren Höhle das Gold der Tressen und des groβen knopfes am Türhüterstab erglänzten" (GW I 91)]. In such extreme cases, the ordering energy of the walls, their built-in ability to camouflage the entropic predisposition of gaps, is simply surpassed by the abundance of emptiness. Count Leinsdorf, and any other similar figure for that matter, the narrator suggests, has

already ceased to be identified in the collective memory with the image of a revered past, full of cultural and historical achievements; instead, the picture of the doorkeeper, the very symbol of void, has been superimposed over the nobleman's.

Just like his protagonist, Musil himself experiences a similar predicament: in writing a text that soon will turn out to have a polymorphous structure, he feels the impatience with which a pre-existing frame, the form of a particular category, necessarily addresses the author. The similarity has also been noted by Michael André Bernstein, who writes that "Ulrich's destiny, Musil's personal anxieties, and the fate of *The Man without Qualities* are clearly linked" (48). Of course, every writer to a certain extent experiences comparable anxieties when struggling to go beyond the set of conventions inherited from the past. No work is exempted from participating in a ceaseless collision of old and new forms, even if some of them choose to replicate deferentially previous models while others resort to sophisticated techniques of disobedience. A much more recent example is particularly relevant here, for it illuminates Musil's own toils as a pioneering writer. Alain Robbe-Grillet recounts anecdotally the experience of the initial fiasco of one of his best-known novels, *La Jalousie*. The painstaking exertions of writing what was to become a classic of French literature, entitled him to great expectations: "I had worked for two years on an extraordinarily precise formal organization which seemed to me as if it should gain wide support. I had created and established such a fine narrative order that I thought I would finally be recognized and that they would give me . . . the Nobel Prize" (3). Instead of acknowledging the excellence of such a fine enterprise, Robbe-Grillet notes, its

first reviewers recoiled as if before the sight of hideous disorder.

The cause of this misunderstanding, Robbe-Grillet himself admits, was that order itself cannot escape a certain degree of relativism. For the critics who lashed out at the novel, order meant simply the execution, that is, the repetition with as little deviation as possible, of a widely accepted model such as Balzac's causal and chronological narrative. Admittedly, this has been, and still is, an influential model, for it has long been believed to be natural. But not so for Robbe-Grillet: his refusal to comply with the deeply ingrained norms of the time is essentially anti-ideological. Like Barthes, who reveals how an ideological substratum is enveloped in the multiple layers of a story without apparent ideological aspirations, Robbe-Grillet exposes the ideological nature of some of the key devices of the nineteenth-century novels: causality, chronology, and the third person of the past tense. Not surprisingly, ideology is once again associated with deception and masquerade: Robbe-Grillet defines it as "established order which is masked as natural order, which pretends to be not a creation of the society but, on the contrary, a sort of divine law dictated . . . by God" (4).

Robbe-Grillet's work therefore aims not at merely reproducing a ready-made order but at creating a new, subtler type of order, one that may easily be mistaken for disorder in the beginning. Unlike its deceptive counterpart, Robbe-Grillet argues, this order defeats ideological ambuscades by persistently pointing at its own artificiality. It is a construct that not only loathes pretending to be what it is not but one that revels in exhibiting its fundamentally manufactured status. Moreover, not only does ideology conceal its pretense, it also displays an inherent tendency to aggregate in plenary forms: "In order to function correctly in society,

ideology needs to be masked to hide its artificiality, and needs as well to be continuous, since ideology can only function as a totality" (11). Consequently, by being anti-ideological, Robbe-Grillet claims, such a new order is also antitotalitarian: the moment one chooses to step outside the series instituted by the prestige of an archetype, one has already created a lethal fissure in the consistency of that series: "ideology needs to be a totality, if a single point is contested, everything immediately collapses" (11). Long before Robbe-Grillet, Musil was aware of the traps hidden in the protocols of the nineteenth-century narrative. He clearly set his work in opposition to them and vehemently advocated the importance of partial solutions: ["Possibly: Adduce as well the principle of partial solutions, which is vital for the way I have set up my task . . . The public prefers writers who go for the whole" (MwQ II 1760) ["Ev: Das Prinzip der Teillösungen, das für meine Aufgabenstellung wichtig ist, auch vorbringen . . . das Publikum bevorzugt Dichter, die aufs Ganze gehn" (GW I 1937)]. Old forms illegitimately create harmonious totalities, and the novelist must look for a way to escape their pressure. The answer lies in the creation of a new form that will turn down the temptation of becoming a totality by ironically subverting the very framework it employs. Stefan Jonsson writes that in *The Man without Qualities* "[a]ncient and approved narrative conventions . . . are picked up and rehearsed, only to be dropped" (109).

While Musil felt genuinely dissatisfied with the somewhat limited and limiting resources of the nineteenth-century narrative, he also knew that a total negation of earlier patterns of narration was equally untenable. Writers may question the validity of a certain framework, but they cannot dispose of the frame

altogether. Musil notes in his diaries, "One only says what one can say within the frame of what is available" (D 118) ["Man sagt nur das, was man im Rahmen des Vorhandenen sagen kann" (T 1 215)]. The entry is dated 13 August 1910; at the time, Musil was working on the two innovative stories of *Vereinigungen* (*Unions*). Luft points out in his first book on Musil that early in the twentieth century, both the Central European novel and philosophical reflection moved toward an essayistic mode, a shift that must be placed in the more general context of the crisis of liberal culture (18-22). As totality became a suspicious concept, be it in the form of traditional narrative or of a system of thought, both novelists and philosophers discovered the benefits of fragmentation and of the essayistic approach. For the twentieth-century novel this inevitably meant the disintegration of the dogmatic prototype of narrative, one that had remained excessively dependent on a strictly narrow version of (Aristotelian) plot. Musil felt compelled to bring together literature and philosophy, that is, to enrich the fairly inflexible schematism of narration with the fertile and supple movement of thought in an outstanding example of what Luft has called "philosophical essayism."[5]

The essayistic chunks that constantly break the continuity of the narrative line, in a movement specific to representational irony, reflect Musil's deep affinity with the realm of ideas. As early as 1910, he confessed in his diaries: "What matters to me is the passionate energy of the idea. In cases where I am not able to

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[5] According to Frederick G. Peters, Musil's philosophical reflections, scattered in large and sometimes autonomous compartments throughout the novel, acquire a life of their own, which is "almost independent" from that of Ulrich. Based on this judgment, he states that "Musil has written the most philosophical work in the history of novel" (19). While not disputing Peters' enthusiastic conclusion for the moment, it is not quite clear what specific form this emancipation assumes, since, as Peter himself admits, "the topics of these essays are more or less related to Ulrich's intellectual and emotional life" (19).

work out some special idea, the work immediately begins to bore me; this is true for almost every single paragraph" (D 117) ["Worauf es mir ankommt, ist die leidenschaftliche Energie des Gedankens. Wo ich nicht irgendeinen besonderen Gedanken heraus arbeiten kann, wird mir die Arbeit sofort zu langweilig; es gilt dies fast von jedem einzelnen Absatz" (T I 214)]. The walls of the narrative become rather porous and through their interstices ideas penetrate the plot, infusing its structure with a slightly chaotic motion. This process of permeation must by no means be whimsical, and in fact presents Musil with a special difficulty. While the flux of narration, because of its overt teleological drive, gives the events in the plot a specific course, which is expected to be completed in spite of all detours and convolutions, more often than not, it lacks a sense of direction, following unpredictable paths. Musil seems at first to be troubled by this "dissipative momentum" (D 117) ["dissipatives Moment" (T I 214)] of reflection, for he feels that it cannot be controlled by and subjected to an ultimately necessary framework. "The idea immediately moves onward in all directions, the notions go on growing onward on all sides, the result is a disorganized, amorphous complex" (D 117) ["Der Gedanke geht nach allen Richtungen sofort immer weiter, die Einfälle wachsen an allen Seiten auseinander heraus, das Resultat ist ein ungegliederter, amorpher Komplex" (T I 214)].

Four years later, however, in an attempt to define the essay more precisely, Musil sees it as an interface between the sphere of scientific knowledge and the sphere of life and art. It is this double vicinity that lends the essay certain strength and makes it a particularly suitable tool for investigations in the realms of ethics and aesthetics. Borrowing from both its neighbours, the essay does not turn into

something volatile; it does not dissolve into an uncontrollable stream of thoughts, a disarticulate assemblage of ideas, but rather submits to the discipline of scientific protocols. The essay, Musil writes,

> takes its form and method from science, its matter from art . . . [It] seeks to establish an order. It presents not characters but a connection of thoughts, that is, a logical connection, and it proceeds from facts, like the natural sciences, to which the essay imparts an order. Except that these facts are not generally observable, and also their connections are in many cases only a singularity. There is no total solution, but only a series of particular ones. But the essay does present evidence, and investigates. (PS 49) [Er hat von der Wissenschaft die Form u. Methode. Von der Kunst die Materie . . . Er sucht eine Ordnung zu schaffen. Er gibt keine Figuren, sondern eine Gedankenverknüpfung also eine logische u. geht von Tatsachen aus, wie die Naturwissenchaft, die er in Beziehung setzt. Nur sind diese Tatsachen nicht allgemein beobachtbar und auch ihre Verknüpfung ist in vielen Fällen nur eine singuläre. Er gibt keine Totallösung, sondern nur eine Reihe von partikularen. Aber er sagt aus und untersucht. (GW II 1335)

As is evident from the passage above, the emphasis falls on the essay's affinity with the logic of scientific arguments, perhaps because Musil felt that his duty was to defend the essay against those who might have associated this type of writing with the lack of precision, discipline, and rigor.

Later, in chapter 62, Part II of *The Man without Qualities*, Musil has Ulrich

adopt the quintessential property of the essay as the core of his personal morality, but it must be noted that the essay's centre of gravity, so to speak, has moved somewhat: "It was more or less in the way an essay . . . explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept—that he believed he could most rightly survey and handle the world and his own life" (MwQ I 270) [Ungefähr wie ein Essay . . . ein Ding von vielen Seiten nimmt, ohne es ganz zu erfassen, – denn ein ganz erfaßtes Ding verliert mit einem Male seinen Umfang und schmilzt zu einem Begriff ein – glaubte er, Welt und eigenes Leben am richtigsten ansehen und behandeln zu können (GW I 250)]. A certain structural flexibility and incompleteness seem to have now become the more important qualities of the essay, in its role as the cornerstone of what Musil termed "essayism." Indeed, when styled after the essay, personal morality turns into "an open-ended system of relationships" (MwQ I 270) ["ein unendliches System von Zusammenhängen" (GW I 251)], in which ethical values are circumstantial, rather than absolute, and the meaning of moral actions is functional, rather than independent.

Aside from being useful in discussing ethical questions, the essay apparently can also serve as a template for an unorthodox kind of novel. Such a novel, modelled on the essay's flexible structure, will not display the tightly knit configuration of more traditional narratives, notably the historical-realist variety. According to Musil, the portrait of a period cannot and should not be reduced to a bare sequence of historical events; on the contrary, it ought to comprise as many facets, "problems of the time," as necessary, be they of cultural, ideological,

religious, metaphysical, philosophical, scientific, or technological nature. But how can one attain a breadth of this kind *without* creating a totalizing and totalitarian narrative in the process? We can easily imagine that this was a difficult question for Musil himself, one with which he constantly struggled while writing his magnum opus. To skirt the totalitarian trap, Musil believed, one needed to embrace, fully and unconditionally, the method and ethos of the essay. Provisional and incomplete by definition, the essay, at least the way Musil conceives it, necessarily shies away from prescribing an absolute general solution to the problem it tackles. This hesitancy to dictate final answers and overall meanings, along with a host of other dissimilarities, distinguishes the essay, again, as Musil defines it, from other more ideologically driven written works, including the conventional historical-realist narrative.

As the core of the notion of "essayism" (MwQ I 273) ["Essayismus" (GW I 253)], that is, of Ulrich's as yet merely utopian existential choice in his search for "the right way to live" (MwQ I 275) ["das rechte Leben" (GW I 255)], the essay is a "unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought" (MwQ I 273) ["einmalige und unabänderliche Gestalt, die das innere Leben eines Menschen in einem entscheidenden Gedanken annimmt" (GW I 253)]. The keyword here is *Gestalt*, which could also be translated as "structure" or "configuration." That Musil uses this word instead of the more neutral "form" is indicative of his desire to give it, and the essay for that matter, a specific meaning. A gestalt is a framework, an integral configuration, of a special order. It is perhaps not fortuitous that notions denoting form, in the sense of structure or configuration, resurface at decisive moments in the novel. Here, for example, the

reader is told that six months have already passed since Ulrich took his "holiday from life" (MwQ I 276) ["Urlaub vom Leben" (GW I 256)] and, more importantly, that he has made no real progress toward his goal. It is exactly at this sensitive moment that Ulrich thinks of the utopia of essayism as a more suitable approach to his problems. Such an existential alternative, the way Ulrich outlines it, shows noticeable signs of openness toward moral, religious, and aesthetic areas of experience, while not losing sight of scientific strictness.

But what type of configuration is this gestalt? To answer the question, let us go back to the essay in which Musil analyzes the significance of form in poetry. As shown, Musil explains with the aid of gestalt terminology that our mind tends to organize things and processes in psychological wholes; this is a procedure that has obvious benefits for every one of us since it simplifies even the most trivial activities of our daily life. A gestalt, therefore, mistranslated as "form" or "whole," is a construct that, because of the particular relationship established among its discrete components, cannot be simply reduced to the expression of their mere sum: "As one of the simplest examples, a rectangle can be said to consist of its four sides and a melody of its sounds, but also of their unique internal relations, in the position of the sides in relation to each other, and of the notes to each other" (PS 83) ["So besteht, als eines der einfachsten Beispiele, ein Rechteck zwar aus seinen vier Seiten und eine Melodie aus ihren Tönen, aber in deren einmaligem Stand zueinander, der eben die Gestalt ausmacht und einen Ausdruck hat" (GW II 1218)]. Life, Ulrich suggests, must aim at becoming such a gestalt, that is, an entirety whose flexible structure resembles that of the essay. Life governed by the principles of essayism is a whole that, in short, refuses to

turn into an autocratic totality. Ulrich, we are told, detests philosophers for, unlike the essayists, they are "despots" ("Gewalttäter") who "subject the world to their tyranny by locking it up in a system of thought" (MwQ I 272) ["die Welt in der Weise unterwerfen, daβ sie sie in ein System sperren" (GW I 253)]. But the work of art must have similar goals. As previously pointed out, Musil's predicaments in writing his novel are somewhat analogous to Ulrich's existential ones. Musil was aware that, because of its vast scope, *The Man without Qualities* could easily take the shape of an oppressive construct, thus undesirably imposing total solutions. Hence, the richly essayistic texture of the novel, its antitotalitarian drive. In anticipating the possible allegation that his work has become excessively essayistic, Musil tersely warned, "today there is too little reflection" (MwQ II 1767) ["heute wird zu wenig überlegt" (GW I 1941)].

