

Zeno's conscience

Italo Svevo

ZENO'S CONSCIENCE

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Intermediate English

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Italo Svevo

Italo Svevo, whose real name was Aron Hector Schmitz, was born in Trieste in 1861, son of a German-Jewish glassware merchant and an Italian mother. At twelve he was sent to a boarding school near Würzburg (Germany). On finishing his elementary education, he returned back to Trieste where he attended a commercial college. Due to difficulties in his father's business he was forced to leave his education. He worked as a bank clerk and, after marrying Lidia Veneziani, he directed her father's factory successfully.

A close friend of the Irish writer James Joyce, Svevo was a pioneer of the psychological novel in Italy. He published three novels: 'A life' (1890), 'Old Age' (1898) and 'Zeno's Conscience' (1923). His last work is a gem of psychological observation and Jewish humour in the form of a patient's statement for his psychiatrist, showing the author's interest in the theories of Sigmund Freud. In 1928 he died in a car accident.

Foreword

I am the doctor who has had in treatment this patient and has induced him to write his autobiography. The patient has suspended his treatment, denying me to the full the results of my long and painstaking¹ psychoanalysis. I am publishing them in revenge². I hope he will resume³ his treatment. I am ready to share with him the profits from this publication.

Doctor S.

I – The Smoke, My First Trouble

My name is Zeno Cosini. I have suffered from depression. My doctor analyst advised me to write about my life in order to cure my depression. He told me to start my work with an historical analysis of my propensity to smoke. Now I do not know how to start my narration, so I beg the assistance of cigarettes, all looking like the one I am holding at this moment. Soon I discover one thing: the first cigarettes I smoked in the 1870s are no longer on the market. Around these first cigarettes, a few people come to my mind. One is Joseph, with a rather hoarse⁴ voice, a youth of my age; another is my brother, a year younger than I, who died many years ago. It seems that Joseph received a lot of

¹ Painstaking: careful, expending or showing diligent care and effort.

² Revenge: the action of hurting or harming someone in return for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands.

³ To resume: to start again.

⁴ Hoarse: rough or harsh in sound.

money from his father and he gave us cigarettes. I am sure he offered more of them to my brother than to me. Hence the necessity of procuring them on my own. It happened on occasions that I was driven to steal for them. In the living room hung my father's waistcoat⁵ over a chair, in whose pocket there was always change⁶. I procured the money to buy a packet of ten cigarettes. That is the origin of my bad habit.

One day my father surprised me with his waistcoat in my hands. I told him that I was curious to count the buttons. To my relief, my father laughed at my disposition to maths, and did not see I had my fingers in the watch pocket. His laugh inspired by my innocence added to keep me from ever to stealing again. That is to say, I stole again, but without knowing it. My father left some half-smoked cigars around the house perched⁷ on table edges and dressers. I believed it was his way to throw them away, thanks to the intervention of an old maid, Catina, who put them away. I smoked them in secret, until my stomach ached and I was in a cold sweat. Surely in my childhood I did not lack energy.

I remember I smoked a lot, hiding in all possible corners. Once I recall staying a full half hour in a dull⁸ cellar, with two other teenagers, of whom I remember only that they were wearing shorts. We had many cigarettes and we wanted to see who could smoke the most in the shortest time. I won and I boasted⁹ of my victo-

⁵ Waistcoat: a piece of clothing that covers the upper body but not the arms, worn over a shirt.

⁶ Change (here): coins.

⁷ Perched: be situated above or on the edge of something.

⁸ Dull: dark, muted.

⁹ To boast: to praise oneself.

ry, though I felt intoxicated. One of the two little men conceded: 'I don't care if I lose; I smoke only when I need to.' At that time I did not know whether I loved or hated cigarettes. When I realised to hate them, I was about twenty.

Then I had suffered for some weeks from a violent sore throat¹⁰ and fever. The doctor prescribed rest and absolute abstinence from smoking. I remember that word 'absolute'. It was shocking for me. When the doctor left me, my father (my mother had died many years before) remained by me with his cigar in his mouth. The following days I started to smoke again. My father came and went with his cigar in his mouth, remarking lightly: 'Well, still some days without smoking and you will be healed¹¹!'

I went on smoking, thinking that they were the last ones. Today, as an adult of fifty-seven, I smoke cigarettes that are not the last.

On the title page of a dictionary I find this note of mine: 'Today, 2nd February 1886, I am passing from jurisprudence to chemistry faculty. Last cigarette!' That was an important last cigarette.

I remember the hopes that accompanied it. I got angry with canon law, that seemed to me far from life, and I ran to science, which is life itself. Lately, to escape the bound of carbon compounds, in which I had no faith, I came back to law. Even here I remember another important last cigarette.