However, as the preceding discussion indicates, the novelist must not allow this consistent movement of ideas to degenerate into an utterly arbitrary one. And, as an additional difficulty, the novelist cannot turn the novel into a scientific treatise either. Ideas, and their architecture in the novel, Musil claims, are to be part of a gestalt, that is, of a non-totalitarian totality. The novel itself will then become such a gestalt. "Ideas are not to be included in a novel for their own sake . . . they are 'components' of a gestalt. And if this book succeeds, it will be a gestalt" (MwQ II 1767) ["Gedanken dürfen nicht um ihrer selbst willen darin stehen . . . sie sind «Teile» einer Gestalt. Und wenn dieses Buch gelingt, wird es Gestalt sein" (GW I 1942)]. It is therefore one of the most challenging tasks of a writer to control the dispersive tendencies of thought, to contain them somehow into the organizing space of a frame without however transforming thought into a

lifeless mass of inert concepts. Musil knows that the narrative cannot be turned into a completely shapeless corpus of ideas, actions, and characters, for that would not solve its crisis but merely relocate it by substituting a dogmatic model for an even more unsatisfying one. Ricoeur explains this persuasively in the second volume of *Time and Narrative*: “But then literature, by reduplicating the chaos of reality by that of fiction, returns mimesis to its weakest function—that of replicating what is real by copying it” (14). It is a commonplace in Musil criticism to consider that the intricate architecture of *The Man without Qualities*, defying the limitations of any type of plotlike structure, reproduces through the specific means of creative writing the anarchic nature of modern life. It is as if the novel were indeed the walking mirror that Stendhal spoke of in 1830. Frederick G. Peters offers the most blatant example in this sense. In a section of his study *Robert Musil, Master of the Hovering Life*, suggestively entitled “The Aesthetics of Nihilism: A World Without Plot,” he writes: “There is no plot in the usual sense in *The Man without Qualities*. Musil considered it part of his intellectual honesty as a modern writer to avoid plot as far as possible. Musil’s attack upon the idea of plot as a form of fraud in the novel was a direct consequence of his nihilistic interpretation of daily reality” (188-89). A page later, he states that “*The Man without Qualities*, lacking a plot, is not a novel of action but rather the supreme example in Western literature of a novel of ideas” (190).

There is at least one problematic aspect in Peters’ radical statements. Although Peters proclaims the conspicuous absence of plot in the novel, he fails to provide a working definition of plot, except by loosely equating it with action of a certain type. He does not demonstrate in what ways Musil has abolished the plot

in *The Man without Qualities* but merely postulates its vanishing. That Musil completely refused to plot his novel is nevertheless far from being as self-evident as Peters assumes. Nor does Peters define what a plotless novel is and whether such a construct might realistically be conceived: he simply takes its existence for granted. The source of all these inconsistencies lies in the fact that Peters' reasoning remains trapped in a fallacious circularity. First, he measures *The Man without Qualities* against the inappropriate standard of the action novel, whose plot grows around causally governed series of actions, only to conclude that Musil's novel fails to meet its requirements, whence he then infers the absence of any plot in the Musilian text.

But Musil never intended, at least initially, to make *The Man without Qualities* an action novel or a historical one. In chapter 42, Part II, of *The Man without Qualities*, while trying to unravel the deep yet thoroughly ludicrous mystery at the heart of the Austro-Hungarian dualism, namely, explaining the unexplainable and representing the non-representable, which in themselves are highly ironic tasks, Musil writes that "neither at this point nor later will any serious attempt be made to paint a historical canvas and enter into competition with reality" (MwQ I 180-81) ["weder an dieser Stelle noch in der Folge der glaubwürdige Versuch unternommen werden wird, ein Historienbild zu malen und mit der Wirklichkeit in Wettbewerb zu treten" (GW I 170)]. Referring to his masterwork in an interview quoted by Georg Lukács in "The Ideology of Modernism," Musil speaks of his intentions in even more unambiguous terms: "'I have not, I must insist, written a historical novel. I am not concerned with actual events . . . Events, anyhow, are interchangeable. I am interested in what is typical,

in what one might call the ghostly aspect of reality'" (1222). Lukács, a staunch defender of realism, uses this passage—albeit without indicating the source or date of the quotation— as irrefutable proof of Musil's antirealist proclivity. But this issue, despite all evidence to the contrary, is certainly not as cut-and-dried as it seems.

To be sure, on the one hand, Musil dissuades his readers from interpreting *The Man without Qualities* as a historical or a realist novel. His literary project, Musil suggests, is not to be considered similar to that of Sir Walter Scott or to Balzac's comprehensive survey of French society in the nineteenth century, painstakingly articulated in *La Comédie Humaine*. In fact, as early as chapter 4, Musil drops a hint about the narrator's equivocal attitude toward the poetics of realism, when he distinguishes between "a sense of reality" [*Wirklichkeitssinn*] and "a sense of possibility" [*Möglichkeitssinn*]. It is important to remember that this distinction does not turn into a diatribe against reality and realism, since the relationship at stake is not one of binary opposition but rather of complementarity. "A possible experience or truth is not the same as an actual experience or truth minus its 'reality value' but has . . . something quite divine about it, a fire, a soaring, a readiness to build and a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something to be invented" (MwQ I 11) ["Ein mögliches Erlebnis oder eine mögliche Wahrheit sind nicht gleich wirklichem Erlebnis und wirklicher Wahrheit weniger dem Werte des Wirklichseins, sondern sie haben . . . etwas sehr Göttliches in sich, ein Feuer, einen Flug, einen Bauwillen und bewußten Utopismus, der die Wirklichkeit nicht scheut, wohl aber als Aufgabe und Erfindung behandelt (GW I 16)].

Thus defined, the sense of possibility entails a creativity that goes well beyond the relatively straightforward stipulations of pure mimesis because it does not content itself with performing mere acts of imitation but instead enlarges the sphere of reality by allowing whatever lies in a state of potentiality to come into existence. Musil's argument resembles the Aristotelian distinction between the universality of poetry and the particularity of history.[6] The man who possesses a strong sense of possibility, Musil contends, "does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise" (MwQ I 11) ["sagt beispielsweise nicht: Hier ist dies oder das geschehen, wird geschehen, muß geschehen; sondern er erfindet: Hier könnte, sollte, oder müßte geschehen; und wenn man ihm von irgend etwas erklärt, daß es so sei, wie es sei, dann denkt er: Nun, es könnte wahrscheinlich auch anders sein" (GW I 16)]. As George J. Becker points out, the philosophical underpinnings of realism represented a radical break from the idealist metaphysics of Romanticism (6). In light of the impressive advances in natural sciences and positivism in the nineteenth century, realism "denied that there was a reality of essences or forms which was not accessible to ordinary sense perception, insisting instead that reality be viewed as something immediately at hand, common to ordinary experience, and open to

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[6] See section 5.5, "Universality," in his *Poetics*: "It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity . . . The distinction [between the historian and the poet] is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history" (16, emphasis in the original).

observation" (6). In his novel, Musil makes it abundantly clear that possibilists, such as Ulrich and his narrator, actively resist the implications of such an overly optimistic and somewhat naïve belief.

Restricting the domain of one's interest to accommodate only what a limited and limiting doctrine deems worth pursuing at a certain time is wrong because it needlessly disregards the inner substance of possibilities, which, as Musil observes, can be nothing but future reality in an embryonic or fetal stage. Such neglect brings with it a number of negative consequences because it precludes creativity and innovation in both human experience and aesthetics. Moreover, it erroneously minimizes the importance of uncertainty for a better understanding of the world. However, modern physics has come to the realization that one cannot dispense with uncertainty without rendering contemporary science useless. Criticizing positivism, Werner Heisenberg calls it a "pointless philosophy," since "what we can say clearly amounts to next to nothing . . . If we omitted all that is unclear we would probably be left with completely uninteresting and trivial tautologies" (826). Musil himself received very solid scientific training, and he put his expertise to good use when writing his second novel. He was also aware that the philosophical tenets of realism were too narrow and as a result, no longer tenable. At the same time, he knew, although he did not wholeheartedly accept, that the use of at least some of the realist codes was unavoidable (Jonsson 110). The resulting tension may have something to do with the fact that Musil could not bring the narrative to what he believed to be a satisfactory ending before death cut short his efforts. "The story of this novel," he wrote in his notes, "amounts to this, that the story that ought to be told in it is not told" (MwQ I 1760) ["Die

Geschichte dieses Romans kommt darauf hinaus, daß die Geschichte, die in ihm erzählt werden sollte, nicht erzählt wird" (GW I 1937)].[7]

The same tension can also perhaps explain why, on the other hand, Musil goes literally to great lengths to do exactly what he insists he will not be doing, that is, make a credible attempt (this is actually the meaning of the original in chapter 42) to investigate—in most of Part I and Part II and occasionally in Part III, thus approximately 800 pages in total—some of the causes, overt or concealed, of the monumental debacle that was the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the gay apocalypse (die fröhliche Apokalypse) that Broch referred to in his essay on Hofmannsthal. As years went by and a suitable closure to the ever-expanding narrative could still not be envisioned, Musil evidently became aware of the ironic twist in his project. A note most likely written in 1938 or 1939 provides evidence for the lack of enthusiasm with which he makes the concession: "During my work on it and under my hand this book has become a historical novel; it takes place twenty-five years ago! It has always been a contemporary novel developed out of the past, but now the span and tension are very great" (MwQ II 1767) ["Dieses Buch ist unter der Arbeit u. unter der Hand ein historischer Romangeworden, er spielt vor 25 Jahren! Es ist immer ein aus der Vergangenheit entwickelter Gegenwartsroman gewesen, jetzt aber ist die Spanne u Spannung sehr groß" (GW I 1941)].

Immediately after acknowledging this ironic shift, however, Musil reaffirms his commitment to the poetics of modernism, which does not hold outward reality

[7] In the context of the passage, "erzählt werden sollte" means "was supposed to be told," not "ought to be told," as Pike has chosen to translate it.

in high regard: “but still, what lies beneath the surface, *which is one of the chief objects of representation*, does not need to be laid significantly deeper” (MwQ II 1767, emphasis added) [“aber das unter der Oberfläche Gelegene, das hauptsächlich eins seiner Darstellungsobjekte gewesen ist, braucht noch immer nicht wesentlich tiefer gelegtzu werden” (GW I 1941]. It should be added at this point that in exploring the spectacular implosion of his own country, “the fall of the House of Usher,” as Maurice Blanchot aptly calls it in his discussion of *The Man without Qualities* (141), Musil inevitably resorts to realist conventions and techniques but does not let them go unchallenged. Representational irony is the means whereby Musil undermines the configurational system of rules and practices he simultaneously employs, and as such, it offers him a possible way out of the predicament. Here is how Jonsson summarizes the negatory phase in this double movement: “the Musilian narrator exposes the vacuity of the narrative frames that make the story of the realist novel cohere. This is the reason for his continuous negation and ironic subversion of cultural codes, discourses, ideas, and habits” (112).

It would therefore be more logical to agree, along with Ricoeur, that the concept of action must not be limited to signify only the external events in which characters are engaged and participate. In the course of its history, the Western novel has witnessed the continual growth of the notion of character at the expense of what Ricoeur calls an “overly narrow conception of plot” (*Time and Narrative II* 9). This gradual process of usurpation began with the picaresque tale, continued with the bildungsroman, and reached its peak in the stream-of-consciousness novel (9). Some have hastily equated it with the character’s complete

emancipation from the plot, which would be a mistake, Ricoeur contends, since even in the *Poetics* characters were not only subordinated to but also part of the all-inclusive concept of action. Thus, regardless of its complexity, character cannot escape what Ricoeur calls "the formal principle of configuration" (10), which is the very core of the concept of emplotment. It naturally follows from here, as Ricoeur points out, that there is a direct correlation between the expansion of plot and that of action: the broader the former, the more extensive the latter:

> Action, in this enlarged sense, also includes the moral transformation of characters, their growth and education, and their initiation into the complexity of moral and emotional existence. It also includes . . . purely internal changes affecting the temporal course of sensations and emotions, moving ultimately to the least organized, least conscious level introspection can reach. (10)

Once we concede that Ricoeur's fairly encompassing definition accounts for the variety of actions in *The Man without Qualities*, external *and* internal, it becomes obvious that Peters' position is no longer tenable. While it is true that Musil felt dissatisfied with the restrictions ensuing from writing a traditional nineteenth-century, that is, action-based novel, to conclude that *The Man without Qualities* completely lacks plot would be an overstatement. Musil neither destroys the plot nor redeems it; he simply exposes it for what it is: a set of illusion-generating conventions that may be ironically subverted, which he certainly does, but not totally removed. According to Stefan Jonsson, the constant fragmentation of traditional plot does not make *The Man without Qualities* a "plotless representation" (111).

It is pertinent to ask now why the question of plot, that is, the question of its flexibility and sometimes even of its viability, has become so imperative; in other words, why do some critics and theorists, such as Frank Kermode and Paul Ricoeur, consider it essential to give the plot their vote of confidence, while others, such as J. Hillis Miller, have uncovered its fundamental inconsistencies? Without attempting to settle an argument that perhaps cannot be decisively resolved—for both of these two positions are legitimate within their respective frame of reference—it would nevertheless be beneficial to clarify some of its relevant aspects. It is a matter of common sense to note that the concept of plot could not, as the nucleus of Western narrative, avoid being caught in the vortex of debates sprung from the advent of French post-structuralism, since it has always and inextricably been associated with the idea of order.

Undeniably, to plot has meant, ever since Aristotle, to organize the narrative space according to some rules of composition with the overt purpose of incorporating a series of disparate events into an autonomous, unitary, and complete body. To some critics and theorists, Kermode among them, it is the plot's predisposition toward establishing concords, which in turn corresponds to our fundamental need for order and comfort (44), that makes this highly regulative mechanism the useful instrument it has become, despite its internal contradictions. Plots, according to Kermode, are in fact the very materialization of man's innate desire to systematize temporal experience within the significant space of a frame(work). Thus, the mere successiveness of time must be given some human meaning so that it will leap from the vacuousness of "simple chronicity" to the substance of *kairos* (45-46). A span encompassed between two

distinct moments on the temporal axis, Kermode notes, turns into a plot the moment it is charged with sense and hence imparted a form. Its two extremities will consequently acquire specific functions and will hereupon be known as the beginning and the end of that stretch. Whatever unfolds between the boundaries of such an interval must necessarily follow the laws of concordance, which bring each and every constitutive segment of this continuous line together into a meaningful unit.

As indicated earlier, there is a direct correlation between these "paradigms of concord" (38) and our natural inclinations to make sense of life and world alike and take comfort in orderly arrangements. It is exactly this correspondence, Kermode contends, that makes the paradigms of agreement indestructible throughout time, despite variations. This is an important remark for it certifies Kermode's genuine confidence in the capacity of the plot to survive the rising wave of skepticism with which it has recently been regarded. Historically, as the consumers' expectations have grown refined so has the set of literary devices meant to augment the complexity of the portion located between the two margins of the plot. Moreover, as now more than ever the world itself appears to be multilayered and convoluted, the novels too have to be equipped with "increasingly varied concord fictions" (63) so that what Kermode calls, with a phrase borrowed from experimental psychology, their "submission to reality" (57) can be maintained. The question, one that proves to be particularly relevant for Musil, is to what degree of sophistication we can take these paradigms without transforming the narrative into pure contingency. Kermode's answer is somewhat predictable: beyond these changes one thing has never ceased to remain constant,

it is precisely the "humanly needed order which we call form" (123). Sartre's novel *Nausea* serves Kermode as a suitable example to illustrate the case of contemporary novel, that is, its attempt to defeat the existing paradigms while not turning into "a collection of events without concordance" (150).[8]

Furthermore, even in the cases of radically groundbreaking works, such as the French *Nouveau roman*, Kermode states, form cannot be totally denied: what seems to be a drastic rejection of all paradigms at a given time will eventually end up being absorbed into the next generation of paradigms, one of a higher degree of complexity. Since the endurance of paradigms appears to be intimately connected with our inborn need for concordance, it is only natural, as Ricoeur points out, to consider the central role played by the reader in "the interplay of innovation and sedimentation" (*A Ricoeur Reader* 151). It is the step that Ricoeur feels compelled to take in his work. By distinguishing mimesis$_2$ from mimesis$_3$, that is the structuring activity of the authors who "configure [action] according to specific rules of emplotment" (143) from the actualization of this process of configuration in the act of reading, he claims to have finally elucidated why the paradigms of emplotment have survived and will continue to do so. Concisely, it is because the reader always wants to experience the comfort of some ultimate meaning that he or she will step in and generate it if the author declines to submit to any such teleological anticipation. This has almost taken the form of an unwritten contract between the two parties with a final clause that reads: "A leap

[8] Kermode delivered the lectures that gave the substance of his book back in 1966, long before postmodern fiction became preeminent. That is why he calls Sartre's novel modern; what he actually means by this is "contemporary." For a brief history of literary postmodernism and its relation to modernism, see Calinescu (265-312).

beyond every paradigmatic expectation is impossible" (*Time and Narrative II* 25). From an entirely different perspective though, others consider both the Aristotelian prototype and its progenies to be rational constructs that seek to identify the structuring principles of narratives and therefore to prescribe the laws governing the practice of producing them.

Since such explanatory models have become extremely influential to the point of being placed at the cornerstone of the entire Western tradition, it is vital to subject them to a thorough investigation, to re-examine critically their presuppositions. As an example, for J. Hillis Miller, just about everything is problematic in the *Poetics*. He shows in *Reading Narrative* that Aristotle's text is an extremely ingenious, albeit failed endeavour to rationalize the irrational (3-45). However, Miller claims, the irrational seems to resist this attempt to be exorcised, sneaking back into the design of the tragedy. Moreover, Aristotle's own definition of plot—that is, a causal succession of actions—is undermined by the very tragedy that served as its illustration. There is no plot in *Oedipus the King*, Miller points out, at least not the type of plot theorized by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Indeed, at the moment of the play's formal inception all relevant action has already taken place *outside* its frame. As a result, Hillis Miller observes, it is language rather than action that Sophocles' tragedy fully exhibits: "*Oedipus the King*, it could be argued, is not a self-sufficient whole but an arbitrarily excised segment of a larger action. This is true, that is, unless you accept the idea that in *Oedipus the King* the language is the action, that it is a play about the action language can perform" (11).

Those who invent rational configurations such as the plot, Miller suggests,

always tend to bury the cluster of whatever latent irrationalities these may host behind the façade of a flawless appearance. It is a procedure that reverberates in the way Westerners have come up with the familiar figure of narrative line to designate the apparently unproblematic progress of a carefully knitted plot whose unfolding follows the predictable course from its beginning to the unavoidable end (*Ariadne's Thread* 18). Miller calls the figure of narrative line a "catachresis" (21), noting the implicit violence of such an act of improper naming. This figure proliferates to form a multitude of other regions of linearity, "areas of linear terminology," of which Miller identifies nine distinct ones (19-21). It is as if almost everything in or related to a narrative may be reduced to the figure of line, whether one refers to the physicality of writing and of books, or to terms describing character, interpersonal relations, topography, figures of speech and so on. The rule that presides over this repetitive propagation, Miller adds, is constant displacement. Figures like "life line," "line of events" and the like do not point to a referent but to another figure, which is precisely the itinerary of allegory. As a result, narrative "is the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy" (21). This in turn entails "the impossibility of expressing unequivocally, and so dominating, what is meant by experience or by writing" (21). The internal constitution of narrative is therefore labyrinthine, a genuine Ariadne's thread, which can never be fully mastered, a maze whose center remains forever inaccessible, for the very words that give it material consistence are already part of an etymological labyrinth. It is perhaps one of the persistent ironies of literature that the desire to engender order, this intense yearning that seems to be inscribed deep down in the layers of our being, is

permanently subverted by the amount of disorder it generates almost in spite of itself.

Inescapability of form, the violence of being enclosed in a frame, as well as an ironic resistance to the lure of the frame: this is both Ulrich and *The Man without Qualities* in a nutshell. As shown in the current chapter, the above-mentioned opposition constitutes one of the nuclei around which Musil's polycentric novel gravitates. Frames, paradigms, structures are all indispensable until we understand their fundamentally ambiguous nature: it is not that they do not keep their promise to deliver order and comfort, but that they do so by deceitful and dogmatic procedures. We rush to acquire some shape and identify totally with it. Similarly, we construct plots and thus allow ourselves to be beguiled by their reassuring harmony. To Musil, this is a luxury only "nursemaids" (MwQ I 709) ["Kinderfrauen" (GW I 650)] can afford. Much to his chagrin, though, Musil realized that most people willingly tolerate the "foreshortening of the mind's perspective" (MwQ I 707, 709) ["perspektivische Verkürzung des Verstandes" (GW I 648, 650)], the optical illusion created by frames, be they existential or narrative. Life itself appears to be reduced to that "celebrated 'thread of the story'" (MwQ I 709) ["berühmten «Faden der Erzählung» (GW I 650)], because that is how people keep chaos at safe distance. But the chaos, of their lives, of the world, and of the story, has not been tamed; it has merely covered over.

Both Ulrich and Musil refuse to submit to the demands of various frame(work)s, choosing instead to confront the consequences of becoming aware and accepting that "everything in public life has already ceased to be narrative and

no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out as an infinitely interwoven surface" (MwQ I 709) ["öffentlich alles schon unerzählerisch geworden ist und nicht einem «Faden» mehr folgt, sondern sich in einer unendlich verwobenen Fläche ausbreitet" (GW I 650)]. One corollary of this is the acknowledgement that narrative can no longer be condensed into a "unidimensional" (MwQ I 708) ["eindimensionalnen" (GW I 650)] sequence of chronologically arranged episodes, except by force. Narrative itself seems to have turned into a labyrinth whose centre is nowhere and everywhere. Unlike Ulrich, and Musil for that matter, people convert the violence with which they were once framed, that is, given shape, into the violence of imposing frames to their stories, of arbitrarily reducing the intricacies of the narrative maze to the unproblematic course of a linear thread. "Most people," Ulrich surmises during one of his typical meditative stances, "relate to themselves as storytellers . . . they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a 'course' is somehow their refuge from chaos" (MwQ I 709) ["Die meisten Menschen sind im Grundverhältnis zu sich selbst Erzähler . . . sie lieben das ordentliche Nacheinander von Tatsachen, weil es einer Notwendigkeit gleichsieht, und fühlen sich durch den Eindruck, daβ ihr Leben einen «Lauf» habe, irgendwie im Chaos geborgen" (GW I 650)]. But a question, an unavoidable perplexity, still lingers: can one, regardless of its inherent deficiencies, realistically give up the formative energy of the frame altogether? Perhaps not. But one does not necessarily have to choose between two mutually exclusive alternatives: *either* fully endorse the frame *or* remorselessly abrogate it. The next chapter investigates how the subtle interplay of form and its almost instantaneous subversion, which

constitutes the essence of Musil’s representational irony, offers a way out of this seemingly unsurpassable formal predicament.

Chapter IV

To Affirm Is to Subvert: Representational Irony in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*

The following short passage from the "Posthumous Papers" ("Nachlass") encapsulates the gist of Musil's exertions while struggling to complete his grand work: "The story of this novel amounts to this, that the story that ought to be told in it is not told" (MwQ II 1760) ["Das Geschichte dieses Romans kommt darauf hinaus, daβ die Geschichte, die in ihm erzählt werden sollte, nicht erzählt wird" (GW I 1937)]. As previously mentioned, Pike mistranslates Musil's key statement: in this particular context, "sollte" designates a past tense fact; thus, a more accurate rendering of the second half of the sentence would read as follows: "the story that was supposed to be told in it is not told." The beginning of the novel, much like that of a historically based bildungsroman, awakens "suppositions" that a narrative is to be told. However, looking back, we see, just as Musil saw, that what was supposed to be told is not materializing: our "suppositions" or "expectations" are not fulfilled. It is not so much that Musil lacks a particular story to recount, a tale or a set of tales upon which to build his narrative, but that he has a hard time finding the most apt manner of telling the story he has planned to tell. What Musil actually needs is an appropriate frame or framework, a form that can properly render the substance meant to be conveyed. In order to understand better Musil's somewhat paradoxical statement, we shall have to revisit his consideration of the question of form in art, outlined at the end of his 1931 essay "Literati and Literature: Marginal Glosses" ("Literat und Literatur: Randbemerkungen dazu").

Far from being "marginal" in Musilian thought, the relationship between

form and content is indicative of the great responsibility Musil always felt for his writing. Even though he refers mostly to poetry in this essay, Musil touches tangentially upon the question of the form in the novel as well. Initially, he takes note of the supposedly sharp contrast between the two. Thus, while in the novel "the discursive network of ideas" (PS 87) ["die diskursive Ideenverbindung" (GW II 1223)] is readily noticeable and seemingly more important; in poetry, "it is most completely the case that what is to be expressed is only what it is in the way it is expressed" (PS 87) ["vollends ist das Auszudrückende nur in der Form seines Ausdrucks das, was es ist" (GW II 1223)]. But this dissimilarity is not quite as radical as one might expect, for, Musil points out shortly afterward, content in the novel should be coextensive and interconnected with form. Generally, in art "there is no form that does not emerge from a content, no content that does not emerge from a form, and such amalgams of form and content are the elements out of which the work of art is composed" (PS 83) ["es gibt keine Form, die nicht an einem Inhalt, keinen Inhalt, der nicht durch eine Form in Erscheinung träte, und solche Amalgame aus Form und Inhalt bilden die Elemente, aus denen sich das Kunstwerk aufbaut" (GW II 1218)].

Form and content in the novel unite into a continuum whose components become indistinguishable like the two sides of a Möbius strip. The novel may therefore be described as a Gestalt, that is, as a unique fusion of form and content. It is an aggregate in which both of its constituents participate indiscriminately in the manifestation of the whole. Musil himself is rather unambiguous about that when he writes of his novel that "it will be a gestalt, and the objections that it resembles a treatise, etc., will then be incomprehensible" (MwQ II 1767) ["wird

es Gestalt sein, und die Einwände, daβ es einer Abhandlung ähnele u. dgl. werden dann unverständig sein" (GW I 1942)]. The numerous essayistic interludes, as part of the novel's content, are carefully interwoven into the fabric of the novel, in its form, in such a way that both content and form effectively contribute to the construction of the novel. Simultaneously, however, the same essayistic intermezzos subvert the act of narration by frequently interrupting it.[32] It can be said therefore that they are caught in a double movement, of affirmation and negation, which represents the intrinsic feature of Musil's representational irony. And if we take into consideration Musil's own claim that "it does not matter what, but how, one depicts" (1766) ["es kommt nicht darauf an, was, sondern wie man darstellt" (1941)], we shall understand the true nature of the novelist's difficulty in telling a story, which is primarily formal.

Wilfried Berghahn explains that the question of form, with its challenging demands, was the real cause behind the impasse Musil experienced at the end of the 1920s when he sought the assistance of a psychoanalyst. "For ultimately," he states, "there are not only psychological inhibitions to be dealt with, those generated by the pure process of work, but also the fundamental question of the novel's form" (my translation) ["Denn letzlich sind es nicht nur psychologisch zu behandelnde Hemmungen, den reinen Arbeitsvorgang betreffend, sondern grundsätzliche Probleme der Romangestalt" (134)]. Admittedly, to tell a story boils down to identifying its proper frame. One gets a story the moment one encloses some disparate elements into the form-giving space of a plot. Musil was

[32] In his 2007 study "*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: Unfinished or without End?*," Pike interprets Musil's essayistic intrusions as a deferral mechanism whose main purpose is to hinder the flow of actions in the novel (366).

clearly dissatisfied with whatever frames he could find at hand, but he also realized he could not do without one. To follow the secure paths of the nineteenth-century narrative meant to consent to the "foreshortening of the mind's perspective" (MwQ I 707, 709) ["perspektivische Verkürzung des Verstandes" (GW I 648, 650)], to indulge in an illusion, which, to him, was unacceptable. But that painful dilemma did not turn into a dead end for Musil; on the contrary, it was precisely there that he found, by employing representational irony, the way out of the quandary. Since no author can step outside any frame without taking the full risk of rendering the enterprise completely formless, hence utterly incommunicable, and since some authors do not wish to yield entirely to the dangerous seduction of the frame, all the author can and should do is to expose the frame for what it actually is: an artificial concept, a cunning device that may be necessary for the purpose of writing, say, a novel but whose function must under no circumstances be taken for granted or, even worse, dogmatized.