Now that I am analysing myself, I feel a surge of doubt: 'If I had stopped smoking, might I have become the ideal, strong man I expected to be?' I venture such

¹⁰ Sore throat: irritation/infection of the pharynx.

¹¹ To heal: to rehabilitate.

hypothesis to explain my juvenile weakness, but without conviction. Now, that I am quite old, can I expect to die healthy, having lived sick all my life?

The last cigarette tastes more intensive for the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of a future of health and strength. I made up my mind to go to that doctor that people said he healed nervous disturbances with electric shocks. I thought electricity could help me to stop smoking. After the first visit, the physician declared my health. To my complaining about poor digestion and bad sleeping patterns, he opined my stomach lacked acids and prescribed me one. Ever since then I have suffered from excess reflux. He said that electricity could heal any sleeplessness. I did seventy applications. I told him of my unhappiness with women. One was not enough for me, nor were many. I desired them all! The doctor replied evenly, hoping that the electric treatment could not heal from such 'disease'.

Later I found the person in an acquaintance of mine able to understand my problem to the best. He was wealthy and learned, big and fat. He was following a diet with good results, that everyday his belly was reducing. I was allowed to touch his belly, wanting to sap¹² his determination. I confessed to him that for me it was easier to renounce eating three times a day than to give up my daily cigarettes. His pondered opinion was that my real disease lay not in the cigarette, but in the decision-making. I had to stop smoking without any resolutions or decisions. Inside me – according to him – there were two persons: the former commanding like a boss, the latter obeying like a slave. As soon as surveillance weakened, the slave infringed his master's

¹² To sap: to extract.

will out of a love of freedom. It was to give absolute freedom to the slave, to avoid to fight my vice, but simply neglect and forget it. But it did not work!

Once my accountant, Mr Olivi, whom my father had imposed on me to keep me from squandering¹³ my father's legacy after his death, gave me a fine idea: a bet. The first one of us who smoked would pay.

I lost the bet. Olivi, smiling, collected the money and started to smoke a cigar.

My son was just three years old, when my wife had another idea: a clinic. We went to Dr Muli's clinic, in our city Trieste. He was young, handsome, elegant. He gave me a good impression, as positive and comfortable as the apartment reserved for me. He introduced me to Joanna, the nurse who had to look after me. She was a small woman of indeterminate age: anywhere between forty and sixty. I took leave of my wife and spent the first hours of my new stay reading. Tired of it, I started a conversation with Joanna. She told me about her two daughters, that she had to put into the Institute for the Poor. Abruptly I asked her for a cigarette. I would have paid ten crowns – considering that Joanna's daily salary was two crowns. That made Joanna fidget¹⁴ and she started to shout. Immediately I calmed her down, changing my proposal: 'Is there something to drink in this place?'

'Before leaving, the doctor gave me this bottle of cognac,' Joanna answered.

I saw drunkenness as my only way out. I drank my first glass. She too received her glass. Before she could

¹³ To squander: to waste, to throw away.

¹⁴ To fidget: to make restless or uneasy movements.

finish saying thanks, she had drunk it, and soon she keenly¹⁵ gazed at the bottle.

Picking up the conversation, she confided in me that her husband, when he was alive, had more beaten than kissed her. She asked me whether I believed that the dead could see what the living did. I nodded. Besides, she wanted to know if the dead, in the afterlife, could remember what had happened in their life. She lowered her voice to avoid being overheard¹⁶ by the dead. She confessed that, during her first months of marriage, she was unfaithful to her husband.

‘Maybe your older daughter’s father is this other man,’ I considered matter-of-factly¹⁷.

She grimaced¹⁸ and bluntly admitted to believing it, due to a certain resemblance.

It came to my mind the thought that my wife was taking advantage of my confinement in order to betray¹⁹ me with the handsome doctor. I asked Joanna if the doctor was still in the clinic. After checking as to his whereabouts²⁰, she said that he had been absent since he had left with my wife. I looked at her, scrutinizing her perfunctory²¹ smile, to see if it was inspired from the fact that the doctor might find himself with my wife rather than with me, his patient. I felt a stab²² of disappointment. Within myself two persons were fighting. One, the more reasonable, was saying: ‘What

¹⁵ Keenly: intensely.

¹⁶ To overhear: to hear without the speaker’s intention or knowledge.

¹⁷ Matter-of-factly: without showing emotion.

¹⁸ To grimace: to twist/to contort the face.

¹⁹ To betray: to be not loyal to someone.

²⁰ Whereabouts: place where a person is or may be found.

²¹ Perfunctory: uninterested, casual, passing.

²² Stab: act of pushing a knife into someone.