One does not have to reject completely all literary conventions, the paradigms and structures that have edified an oppressive legacy in order to unmask their illegitimacy, for such an extreme solution will not take one into the realm of total freedom but rather into the unintelligible emptiness of non-literature. Nothing, however, can stop an author from examining these artifacts with critical irony, from subjecting them to close scrutiny, and thus from revealing with self-conscious irony their fundamentally contrived nature. A convention is literally a *con-venire*, a "coming together"; it is the result of an agreement, of a contract that is neither absolute nor timeless, for it bears the seal of the specific moment of its ratification. It is instead our desire for conventions that has remained intact, even

when their authority was fiercely disputed. As Kermode points out, paradigms survive because they have always been supple enough to convert their successive crises into sources of renovation. Paradigms are not inflexible, although we sometimes tend to make them so. The validity of literary conventions may therefore be questioned not by denying them altogether but by cleverly undermining their intentions and claims from the inside. This is exactly what Musil does in his novel when he resorts to representational irony to solve the formal predicament he was facing. As a result, by consciously reflecting on its own conditions of production and consumption, *The Man without Qualities* is a metafiction. This chapter will investigate how the centripetal affirmation of form, of a frame of some sort, is necessarily opposed by its centrifugal dispersion, in a subtle ironic interplay of two conjoined movements that is perceptible primarily on the level of form.

It all begins with the frame of the novel. Scholars have noted Musil's intention to assemble *The Man without Qualities* symmetrically, with its massive and heterogeneous body pervaded by correspondence and equilibrium (Payne 1988 58-60; Peters 197-90; Pike 1961 137-38). Thus, the left wing of this highly organized edifice, namely its first part, "A Sort of Introduction" ("Eine Art Einleitung") was to be "balanced" (the verb used by both Pike and Peters) by a projected and never written "A Sort of Conclusion/Ending" ("Eine Art Ende"), the right wing meant to sustain the whole configuration in a sort of a flexible stability.[33] Likewise, the second part of the novel, "Pseudoreality Prevails"

[33] For an illuminating discussion on the question of structural symmetry in Musil's second novel, see Walter Fanta's excellent study "The 'Finale' of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*: Competing

("Seinesgleichen geschieht"), formerly translated as "The Like of It Now Happens," would find its natural correlative in the third part "Into the Millenium (The Criminals)" ["Ins Tausendjährige Reich (Die Verbrecher)"].[34] Seen from this angle, the novel's quadruple structure does resemble the perfection of a butterflylike design; it appears, in other words, to be the ultimate fulfillment of

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Editions and the 'Telos' of the Narrative." In it, Fanta argues that the view according to which the structure of *The Man without Qualities* is symmetrical gained influence as part of the debates stirred by the publication of Adolf Frisé's first post-war edition of the novel in 1952. It is worth noting that Fanta enjoyed unrivalled access to Musil's literary estate, the *Nachlass*, as one of the editors, together with Klaus Amann and Karl Corino, of the new electronic edition of Musil's collected works, "Kommentierte digitale Gesamt-Edition Robert Musil," published by the *Robert Musil Institute* in Klagenfurt in 2009. The novelty of this edition consists in the fact that it presents Musil's posthumous papers as a hypertext: "It offers the *Nachlass* continuation of the novel in two guises: first in its 'essential' form—the setting out of the manuscripts in a coherent narrative arrangement—with newly edited texts in a total of eleven sequences of chapter drafts. But at the same time, the digital edition offers the 'accidental' form of the novel as it was left in the *Nachlass*, the transcription of the manuscripts set out in its grouping in folders as it was handed down. The essential and the accidental forms are connected to each other via hyperlinks . . . In the commentary on the transcription, the status of every manuscript is determined exactly, with respect to its relative chronological position—this chronology has been identified throughout the whole—with respect to its location within a particular chapter and its placing within a succession of drafts" (390).

[34] See Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser's first English translation, published in three volumes in 1953, 1955, and 1961, respectively. While Wilkins and Kaiser chose a more literal translation of the German expression "Seinesgleichen geschieht," Sophie Wilkins's 1995 version, supervised by Burton Pike, a longtime Musil scholar, is closer to the spirit of Musil's text than to its letter. Here is how Musil himself explains the meaning of this expression, which is so difficult to render accurately in English: "Note the title of the major portion of the first volume: Pseudoreality Prevails. This means that in general today the personal givens of events are definite and delineated, but what is general about them, or their significance, is indefinite, faded, and equivocal, and repeats itself unintelligibly. The person awakened to awareness of the current situation has the feeling that the same things are happening to him over and over again, without there being a light to guide him out of this disorderly circle" (MwQ II 1745). ["Man beachte den Titel, den der Hauptteil des I Bdes. führt: Seinesgleichen geschieht. Das heißt, daß heute wohl das persönliche Hier und Dort des Geschehens ein bestimmtes ist, das Algemeine daran aber oder seine Bedeutung unbestimmt ist, verwaschen, äquivok und unübersichtlich sich wiederholend. Der zum Bewußtsein der heutigen Lage erwachte Mensch hat das Gefühl, daß ihm immer wieder die gleichen Dinge wiederfahren, ohne daß ihn ein Licht aus diesem unordentlichen Kreis herausführen würde" (GW I 1844)]. This fragment, written shortly after Volume I of the original appeared in late 1930, was first published in the 1978 German edition of Musil's collected works and was translated into English in 1995 by Burton Pike as part of the section "From the Posthumous Papers." Sophie Wilkins' version, "Pseudoreality Prevails," has so far been well received by Musil scholars; see, for example, Stefan Jonsson (298). Depending on the context, Wilkins also translates it as "semblances of reality" (MwQ I 135). But these are not the only versions available: Philip Payne chose the most literal solution of all with his "The Same Kind of Things Happen Again" (58). Hannah Hickman, in turn, proposed two more or less identical translations that she thought were going to have a greater impact upon the reader because of their familiarity: "History Repeats Itself" and "There Is Nothing New Under the Sun" (145).

form. What has not yet been noticed—quite surprisingly given its striking presence—is that Musil, by using representational irony, almost simultaneously subverts the seemingly vigorous affirmation of form.

The frame is there, for its contribution seems to be indispensable, but what we see is not a proper frame: it is just "a sort of" frame. The frame is therefore treated ironically: it is evoked, used, but at the same time shown to be illusory and potentially dogmatic. The author reserves the right of pointing to its conventional status, of uncovering its blatant artificiality. For Musil, a frame that is not destabilized at the very moment of its creation may likely become the origin of illusion. Scholars have correctly appreciated that Musil conceived the first and the fourth parts as a narrative frame that was supposed to enclose the actual body of the novel within its boundaries.[35] Musil himself explains in the *Nachlass*—with a high-quality sarcasm that is clearly discernible—his unusual decision of adding a "sort of" introduction to a novel whose sole magnitude should render an undertaking of this nature useless: "The stories being written today are all very fine, significant, profound, useful distillations and full of spirit. But they have no introductions. Therefore I have decided to write this story in such a way that in spite of its length it needs an introduction" (MwQ II 1759) ["Die Geschichten, die heute geschrieben warden, sind alle sehr schön, bedeutend, tief u. nützlich temperamentvoll oder abgeklärt. Aber sie haben keine Einleitungen. Darum habe

[35] In his 1961 study, Pike wrote that, "the most helpful way of approaching this novel is to regard the third and the projected fourth parts as attempts to find a solution to the problems stated in the first part and elaborated in the second" (138). Although coming from a slightly different perspective, Philip Payne's position is somewhat similar to Pike's. Thus, after having briefly described the novel's four-unit configuration, he argues that "*The Man without Qualities* is largely the product of an intuitive process within the frame of the rough plan which I have outlined above" (1988 59).

ich beschlossen, diese Geschichte so zu schreiben, daβ sie trotz ihrer Länge eine Einleitung braucht" (GW I 1935)].

It is not without relevance that Musil situates himself in explicit opposition to the writers who do not feel like writing introductions. Those generally successful authors just predictably reduplicate some familiar models and as a result, introductions would appear to be plainly redundant in their case. This obedient submission to what has already been validated as acceptable by public consensus nourishes readers' expectations: "the writer has to open his mouth, and the audience must already know what it is he wants to say" (MwQ II 1759) ["der Dichter muβ den Mund auftun, u. das Publikum muβ schon wissen, was er sagen will" (GW I 1935)]. According to the popular wisdom, much ridiculed by Musil, it is only the poorly shaped works, "if the writer has not been able to shape it successfully" (MwQ II 1759) ["wenn der Dichter mit ihrer Gestaltung nicht zu Rande gekommen sei" (GW I 1935)], that require an introduction. Needless to say, *The Man without Qualities* may have given this impression to many of its contemporaries. But Musil did not write the "introduction" in atoning for the allegedly cumbersome form of his novel; on the contrary, he wanted his readers to be aware that they were witnessing an "exceptional case" (MwQ II 1759) "Ausnahmenfall" (GW II 1935)]. He wanted them to understand that form, though important, was the effect of a completely conventional process, of an assemblage of rules that should not to be taken at face value. How is one supposed to do that? Not by being radically innovative but by "[a] small variation" (MwQ II 1759) ["Eine kleine Variation" (GW I 1935)], namely, by putting on a strategic, that is to say, ironic, interplay of form and resistance to its interpellations.

But if the narrative frame is simultaneously affirmed and negated, this will then have some dramatic consequences for the entire novel. *The Man without Qualities* is thus placed under the sign of a similar ambiguity, that is, of a permanent ironic hovering between the necessity of form and its rejection, without fully embracing either of these two margins. As both Pike and Peters fail to acknowledge, this double movement of affirmation and negation acting in conjunction, which is essentially ironic, they involuntarily fall into the trap of a self-contradiction. On one hand, they rightfully emphasize the internal balance of *The Man without Qualities*, the intended evenness of its framework, which is the epitome of order. On the other, they speak either of "Musil's [deliberate] rejection of narrative order" (Pike 155) or of a conspicuously absence of plot in the novel, that is, of a structuring principle (Peters 188-90). But this alleged inconsistency quickly dissolves when we understand and accept that the need for form and an instantaneous refusal of its promises thoroughly inform *The Man without Qualities*.

The beginning of the novel, the structural core of its frame, is in itself highly problematic. This is perhaps because beginnings are ambiguous to a certain extent, as Musil wrote in his diary in 1910: "since the point of departure is arbitrary there is an element of chance about it. But the point of departure is not absolutely arbitrary, for the first images are after all products of a tendency that, hovering before one's eyes, sets the direction for the whole work" (D 118) ["da der Ausgangspunkt willkürlich ist, liegt etwas Zufälliges darin. Aber der Ausgangspunkt ist nicht ganz willkürzlich, denn die ersten bilder werden ja aus der Tendenz heraus geschaffen, die einem für das Ganze vorschwebt" (T I 215)].

No beginning, not even that of the *Genesis*, can aspire to the status of an absolute beginning for, as J. Hillis Miller points out in his study *Ariadne's Thread*, "narration is the retracing of a story that has already happened" (20). Narratives, be they religious or secular, are always mere repetitions of something that has preceded them or that it is implicitly claimed to have preceded them. It is then only in relationship to the subsequent series of events triggered by a certain beginning, that the initial point of a narrative is not completely arbitrary. Were it to be equally random for both its exteriority and interiority, the beginning would simply disappear, and everything that follows it would disappear along with it. Musil was aware of this basic in-betweenness of the beginning, positioned at the intersection of arbitrariness and predictability as it was, without however being totally assimilated into either of the two, and he exploited it in his fiction.

The Man without Qualities seems to take this awareness even further. Let us note that Musil ingeniously orchestrates the interplay of two incompatible movements in the very first chapter of the novel: the centripetal force of form encounters the opposition of a centrifugal resistance to its demands and vice-versa. The title itself, "From which, remarkably enough, nothing develops" (MwQ I 3) "Woraus bemerkenswerter Weise nichts hervorgeht" (GW I 9)], is disconcerting, as is the chapter that develops beneath it. Right from the title, the narrator subtly warns his readers that what they are about to embark on is not to be regarded as an ordinary, unproblematic beginning. Rather, it is one that invites the reader to reflect closely on its artificial and ambiguous character. Thus, although the title, and the whole chapter for that matter, admits of two mutually exclusive readings, neither of them is able to obliterate the other completely. As a

matter of fact, they are inseparable, and the chapter itself appears like a two-faced Janus.

One the one hand, the title may be read literally in what would be in overt defiance of the notorious principle of literary incipiency, first articulated by Aristotle. Since it does not activate any event that is intimately connected to the later course of the novel, the chapter remains outside the novel's corpus, as Ulf Schramm points out (13). By refusing to assume the shape of a portal that is supposed to take the reader deep into the body of the text, it defies our common expectations. It represents in other words a fake entrance, the anarchic repudiation of the frame's unifying energy, the spectral counterpart of form.[36] Those who hope to learn from it vital information for the ensuing developments will be

[36] The German equivalent would be *Gespenst*, that is, "ghost" or "specter." This is exactly the word Musil uses to illustrate Ulrich's shapelessness in chapter 122 of the second part of the novel as he depicts the scene in which the form-giving apparatus of Viennese architecture suddenly interpellates the protagonist (MwQ I 706, GW II 648). Much along the same lines, the narrator writes in chapter 40 of "Pseudoreality Prevails" that "[t]here is always something ghostly about living constantly in a well-ordered state" (MwQ I 165) ["Nun hat der ständige Lebensaufenhalt in einem wohlgeordneten Staat aber durchaus etwas Gespenstisches" (GW I 156)]. It is because one chooses to ignore or deny this invisible yet thorough pressure of form that life is given "a certain spooky quality" (MwQ I 166) ["eine gewisse Geisterhaftigkeit" (GW I 157)]. Without the material consistency of form, reality itself looks as if it has just liquefied or been sublimated, that is, turned into something that lacks independent shape and/or substance. Ulrich dislikes both ends of the spectrum alike: incarceration in a rigid form vs. disintegration into absolute vacuousness. Consequently, his central concern throughout the novel is to find a way out of a world that is hopelessly partitioned between these two poles. The ephemeral ecstasy induced by his love for the major's wife, which prefigures Ulrich's relationship to Agathe, is just such a moment of grace. Thus, we are told, Ulrich retreats symbolically to an island to meditate upon the consequences of such an affair and to distance himself from the heat of the passion. There he sits in the proximity of "sea, rock, and sky" (MwQ I 130) ["Meer, Fels und Himmel" (GW I 125)], which represent precisely the three states of matter. The island stands for a supernatural geography wherein the subject is elevated above all boundaries: "To put it quite soberly, these differences [between mind and nature, animate and inanimate] were neither lost nor lessened, but their meaning fell away; one was no longer 'subject to those divisions that afflict mankind' as described by those religious seized by the mysticism of love" (130) ["Um das ganz nüchtern auszudrücken, diese Unterschiede [zwischen Geist, tierischer und toter Natur] werden sich wohl weder verloren noch verringert haben, aber die Bedeutung fiel von ihnen ab, man war «keinen Scheidungen des Menschentums mehr untertan», genau so wie es die von der Mystik der Liebe ergriffenen Gottläubigen beschreiben haben" (GW I 125)]. The most persistent opposition in *The Man without Quality*, expressed in a cluster of metaphors, is that between material, solid, corporeal, physical forms of matter on one hand and fluid, liquid, or gaseous ones, on the other.

disappointed. As a matter of fact, nothing is unequivocal in the first chapter, except the time of action. The other two main questions, who and where, are shrewdly left in suspension. At first, the narrator advances the idea that the city is Vienna, but immediately afterwards he states that "[w]e overestimate the importance of knowing where we are because in nomadic times it was essential to recognize the tribal feeding grounds . . . So let us not place any particular value on the city's name" (MwQ I 3-4) ["Die Überschätzung der Frage, wo man sich befinde, stammt aus der Hordenzeit, wo man die Futterplätze merken muβte . . . Es soll also auf den Namen der Stadt kein besonderer Wert gelegt werden." (GW I 9)].

Nor is the identity of the couple revealed. Since they are introduced in the first chapter of a work that pretends to be a novel and since it is customary for the protagonist in the novel to be presented at a very early stage, one may rightfully infer that the lady and the gentleman will be assigned leading roles in the narrative that has just begun. The narrator himself plays with this expectation, only ultimately to thwart it. He writes, "Their names might have been Ermelinda Tuzzi and Arnheim – but then, they couldn't be, because in August Frau Tuzzi was still in Bad Aussee with her husband and Dr. Arnheim was still in Constantinople; so we are left to wonder who they were" (MwQ I 4) ["Angenommen, sie würden Arnheim und Ermelinda Tuzzi heiβen, was aber nicht stimmt, denn Frau Tuzzi befand sich im August in Begleitung ihres Gatten in Bad Aussee und Dr. Arnheim noch in Konstantinopel, so steht man vor dem Rätsel, wer sie seien" (GW I 10)]. Alan Holmes notes that the narrator's parodic attitude toward a number of conventions in the first chapter of the novel, including the one directly stipulating

the codes of his own role as narrator, makes the reader aware of that role (280-82) and, by extension, of the artificiality of the entire enterprise. In the light of all these considerations, it sounds as if Musil were denying the necessity of narrative frame altogether. But this is of course not wholly possible: the frame is placed under the shade of suspicion but is not missing. Without a frame, even if that frame is just a sham, the text itself would dissolve into an indistinct mass of disparate elements. It would become anything but a novel. That is why this dangerous tendency toward lethal formlessness needs to be contained within reasonable limits.

One may easily do so by reading the title of the first chapter ironically as an antiphrasis, that is, as the opposite of what it literally says: “From which, remarkably enough, *everything* develops.” According to this equally valid interpretation, it is in the fairly compact area of only three pages that one may find, condensed as in an embryonic nucleus, the essential themes to be developed later in the novel. Far from being a denial of frame, a bogus doorway, the first chapter then becomes *the* royal gate into the novel’s internal machinery. As such, its function is to bring together all dispersive tendencies and hence erect a meaningful edifice made of some otherwise unrelated components. For example, Schramm finds that the significance of this chapter is the theme it puts forward, that of a possible alternation of two conflicting outlooks on reality, of which only one is narrative (13). Stefan Jonsson too records the presence of “two discursive registers” (101) within the space of the same chapter: while the former is the embodiment of an impersonal, objective description of the world, the latter corresponds to the subjective experience of individuals. Or, to put it differently,

without affecting the substance of the distinction: one observes the protocols of scientific discourse, the other abides by the conventions of traditional narrative (101-05). Their inherent opposition, Jonsson argues, translates into one of the crucial themes of *The Man without Qualities*: "[t]he conflict between *objective knowledge* and *experiential knowing*" (104). But this drive toward form and rigid structures, toward harmonious configurations, which is no less perilous than its symmetrical figure, must also be kept under careful observation. The secret consists in maintaining these two opposite tendencies in a sort of equilibrium so that neither of them ultimately prevails. This is achieved in the first chapter of the novel.

Arguably, the first paragraph of *The Man without Qualities* is among the most perplexing novelistic openings ever written. As previously indicated, Musil scholars have correctly identified in it the coexistence of two distinct perspectives or discourses, which are then visible throughout the rest of the chapter. I would like to focus on the first of these discursive modes and examine it briefly. Here is the passage (minus the first three lines):

> The isotherms and isotheres *were functioning as they should*. The air temperature *was appropriate relative* to the annual mean temperature and to the aperiodic monthly fluctuations of the temperature. The rising and setting of the sun, the moon, the phases of the moon, of Venus, of the rings of Saturn, and many other significant phenomena *were all in accordance with the forecasts* in the astronomical yearbooks . . . In a word that characterizes the facts fairly accurately, even if it is a bit old-fashioned: It was a fine day in August 1913.

> (MwQ I 3, emphasis added) [Die Isothermen und Isotheren *taten ihre Schuldigkeit*. Die Lufttemperatur *stand in einem ordnungsgemäßen Verhälnis* zur mittleren Jahrestemperatur, zur Temperatur des kältesten wie des wärmsten Monats und zur aperiodischen monatlichen Temperaturschwankung. Der Auf- und Untergang der Sonne, des Mondes, der Lichtwechsel des Mondes, der Venus, des Saturnringes und viele andere bedeutsame Erscheinungen *entschprachen ihrer Voraussage* in den astronomischen Jahrbüchern . . . Mit einem Wort, das das Tatsächliche recht gut bezeichnet, wenn es auch etwas altmodisch ist: Es war ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres 1913. (GW I 9)]

For a start, one might legitimately note that the apparently technical jargon of the meteorological report plays yet another role besides that of constituting the symmetrical counterpart of the terse albeit enlightening last sentence. Meteorology is the science that aims at finding patterns and orderly developments amid what appears to be the quintessence of irregularity. Atmospheric phenomena are more often than not volatile, hence difficult to predict. The formation and the subsequent itinerary of large masses of air, the movement of clouds in the sky, seem to defeat even the most basic prerequisites of scientific investigation, outlined by Musil as follows: "Lack of ambiguity, the repeatability of experience, and fixity of the object are the preconditions of calculating and measuring, as they are of the discipline of thinking in general" (PS 182) ["Eindeutigkeit, Wiederholbarkeit des Erlebnisses Festigkeit des Gegenstandes sind die Vorbedingungen von Rechnen und Messen wie von denkendem Verhalten

überhaupt" (GW II 1388)].

In chapter 83 of the second part, Musil compares the course of history to the motion of clouds, which, in total opposition to the unambiguous path of a billiard ball, is capricious and frustratingly unstable. Let us quickly note in passing that cloud motion figures prominently in chaos theory. And yet what we see here is that the apparent chaos of meteorological phenomena has been contained within an explanatory discourse, which, despite its verbosity, if compared to the succinctness of the narrative mode, does convey critical information. Disorder has therefore been given a frame, a form of some sort and thus momentarily neutralized. Moreover, the report itself describes a system in a transitory equilibrium: everything at this moment of reference is in keeping with what is expected from it. It is nevertheless reasonable to assume that the internal coherence of such a heterogeneous system is bound to be disturbed: indeed the occurrence of some perturbational factors seems quite probable given the extraordinary extent of the system. Furthermore, in the following paragraph, the narrator compares the motion of people on the streets of a big city with atmospheric phenomena: "Dark clusters of pedestrians formed cloudlike strings" (MwQ I 3) ["Fuβgängerdunkelheit bildete wolkige Schnüre" (GW I 9)]. The state of this urban system, with its permanent fluctuation between order and disorder, closely resembles that of the natural one depicted in the preceding passage. Neither of the two opposing tendencies, however, ultimately prevails, just as the equilibrium of the entire system is rather evanescent. Its structure neither collapses into complete formlessness nor freezes in an ideal arrangement but moves back and forth in the area defined by these boundaries:

> Where more powerful lines of speed cut across their casual haste they clotted up, then trickled on faster and, after a few oscillations, resumed their steady rhythm. Hundreds of noises wove themselves into a wiry texture of sound with barbs protruding here and there, smart edges running along it and subsiding again, with clear notes splintering off and dissipating. (MwQ I 3) [Wo kräftigere Striche der Geschwindigkeit quer durch ihre lockere Eile fuhren, verdickten sie sich, rieselten nachher rascher und hatten nach wenigen Schwingungen wieder ihren gleichmäβigen Puls. Töne waren zu einem drahtigen Geräusch ineinander verwunden, aus dem einzelne Spitzen vorstanden, längs dessen schneidige Kanten liefen und sich wieder einebneten, von dem klare Töne absplitterten und verflogen. (GW I 9)]

The microcosm reflects the macrocosm, and the essence of this mutual reflection is the law of *παντα ρε* (all things flow). A similar situation unfolds toward the end of the chapter as two bystanders, a man and a woman, witness how a heavy truck hits a man in their close proximity. This accident represents the sudden outburst of disorder, the unforeseen manifestation of chance, and as such, it elicits a visceral reaction in the lady who, we are told, "had a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach" (MwQ I 5) ["fühlte etwas Unangenehmes in der Herz-Magengrube" (GW I 11)]. But this unwelcome disturbance also calls for a rational response, for an attempt to inhibit the quick spread of chaos by enclosing it into the secure frame of unemotional judgment. It is the man who assumes this intellectual posture: "The brakes on these heavy trucks take too long to come to a

full stop" (MwQ I 5) ["«Diese schweren Kraftwagen, wie sie hier verwendet werden, haben einen zu langen Bremsweg» (GW I 11)]. The man's aloof stance and the rationalization itself do reach their goal for "[t]his datum gave the lady some relief" (MwQ I 5) ["Die Dame fühlte sich dadurch erleichtert" (GW I 11)]. What comforts her is not the internal logic of an approach whose terminology remains utterly alien to her understanding but the fact that "[the man's explanation] helped put this ghastly incident into perspective by reducing it to a technicality of no direct personal concern to her" (MwQ I 5) ["damit dieser gräβliche Vorfall in irgend eine Ordnung zu bringen war und zu einem technischen Problem wurde, das sie nicht mehr unmittelbar anging" (GW I 11)]. Although not literal, Sophie Wilkins' translation captures the spirit of the original, since to put something in order means to place it in the inclusive space of a frame that creates a meaningful representation.

All these significant examples, compressed within a mere three pages, speak of one and the same thing: the interplay of two conjoined movements that will never completely annihilate each other. Thus, the centrifugal drive toward the anarchic extremity of shapelessness is necessarily countered by the centripetal action of a form-giving frame. This ceaseless confrontation, which is also the core of life after all, characterizes adequately the narrative of *The Man without Qualities* and Musil will explore its different facets further in the novel. The novel itself is located at the intersection of these two divergent tendencies: while it cannot be fixed into a formal straitjacket of a nineteenth-century type, the complete rejection of form is also not an option. The fact that this wide-ranging theme is already prefigured in its first chapter might enable one to consider the

beginning of Musil's novel a proper narrative frame, which, because of its fundamentally ambiguous nature, is not the case, as I have already explained.

But what about the other border of the frame, that is, the end of *The Man without Qualities*? Since Musil himself did not reach it, we can only speculate about its characteristics. That, however, is not an easy task. As the reader burrows deeper and deeper into the *Nachlass*—Le Rider observes—the fine line between fiction and non-fiction, between the novel and the author's work diary becomes blurred; at some point, it is virtually impossible to differentiate between the two (*Kein Tag ohne Schreiben* 258). Michel Espagne outlines the main difficulty involved in dealing with such variable-geometry structures as follows: "an endless series of directing notes, project plans, and sketches change the overall perspective, without it being possible to establish a clear chronology or to determine all its implications" (qtd. in Le Rider 2002 258). In commenting on the impossibility of predicting how Musil would have ended *The Man without Qualities*, based on both the parts published in the author's lifetime and those put in print after 1942, Burton Pike writes, "This is because of the novel's rigorously experimental structure, consisting of an 'open architecture' that could be developed in many directions from any given point. The novel does contain coherent individual threads and incidents, but Musil firmly rejected the idea of a plotted narrative whole" (MwQ II xi).

Obviously, this has always been a "hot topic" in Musil scholarship and an exhaustive summary of what has so far been said lies beyond the scope of the

current chapter.[37] However a few important things may be pertinent to the argument presented here. First, let us see what Musil has to say about this: "I take the matter neither from all sides (which in the novel is impossible) nor from one side, but from various congruent sides. But one must not confuse the unfinished state of something with the author's skepticism" (MwQ II 1760) ["Ich nehme das Ding weder allseitig (was unmöglich ist im Roman), noch einseitig; sondern von verschiedenen zusammengehörigen Seiten. Man darf die Unfertigkeit einer Sache aber nicht mit Skepsis des Autors verwechseln" (GW I 1937)]. It is not hard to see that the first half of this passage summarizes the tension in my own reading of Musil's work. On one hand, the novelist cannot afford to delve thoroughly into the multiplicity of the world, for that would presuppose a drastic dislocation of the novel's frame and lead to an indistinct formlessness. Equally unfeasible, however, would be to embrace fully just one point of view, or a limited number of them, in order to come up with a tightly knit narrative. Musil's second novel is a continual search for the right balance between these two poles.

Since the notion of closure is intimately connected to that of totality, Musil's predicament may be summed up as follows: how could one finish a novel like *The Man without Qualities*, without turning it into a totality, into a mechanism that,

[37] In *Robert Musil: An Introduction to His Work* , Pike argues that at the time of Musil's death, the novel "was not only unfinished but . . . unfinishable" (133). See also his 2007 study, in which he basically reaffirms his position. Moreover, the enormous quantity of posthumous materials as well as their heterogeneity simply makes any effort of putting together an ultimate edition of the novel impossible. In the *Preface* to his English translation of the *Nachlass*, Pike writes that "[t]here is no way of telling from either the parts published in his lifetime or his posthumous papers how [Musil] would have [finished the novel], or indeed whether he could have done so to his own satisfaction" (MwQ II xi). In *Robert Musil's 'The Man without Qualities: A Critical Study,* Payne in turn points out in this sense that, regardless of the endless disputes generated by the *Nachlass*, "scholars agree on one point: no definite final version of the novel can be established however hard one combs through all that Musil wrote" (57). Similarly, Alan Holmes admits that such a task is unrealistic: "But any edition, however definitive, will have to face up to the fact of an unfinished novel" (116).

just as those impeccably coherent philosophical systems, subdues the world to its own orderly—hence despotic—outlook? Michael André Bernstein has correctly identified the main source of Musil's difficulty in finishing his novel in the fact that both Ulrich and "[the novel] want mutually exclusive things" (48). In other words, one cannot properly define what Musil has called "the right way to live" in a narrative whose foundational principles seem to resist the implied assumptions of such a goal. Says Bernstein: "The very concept of *das rechte Leben* implies a hierarchic stability that is counter to the infinite openness and provisional nature of essayism, of remaining 'without qualities' (48). Musil's so-called failure to wrap up *The Man without Qualities* eventually turns into a triumph because, as Bernstein puts it, "it rescues the novel from the dangers of its own totalizing ambition" (48). However, Musil did not want his critics to identify the novel's incompleteness or, better yet, the author's incapacity to arrive at a closing point, with an allegedly radical skepticism. He genuinely believed he could accomplish the task he had set for himself and his failure to bring that task to an end does not indicate in any way a lack of intention. We may agree with Jacques Le Rider that Musil "is constantly insisting on the need to remain in a state of subjective availability, to leave one's character . . . unfinished so as to allow for possible new combinations" (*Modernity and Crises of Identity* 300). But what about the narrative in which such a condition of permanent deferral is constructed? Does it necessarily have to remain in a comparable state of suspension? Would that make it more convincing? From the manuscripts and drafts that are currently available, it looks as if Musil was quite determined to finish his novel, and he did all he could under the circumstances to carry out his undertaking.

In mid-January 1942, shortly before his death, he wrote, "In this fashion concluding somehow and (instead of or after 'A Kind of Conclusion') write an Afterword, concluding word, of Ulrich's" (MwQ II 1770) ["Auf diese Art dazugekommen, irgendwie abzuschließen und (statt oder nach Eine Art Ende) ein Nachwort, Schlußwort, U's zu schreiben" (GW I 1943)]. As for what Musil meant by the mysterious "somehow" we can only hypothesize. One thing is certain: roughly three months prior to his sudden death, Musil's plans regarding the future course of the novel were vague. It is nevertheless safe to assume that the projected concluding section, had it been workable at all, would have been similar in nature to its symmetrical counterpart. It makes sense only to suppose that Musil was looking for a way to ironically undermine the totalitarian substance of the narrative closure as well as the expectations traditionally attached to it, without allowing the fabric of the novel to unravel, just as he had done with the beginning. Admittedly, this was a much more challenging mission, and Musil simply did not have time to work it out. The fact that Ulrich was to have the final word, and not the author, only strengthens this insight. Especially that, immediately following the above-mentioned passage, Musil refers to Luigi Pirandello, the playwright who fundamentally reshaped the landscape of European drama early in the twentieth century by dismantling its traditional conventions: "To be harmonized: the romantic or even Pirandellesque irony of the character above the author" (MwQ II 1770) ["Ins Lot zu rücken: die romantische oder gar Pirandellosche Ironie des: die Figur über den Autor" (GW I 1943)].

Early in the 1920s, as he outlined the ambitious plans for a handful of novels out of whose sketches *The Man without Qualities* gradually emerged, Musil was

determined not to restrict the presence of satire to the domain of content but to extend it to the questions of narrative technique. One entry in the diaries of those preliminary years reads: "Satire also directed against narrative style, against technique" (my translation) ["Satyre auch gegen die Art des Erzählens, die Technik richten" (T I 585)]. It is not difficult to imagine that Musil's favourite targets were those conventions that concealed their artificiality behind the façade of naturalness. Throughout the long process of writing his great novel, Musil remained true to this idea. As a result, just about everything in *The Man without Qualities* is problematic, not only the beginning and the end but also what lies within its entire perimeter. Let us quickly consider the first of the two major middle parts, "Pseudoreality Prevails," for in its own particular way it will take us to the limits of narration, of the narratable. How, for example, is one to represent a world caught in the endless series of repetition, the world of "Seinesgleichen"? Vienna 1913 is characterized by the empty reverberation of disorder, as if its inhabitants were forever locked in the meaningless labyrinth of a "self-perpetuating muddle" (Bernstein 51). Jonsson points out that one can no longer compile a "Geschichte," a history, from the chaotic elements of everyday Viennese life as "wheels turn in the air" (239). The never-ending repetition of more or less identical and inconsequential events is essentially hostile to narration, for it contradicts the basic law of its implied dynamism; it arrests, in other words, the incessant forward movement that is supposed to link, in spite of all detours and delays, a beginning to an end (Barthes *S/Z* 30, 75-76, 135, 178; Brooks xiii; Said 41, 162).

People of Austria-Hungary feel that the time is moving but have not the

slightest idea where exactly it will take them: "And it was not always clear what was up or down, what was going forward or backward" (MwQ I 7) ["Man konnte auch nicht recht unterscheiden, was oben und unten war, was vor und zurück ging" (GW I 13)]. As it soon turns out, time neither advances nor regresses but rather rotates just as large atmospheric fronts sometimes rotate in cycles that do not lead anywhere. Both center and periphery are therefore trapped in such a circular motion, a vortex that pulverizes the last residues of meaning and creates an enormous hollow space, the absolute vacuousness into which people, history, and the whole empire are to be absorbed eventually one by one. Shortly after the first volume of the novel, containing chapters 1 to 123, was published in 1930, Musil himself defined the notion of "Seinesgleichen geschieht" in an attempt to make known the technical difficulties with which he was confronted while writing it:

> Note the title of the major portion of the first volume: Pseudoreality Prevails. This means that in general today the personal givens of events are definite and delineated, but that what is general about them, or their significance, is indefinite, faded, and equivocal, and repeats itself unintelligibly. The person awakened to awareness of the current situation has the feeling that the same things are happening to him over and over again, without there being a light to guide him out of this disorderly circle. (MwQ II 1745) [Man beachte den Titel, den der Hauptteil des I. Bdes. führt: Seinesgleichen geschieht. Das heiβt, daβ heute wohl das persönliche Hier und Dort des Geschehens ein bestimmes ist, das Allgemeine daran aber oder seine Bedeutung

> unbestimmt ist, verwaschen äquivok und unübersichtlich sich wiederholend. Der zum Bewuβtsein der heutigen Lage erwachte Mensch hat das Gefühl, daβ ihm immer wieder die gleichen Dinge wiederfahren, ohne daβ ihn ein Licht aus diesem unordentlichen Kreis herausführen würde. (GW I 1844)

Circular motions of the type described by Musil lack direction, for their repetitiveness has wiped it out: any sense of meaningful progression is therefore erased. This highly entropic movement becomes visible in the fate of the Parallel Campaign, which disintegrates under the burden of its own wordiness and redundancies. No wonder that, as Musil adds, "the technical problem of the book could be characterized as the attempt to make a story at all possible in the first place" (MwQ II 1745) ["das technische Problem des Buche lieβe sich so bezeichnen als den Versuch eine Geschichte überhaupt erst möglich zu machen" (GW II 1844)]. Obviously, not any kind of story will do. Musil knew that classical realism with its fairly rudimentary repertoire of narrative techniques could not be a solution. But that does not mean that one must abandon them altogether: they may be obsolete and defective, yet no novelist can think of writing his or her text completely outside their realm. Stefan Jonsson's convincing analysis shows how Musil's narrator employs some traditional narrative conventions in order to uncover their shortcomings rather than to reinforce their authority. They are, as Jonsson puts it, "reappropriate[d] for new purposes" (109). The result is spectacular and disconcerting at once: "The absence of a central perspective and a predominating epistemology allows several perspectives and symbolic systems to coexist: the narrative generates a heterologic and polycentric space" (125). It is

Jonsson's contention that in the "achronic space" (125) of such a narrative the Musilian subject, freed from the external burdens of a fixed identity, a social role, or a particular ideology may properly be represented in its characteristic posture of openness and flexibility.

Musil's efforts to find a new and adequate narrative form are in fact a powerful, if subtle, declaration of secession whose motive lies in the awareness that not only history repeats itself but also literary tradition. Twice in *The Man without Qualities*, history, in general, and the history of novel in particular are placed in something of a mirror: they reflect each other, for both are caught in the Seinesgleichen, that is, in a relatively identical and pointless circularity: "Several times in the course of the Parallel Campaign it could be perceived that world history is made up much as all other stories are—i.e., the authors seldom come up with anything really new and are rather given to copying each other's plots and ideas" (MwQ I 560) ["Es konnte im Verlaufe der Parallelaktion schon einigemal bemerkt werden, daβ Weltgeschichte gemacht wird wie andere Geschichten auch; das heiβt, den Autoren fällt selten etwas Neues ein und sie schreiben, was die Verwicklungen und die Ideen angeht, gerne voneinander ab" (GW I 514)]. Form and content are endlessly reduplicated, and the line that such an unimaginative appropriation engenders is not straight as one might wrongfully assume but reiterates previously established circumvolutions. Musil did not feel comfortable following this deceptive path, and *The Man without Qualities* is the outcome of an intense desire to escape the formative and equally oppressive force of tradition.

Musil's subversive attitude toward the legacy of his predecessors was in fact perfectly compatible with the spirit of the time. Edward W. Said points out that

modernism witnessed a groundbreaking shift in the field of literary practice, which could be best described as the dislocation of hierarchical successions by juxtapositional sequences. Some authors, Musil among them, chose not to adhere obediently to the continuity of a line unfolding pyramidally from one generation to the next. It is a rearrangement based on the passage from a vertical, paradigmatic transference to a horizontal, syntagmatic organization. According to Said, other similar substitutions abide by this general principle:

> The series being replaced is the set of relationships linked together by familial analogy: father and son, the image, the process of genesis, a story. In their place stands: the brother, discontinuous concepts, paragenesis, construction. The first of these series is dynastic, bound to sources and origins, mimetic. The relationship holding in the second series are complementarity and adjacency; instead of a source we have the intentional beginning, instead of a story, a construction. (66)

It is in this context that the father-son relationship acquires a distinctive nuance in *The Man without Qualities*, which in turn makes it particularly attractive for my reading. Ulrich's relationship with his father, not the only one to be considered in the text, infuses discreetly the first two parts of the novel, only to be displaced eventually by the somewhat eccentric, and essentially mystical, union with his sister Agathe.

The state of affairs between the protagonist and the old professor of law is not unambiguous despite the fact that the two of them are set right from the beginning in a radical and ultimately irreconcilable opposition. However, the fracture is

rather elusive, and its consequences are never openly or too dramatically acknowledged by the two parties, since a more or less formal bridge is still maintained between them. But it is precisely this rather narrow channel that brings the deep fissure to the forefront: with the sole exception of two childhood memories and of the funeral, the father and son are never shown in physical proximity. Nevertheless, Ulrich's only recollections in which he and his father are brought together speak in fact of separation: first, we are told, the professor sends both his children away from home in different schools, following the premature death of their mother; then, a few years later, the scenario is repeated: shortly after writing an allegedly offensive essay on patriotism, young Ulrich finds himself on his way to a private school in a foreign country. As domestic ties are severely weakened, Ulrich has not developed a very strong sense of belonging to that basic social nucleus which is the family. Throughout the novel, therefore, the communicational flux between the father and son is reduced to several epistles that the old scholar occasionally sends to Ulrich and in which the timid waves of parental emotion are carefully inhibited.

The title of chapter 3 of Part I summarizes quite accurately the nature of the fundamental discrepancy that keeps the father and the son philosophically apart, in the broad sense of the term: "Even a man without qualities has a father with qualities" (MwQ I 8) ["Auch ein Mann ohne Eigenschaften hat einen Vater mit Eigenschaften" (GW I 13)]. Not only are they affiliated with two totally divergent worlds, the world of "Wirklichkeit" and the world of "Möglichkeit," but also with two completely dissimilar types of narrative. As Jonsson notes, Ulrich's father appears to possess the indispensable attributes of a bildungsroman hero (114) and,

as a matter of fact, chapter three of the novel *is* a bildungsroman in a nutshell. On just three pages—Musil could be concise—we read the compressed version of the story of a self-made man. The reader is given the essentials, and one such element is that the old professor has always observed hierarchical relationships, "those carefully nurtured connections" (MwQ I 8) ["die sorgfältige Pflege dieser Beziehungen" (GW I 14)], as the narrator calls them, for they are always accompanied by some sort of reward in a world governed by the ethics of reality (Wirklichkeit). That is how the father has made it from the modest status of a student in law to that of a prestigious scholar and politician and, further still, from the ranks of bourgeoisie to those of hereditary nobility.

Ulrich's defiance to all these unwritten social regulations is also mentioned: "Ulrich had always been irritated by the subservience of a man who was, after all, a member of the intellectual aristocracy toward the owners of horses, fields, and traditions" (MwQ I 9) ["die Unterwürfigkeit eines immerhin zum geistigen Adel gehörenden Menschen vor den Besitzern von Pferden, Äckern und Traditionen hatte ihn immer gereizt" (GW I 14)]. But the story of Ulrich's insubordination does not stop here: his decision to purchase the cozy Viennese mansion deeply annoys his father who interprets the act as "a transgression against limits all the more sacred for not being legally defined" (MwQ I 10) ["die Verletzung einer gesetzlich nicht umschriebenen, aber desto achtsamer zu respektierenden Grenze" (GW I 15)]. The little château itself, with its structural eclecticism, is provocative for the entire system of values of the old man who believes in and thoroughly enjoys the benefits of the world that has produced him. Ulrich's house is the architectural equivalent of a modernist narrative for "the whole had something

blurred about it, like a double-exposed photograph" (MwQ I 6) ["das Ganze hatte . . . einen etwas verwackelten Sinn, so wie übereinander photographierte Bilder" (GW I 12)]. It therefore represents the perfect antithesis of the Viennese urban design that, with its "indescribable harmony of all the lines and spaces . . . so complete and finished" (MwQ I 136) ["unaussprechliche Übereinstimmung in allen Linien und Räumen . . . so vollständig und fertig" (GW I 130)], closely resembles the framework of a classic realist narrative.

It soon becomes apparent that at the center of this deep-seated disagreement between the father and the son lie their utterly opposite understandings of what the functions of frames should be. According to the old professor, one must accept as natural the fact that frames, of whatever variety they might be, are necessarily characterized by a high degree of firmness and that as a consequence, one must under no circumstance attempt to violate the boundaries these devices strictly demarcate. In the beginning of chapter four, where Musil distinguishes "Wirklichkeitsinn" ("sense of reality") from "Möglichkeitsinn" ("sense of possibility"), we are told that "[t]o pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality" (MwQ I 10) ["Wenn man gut durch geöffnete Türen kommen will, muβ man die Tatsache achten, daβ sie einen festen Rahmen haben: dieser Grundsatz, nach dem der alte Professor immer gelebt hatte, ist einfach eine Forderung des Wirklichkeitssinn" (GW I 16)]. Stated in this way, the father's belief also defines, quite acceptably, the narrative frame as realist authors have always understood and reinforced it in their practice. In order to be able to complete a good story such a writer is

supposed to conform to certain norms, chief among them being the one that sternly forbids a writer to tamper with the frame of the story.

Not surprisingly, Ulrich's attitude toward frames is much more ambiguous, that is to say, ironic. On one hand, their rigidity clearly tends to exceed acceptable limits as they enclose the boundless energy of imagination and throttle the flow of creative springs; on the other, however, one cannot simply afford to dispose of frames altogether for in the absence of their configurative force nothing can ever begin to assume some shape. Ulrich thinks that "[f]or a man's possibilities, plans, and feelings must first be hedged in by prejudices, traditions, obstacles, and barriers of all sorts, like a lunatic in his straitjacket, and only then can whatever he is capable of doing have perhaps some value, substance, and staying power" (MwQ I 15-16) ["Es muβ der mensch in seinen Möglichkeiten, Plänen und Gefühlen zuerst durch Vorurteile, Überlieferungen, Schwierigkeiten und Beschränkungen jeder Art eingeengt werden wie ein Narr in seiner Zwangsjacke, und erst dann hat, was er hervorzubringen vermag, vielleicht Wert, Gewachsenheit und Bestand" (GW I 20)]. If one then cannot do away with the frame, one should definitely not attach too much importance to it either, not more than it is strictly necessary, anyway. Or better yet, one could downplay its excessive stability, which is what Ulrich fantasizes about doing while decorating his interiors: "Finally he dreamed up only impracticable rooms, revolving rooms, kaleidoscopic interiors, adjustable scenery for the soul, and his ideas grew steadily more devoid of content" (MwQ I 15) ["Schlieβlich dachte er sich überhaupt nur noch unausführbare Zimmer aus, Drehzimmer, kaleidoskopische Einrichtungen, Umstellvorrichtungen für die Seele, und seine Einfälle wurden immer

inhaltsloser" (GW I 20)].

But this process of relativizing the substance of frame cannot be taken to its last consequences, for it entails a dangerous slide toward unacceptable formlessness. Extreme solutions are to be avoided once again, and despite the serious disagreements between the father and the son, Ulrich manages to maintain his relationship with the old professor in a kind of equilibrium. When the latter politely insists that Ulrich become involved with the mysterious project later to be known as the Parallel Campaign, the son does follow the parental advice, even though not for identical reasons. As the Parallel Campaign is conceived to become a highly integrative mechanism, the father does not give up hope that Ulrich will eventually be absorbed into the meaningful space of a social frame, the only place where individuals may be given sense as components of a greater whole. The old scholar considers the nation to be what Benedict Anderson has aptly called "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Furthermore, as Anderson points out, "Kingship organizes everything around a high centre. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations" (19). To put it differently, the emperor, the father of the entire nation, is also the core wherein this imaginary horizontal dimension constituted by the people intersects the vertical axis of a divinely ordained dynasty.

William M. Johnston shows that, in the late years of his reign, Franz Joseph's image was multiplied in various ways by his subjects: from the instantly recognizable whiskers, enthusiastically embraced among officials, to the countless portraits spread virtually everywhere in the territories of the large empire (33; see also Janik and Toulmin 203). It is this imitative fever, a mimesis by a lower order,

this desire to emulate father figures, the uncritical willingness to perpetuate some dynastical values that Musil finds extremely problematic. Thus, the absence of the father in *The Man without Qualities* is logically accompanied by the absence of the emperor. Both of them exist yet are invisible. Franz Joseph's omnipresence, the narrator notes, is deceptive: "this popularity and publicity was so superconvincing that believing in his existence was rather like believing in stars that one sees though they ceased to exist thousands of years ago" (MwQ I 83) ["diese Popularität und Publizität war so über-überzeugend, daβ es mit dem Glauben an ihn leicht ebenso hätte bestellt sein können wie mit Sternen, die man sieht, obgleich es sie seit Tausenden von Jahren nicht mehr gibt" (GW I 83)].

In a fragment from the posthumous papers entitled "On Kakania," Musil's criticism of the notion of causality, which reminds us of the fourth chapter of his dissertation on Ernst Mach's work, is illustrated with an example that exposes both the vagueness of lineages and the futility of trying to capture their hypothetical continuity.[38] It is not quite certain, Musil argues, that by just following the uninterrupted line of causes one will eventually reach God as the cause of all causes: "But on the other hand it's like a person going from his father to his father's father, from his father's father to his father and father's father of the father's father, and so on in this series: he will never arrive at a complete notion of his descent" (MwQ II 1476) ["Anderseits ist das aber so, wie wenn einer vom Vater zum Vatersvater, vom Vatersvater zum Vater und Vatersvater des Vatersvaters und in dieser Linie weiter geht: er wird niemals einen vollen

[38] Cf. "The Polemic against the Concept of Causality; Its Replacement by the Concept of Function" in Musil's *On Mach's Theories* (44-56).

Inbegriff seiner Abstammung erlangen" (GW I 1438)].

Strikingly opposite is the relationship between Arnheim and his father. Although from a different philosophical standpoint than that of the old businessman's, the son struggles hard to imitate the work of his revered parent. Arnheim's resolution to propagate hierarchical relationships is fully visible in his double posture: that of a son and that of a symbolic father for his black servant, Soliman. Moreover, he would like to extend the authority of this position over Ulrich, too: intrigued by the latter's state of suspension, Arnheim wants to convert Ulrich to his own system of values "at any cost . . . even if he had to adopt him as a son!" (MwQ I 598) ["um jeden Preis . . . und sei es, daβ er ihn dazu an Sohnes Statt annehmen müβte" (GW I 549)]. Arnheim's unexpected offer that Ulrich take over a key position in the family's company is just such a disguised attempt. As previously indicated, this happens at a critical point in the novel's configuration and carries deep implications for the entire work. Shortly after being captivated with the proposal and resolving to reject it, Ulrich learns of his father's death. All dynastical relationships have now completely been obliterated, and Ulrich is ready to embark on his mystical union with Agathe. The biological father and the father-to-be are being replaced by the sister, just as the vertical connection of hierarchy is being substituted for the horizontal line of adjacency. What seems to be an excerpt from Ulrich's diary, which did not make its way into the published body of the novel, attests to this important shift. Thus, having just been advised of the old professor's demise, Ulrich coldly reviews his reactions occasioned by the event as follows:

> I cannot say I was shaken; we had little fondness for each other. Also,

> I was totally lacking in the feeling for that continuity which, it is claimed, binds ancestors and posterity; the inheritance of certain dispositions and qualities, while certainly present, did not seem to me any more important than that the most disparate melodies can be constructed from the same notes. (MwQ II 1727) [Ich kann nicht sagen, daβ ich erschüttert war; wir hatten wenig Sympathie für einander. Auch fehlte mir völlig das Gefühl für jene Kontinuität, die, wie man behauptet, Ahnen und Nachfahren verbindet; die Erblichkeit gewisser Anlagen und Eigenschaften, die gewiβ vorhanden ist, erschien mir nicht wichtiger, als daβ die verschiedensten Melodien aus den gleichen Tönen aufgebaut werden können . . . (GW I 1829-30)]

This chapter cannot end without a brief comment, placing the Parallel Campaign's anticipated failure in the context of the approach argued here. At least in the moments of its inception, this project resembles a conspiracy: since one of its implied goals is to outrun a relatively similar German initiative, the whole enterprise is veiled in secrecy like any other plot. The Parallel Campaign is a heterogeneous congregation of the supposedly best minds of the early twentieth-century Austria, whose main task is to prepare the celebration for the seventieth anniversary of Franz Joseph's ascension to throne in 1918. However, its true ambition, one that will gradually overshadow the rest, is the search for a great idea, an organizing principle that could hinder the dispersive tendencies at work in the Habsburg Empire of 1913. Symbolically, the object that animates the energies of such a quest is an overarching frame, a structure of imperial proportions, a clearly outlined perimeter meant to inhibit the centrifugal force of various

discourses flowing chaotically on different levels of Austrian society.

The originating impulse of the Parallel Campaign is dynastic and aspires to engender the systematic reduplication of an archetype, namely the divine figure of the emperor. Thus, Count Leinsdorf views Franz Joseph as a paternal icon, “a true father of his people” (MwQ I 89) [“ein wahr[er] Vater seiner Völker” (GW I 88)], who must become a model not only for Austria but for the entire world. Multiplied vertically, from the highest to the lowest social strata, this symbol is at once the sole guarantor of a harmoniously established totality, of a body firmly enclosed within the solid boundaries of a supranational frame. The emperor is not only the most important source of coherence—he is also a powerful agent of resistance to modernity (Johnston 34) and to many of his subjects these two areas are strictly correlated. That is why the emperor’s replicas feel the same distrust for everything that, from their reactionary position, is associated with modern times: multiplicity, contradiction, incoherence, endless fluctuation. They cannot come to terms with the experience of modernity, as Marshall Berman has characterized it: “a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” (15). Of Count Leinsdorf we learn that “his cast of mind was much too fixed” (MwQ I 179) [“der Charakter seines Denkens war ein viel zu fester” (GW I 169)], while Diotima reduces modern civilization to “everything that her mind could not control” (MwQ I 105) [“alles, was ihr Geist nicht beherrschen konnte” (GW I 103)]. The common denominator of all these individuals is the anxiety they share that Austria, and Western world for that matter, has reached the critical stage of losing its essence, that is, its great culture. Two short comments in

the *Nachlass* seem particularly appropriate to describe such a catastrophic attitude: “It’s comical, this hot, sudden, and doubtless momentarily not disreputable passion for one’s culture . . . They defend culture instead of having it” (MwQ II 1751) [“Denn es ist komisch, dieses heiβe plötzliche und zweifellos im Augenblick nicht unehrliche Gefühl für die Kultur . . . Sie verteidigen die Kultur, statt sie zu besitzen” (GW I 1872)].

The presence of an influential symbol, the emperor, is then necessary in order to annihilate what the leading figures of the Parallel Campaign perceive to be the destructive predispositions of modernity. But Franz Joseph is conspicuously absent from Musil’s novel, as we have seen, and that is the beginning of troubles for this semi-official organization. Count Leinsdorf and Diotima fail to understand that Franz Joseph, along with the monarchic institution, has become a mere simulacrum and that cultural homogeneity has never been more than a mental construct: “Beyond that the fiction of the unity of culture, a fiction that had grown thin and brittle. (Represented by the *monarchy*)” (MwQ II 1750, emphasis in the original) [“Darüber die dünn u. mürbe gewordene Fiktion der Kultureinheit. (Repräsentiert durch die *Monarchie*)” (GW I 1872)]. And yet, Arnheim regards art, literature in particular, as the only realm in which the purportedly dangerous fragmentation of modern era may still be overcome and controlled. Of course, not just any type of literature will do: what Arnheim has in mind are some classic texts such as the Bible and Homer, since “Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert have already created the epic of the new mechanized social and inner life, while the demonic substrata of our lives have been laid bare by Dostoyevsky, Strindberg, and Freud” (MwQ I 211) [“Dem neuen, mechanisierten Gesellschafts- und

Gefühlsleben haben bereits im Anfang Stendhal, Balzac und Flaubert die Epopöe geschaffen, das Dämonium der Unterschichten haben Dostojewski, Strindberg und Freud aufgedeckt" (GW I 197)]. Section Chief Tuzzi has also limited his readings to include mostly the Bible, Homer, and some obscure Austrian writers, "priding himself that this saved him from dissipating his mental forces" (MwQ I 224) ["und darauf tat er sich etwas zugute, weil es ihn vor Zersplitterung bewahrte" (GW I 209)].

Whether they refer to culture, religion, or community, Count Leindsorf, Diotima, Arnheim, and Tuzzi have the nostalgia for homogeneous, organic wholes, ideal entities that need to be safeguarded from the growing confusion of the present. Thus, Diotima's first suggestion of the great idea around which the Parallel Campaign could eventually grow is the eccentric thought of "a Global Austria" (MwQ I 185) ["ein Weltösterreich" (GW I 174)], the ultimate, universal, extension of what she has always believed to be a perfect and desirable model. Much later, Arnheim states emphatically that "[n]obody feels any responsibility toward the situation as a whole. Ever since the Church lost its influence, there is no central authority to stem our general chaos. There is no educational model, no educational principle" (MwQ I 616) ["niemand denkt an eine Verantwortung für das Ganze! Seit die Kirche ihren Einfluβ verloren hat, gibt es keine Autorität mehr in unseren Chaos. Es gibt kein Bildungsvorbild und keine Bildungsidee" (GW I 564)]. For Musil, this quasi-idealistic approach is entirely counterproductive. In his 1921 essay "'Nation' as Ideal and as Reality" ("Die Nation als Ideal und als Wirklichkeit"), he shows that reality, multifarious and fluid, defies the implied reductionism of those ideals conceived as "Platonic-Pythagorean ideas,

immovable and unalterable" (PS 113) ["die platonisch-pythagoräischen Ideen, unverrückbar und unverändlich" (GW II 1072)]. More often than not, ideals are imaginary constructs that do not have an actual correlative in reality; the nation would be one such example, as Musil explains, for what characterizes us is our profession (PS 158, GW II 1362) and not the nationalist, much less the racial elements. The attempt to impose the law of homogeneity at any costs turns out to be a hopeless effort, and the Parallel Campaign's failure speaks for itself. With the notable exception of Ulrich, all those involved in this project are unable to see the potential that modernity carries within its multiple folds.

Musil himself was not a pessimist, and he knew that chaos was not to have the last word: "I have repeatedly attempted to argue for evaluating this chaotic situation positively" (PS 159) ["Ich habe wiederholt den Versuch gemacht, zu einer positiven Bewertung dieses chaotischen Zustands zu raten" (GW II 1363)], he wrote in one of his unfinished essays. Ulrich's proposal that a "World Secretariat for Precision and Soul" (MwQ I 651) ["Erdensekretariat der Genauigkeit und Seele" (GW I 597)] be established clearly indicates that a possible solution to the complex problematic of modernity could not afford to discard either of the two main branches of human experience at the expense of the other as many of his peers wrongfully believed. This is a genuine work in progress, one that cannot be thoroughly finished, except by violence. The incompleteness of Musil's own novel seems to reinforce this belief. Following Anne Longuet Marx, Stefan Jonsson agrees that the novel's lack of closure must not be attributed to some technical deficiencies; instead, he considers *The Man without Qualities* to be "rooted, rhizome-like, in a notion according to which

personal identities, aesthetic entities, and cultural communities are open-ended processes intersected by multiple determinants" (268).

This analysis aimed to show that the attempt to handle the inherent multiplicity of modern life and experience is riddled with difficulties. On one hand, there is a desire, legitimate to a certain extent, to enclose everything we encounter in meaningful frames and thus give it all a form: from personal and national identities to the narratives that speak of them. But the order we achieve may be deceptive, for its comfort comes with a price, that of concealing contradictions rather than solving or at least tackling them honestly. On the other hand, formlessness is also not an acceptable answer: one cannot simply dispose of any frame in the name of an antitotalitarian consciousness. Musil felt this tension first hand, and *The Man without Qualities* is the outcome of the struggle to come to terms with it. Frames and the form they create may be indispensable, but one must always keep in mind that they are only auxiliary tools, tentative structures whose role is to maintain the whole system in a mobile equilibrium. Narrative frames, Musil contends, are not to be fixed and definitive but rather ambiguous. As such, they constantly hover between complete self-subversion and total self-affirmation without ever reaching any of these two extremes. This twofold, self-contradictory movement is fundamentally ironic.

In his diaries, Musil wrote that "*Th[omas] M[ann]* and similar authors write for people who are there; I write for people who aren't there" (D 427, emphasis in the original) ["*Th M* und ähnliche schreiben für die Menschen, die da sind; ich schreibe für Menschen, die nicht da sind" (T I 880)]. It is this acute awareness of his strange status, a posthumous living author, who speaks to us even today.

Musil's work is more topical than ever, for it anticipates our postmodern world in many ways. As Jacques Le Rider points out, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "we have tired of our attempts to replay the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: we are back in a situation similar to that of the Viennese modernists . . . The example of Vienna shows that this indeterminacy can be extremely fruitful, allowing for recombinations of unbelievable variety and richness" (*Modernity and Crises of Identity* 301).

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to demonstrate that, while both Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* and Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* are essentially ironic novels, each of them stages a different type of irony: tropological, in the case of Svevo, representational in that of Musil. This distinction constitutes the theoretical backbone of my thesis. The Introduction clarified the key aspects of these two kinds of irony in the context of the two works under consideration. At its most fundamental level, irony, whether tropological or representational, features the same paradoxical dynamics, which can be said to consist of a double movement, at once affirmative and negative. Such a self-contradictory dualism is already visible in the etymology of the word *irony*. In ancient Greek, irony meant "dissimulation," "pretense," and it designated the clever manoeuvre by which one was able to disguise one's true intentions under a feigned appearance. Socrates, the most notable representative of this technique, affirmed his ignorance only to have it negated in the end. Irony, in its literal and figurative senses, has inherited this antithetical structure, so, even today, when one makes use of irony, one basically performs a similar operation to that of Socrates, which affirms only to negate, utilizes only to subvert.

While both tropological and representational irony share this basic characteristic, they differ in every other respect. Not only are they used for different purposes, they largely pertain to distinct planes of the work. Thus, in employing tropological irony, Svevo shows his readers that our perceptions of the world, of ourselves, and of ourselves in relation to the world and the others may change dramatically as time goes by. Because our mental representations, and

ultimately our awareness and understanding, are highly susceptible to change, hence unreliable by definition, we are therefore reminded to treat them with utmost caution. Indeed, deceptive as they are, they can and most likely will shape the course of our actions in a manner that may be detrimental to us. That is exactly what happens to Zeno Cosini, the protagonist of Svevo's novel. It takes him almost a lifetime to realize that neither scientific medicine nor psychoanalysis holds the key to his healing; instead, he finally comes to recognize that health, or lack thereof, is more than anything else a matter of personal conviction. As soon as he stops being overly concerned with his health, Zeno finds himself cured of his imaginary illness. Since it primarily applies to what is being depicted in the narrative, tropological irony manifests on the level of content.

By contrast, representational irony responded to a need of an entirely different nature. As Musil set out to write what was to become his magnum opus, which eventually turned into an existential project, he understood that he was facing a formal problem whose difficulty and scope could not be overstated. On the one hand, he was disappointed with the traditional form of the nineteenth-century historical-realist narrative, which tended to diminish the rich complexity of the world and life by artificially removing any gaps and disparities it encountered in trying to represent this remarkable plenitude. The false consistency and coherence of a world described in accordance with such a narrow narrative formula did not sit well with Musil, because his ambition as a novelist was to capture, rather than willfully suppress, the underlying intricacy of modern world. On the other hand, however, Musil was clearly aware of the fact that no writer could completely dispose of those conventions that converted a simple collection

of events, actions, mental states, and intentions into a narrative. Despite their blatant shortcomings, the existing patterns of narration seemed to be unavoidable. Musil knew very well that he could not properly accomplish his enormous undertaking unless he came up with a way around this formal dilemma. Representational irony was the ideal solution to the seemingly impossible predicament. It allowed him to undermine the same conventions he was using in constructing his narrative, and thus it helped him to maintain a semblance of form while subverting it.

While the Introduction focused on illustrating the theoretical distinction between tropological and representational irony, the main task of the exegetical chapters was to explore the different ways in which Svevo and Musil put irony into practice in order to achieve their desired goals and objectives. There are numerous instances of tropological irony in *Zeno's Conscience*, so I found it necessary to restrict myself to discussing only the most significant ones. Arguably, the single most important example of tropological irony in Svevo's third novel is the reversal that the protagonist undergoes with respect to his health. However, no interpretation of Zeno's radical metamorphosis can afford to ignore Svevo's powerful critique of Freud and psychoanalysis. Chapter I indicated that this critique was already evident in the title of the novel. Both meanings of *coscienza*, "consciousness," "awareness" and "conscience," occur frequently in the Freudian vocabulary, and Svevo used irony to expose their internal inconsistencies or contradictions, to reveal that in reality they were the opposite of what they initially appeared to be. Thus, Svevo disputed Freud's claim that an increased awareness was beneficial for the patient; as Zeno painfully discovered

during his conversation with Tullio, the contrary was in fact true.

Svevo's critique of psychoanalysis provided the appropriate background for the examination of Zeno's imaginary illness carried out in chapter II. Here, the argument was put forward that Zeno's ultimately pointless therapy with Doctor S. functioned as a pretext for Svevo to satirize the bold assertions made by psychoanalysis with regard to its healing abilities. Ironically, Zeno's final revelation, namely, that he had not actually been sick, only obsessed with the state of his health, did not take place because of the therapy but rather in spite of it. It was also noted in chapter II that the analysis of Zeno's reversal led to a conclusion with far-reaching implications for the Svevo scholarship. Among the most persistent misconceptions about Zeno is that he belongs in the same category, of misfits and inept men, as Alfonso Nitti and Emilio Brentani, Svevo's other two protagonists. However, as chapter II proved it beyond doubt, this could not be further from the truth. At the end of the novel, Zeno emerges as a strong and adept businessman, ready to take immediate advantage of any circumstance that might benefit him, including the war. Far from being a failure, he is a winner in every sense of the word.

The strategy chosen for the two Musil chapters was dictated by the complexity of the issues studied in them. To gain a better understanding of how representational irony works in *The Man without Qualities*, I considered it was crucial to start by providing an overview of the formal problem Musil had to overcome in writing his novel. This was done in chapter III. One of the critical observations made in that chapter concerned a surprising yet informative analogy between the protagonist and the narrative itself. Both Ulrich and the novel can be

said to resist being secured in a space surrounded by the finite contour of a frame. One of the qualities that Ulrich conspicuously lacks is that of a frame. The man without qualities is, among many other things, the man without a frame. Frames, as guarantors of forms, may be useful aesthetic devices, perhaps *too* useful sometimes, and that explains why Musil was rather wary of them. He saw frames as sources of cohesion, harmony, and comfort, which are all attributes of form, but he also knew that the cohesion was constricting, the harmony, artificial, and the comfort, illusory. The pressure to acquire a frame, and thus engender a form, that Ulrich feels while strolling through the streets of Vienna no doubt resembles the pressure all writers, Musil included, feel while struggling to complete their works. The incredibly difficult formal problem that Musil had to solve could therefore be summed up as follows: given that a novelist must work within a pre-existing system of limitations, namely, the conventions handed down by tradition, what kind of a narrative frame, or any other narrative convention for that matter, can the novelist use so that the work does not become a reductive totality?

Once this question was clearly formulated in chapter III, it was the purpose of chapter IV to reconstruct Musil's solution and illustrate how representational irony actually operated in *The Man without Qualities*. A close reading of the first chapter of the novel revealed that Musil conceived it in such a way that it admitted of two mutually exclusive readings. It was then remarked that, while one of these readings was positive, reinforcing the notion of narrative frame, the other was negative, in effect subverting the same frame. The double, self-contradictory movement that these reading create was defined as the essence of Musil's representational irony. Though these two fundamentally incompatible readings are

placed side by side, they do not coexist peacefully. Their turbulent interaction produces a parabasis, much in the same way the two incongruous codes in the chapter "A Reflection" of Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* generate parabasis, as Paul de Man pointed out, by interrupting and disrupting each other. As for the other end of the frame, things are a little more complicated, since Musil did not have the chance to finish his novel. Although it is impossible to predict how Musil would have completed his work, it is fair to conclude that, had he done that, he would have found a way to affirm the ending and simultaneously negate it, just as he did with the beginning.

A dissertation dealing with two highly complex novels such as *Zeno's Conscience* and *The Man without Qualities* cannot claim to be exhaustive. A careful selection of the aspects that were most relevant to my thesis was imperative. There are of course many other cases of ironic reversals in Svevo's third novel, and I even mentioned a few of them when the course of reasoning allowed me to do that. However, it would have been virtually impossible to investigate all of these ironic instances with that attention to particulars that they certainly deserved. The inherent limitations of my dissertation become even more visible when it comes to Musil's masterwork. A truly encyclopaedic novel, *The Man without Qualities* made a habit of using and abusing, employing and subverting some of the most widely embraced narrative conventions, such as those governing the narration of time, action, and character. A survey of all these instances of representational irony would have definitely required an equally comprehensive critical study.

My dissertation aims to fill a gap in the scholarship. There are currently very

few comparative studies that examine the works of Svevo and Musil, and none of them looks specifically at the question of irony in *Zeno's Conscience* and *The Man without Qualities*. This is rather surprising, if we take into consideration the fact that Svevo and Musil are not quite as apart as this unusual interpretive silence might suggest. They were more or less contemporaries and lived, until 1918 at least, in the same country. They spoke different languages, but Svevo was educated in Germany and was obviously fluent in German. On the other hand, Martha Marcovaldi, Musil's wife, was Italian, and it was most likely at her suggestion that Musil read *Zeno's Conscience*. It is of course true that Svevo and Musil belonged to two different literary traditions, but the Austro-Hungarian cultural heritage was strong enough in Trieste to leave indelible traces on Svevo's ethos. Scholars who are familiar with Italian and Austrian literatures of the twentieth century can therefore find plenty of good reasons to start comparing the works of Svevo and Musil. I can only hope that my thesis contributes to a greater awareness of the excellent opportunities that await those who would like to engage in similar projects.

Just like other enterprises of this kind, the current dissertation creates new questions even as it attempts to answer the ones that set it off. These new questions are important, because they can indicate future avenues of research. A possible direction in which my study could fruitfully develop is the one given by the answer to the question whether Svevo and Musil were modernist or postmodernist writers. Generally, both Svevo and Musil are considered modernist authors, but my dissertation provides enough evidence to argue that *Zeno's Conscience* and *The Man without Qualities* already foreshadow postmodern

practices and attitudes. The paradoxical structure of irony, be it tropological or representational, with its self-contradictory interplay of centripetal and centrifugal forces, is uniquely positioned to respond to and embody what theorists and literary historians identify as a postmodern sensibility. I am thinking in particular of how Svevo simultaneously affirms and undermines Freud's psychoanalytic theory in his third novel and how Musil chooses to employ and subvert at the same time a number of well-established narrative conventions in his second novel. Because of the nature of the argument presented here, a great deal of time was spent looking at what differentiates Svevo from Musil. It is nevertheless important to remember that ultimately both speak of things that are yet to come, in words that are yet to be spoken.

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