Descent, Transition and Raising in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*

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The sixth episode of *Ulysses* was among the first ones written in Trieste, and contains references which cast light on the Triestine setting as a background presence. They can be found in "Daren't joke about the dead for two years at least. *De mortuis nil nisi prius*" (90). In a letter written to Ezra Pound on 5th June 1920 Joyce wrote, "My reasons for travelling north are these. I am in need of a long holiday (by this I don't mean abandonment of *Ulysses* but quiet in which to finish it) away from here. Without saying anything about this city [Trieste] (*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*) my own position for the past seven months has been very unpleasant" (*Letters* 467).

Richard Ellmann's comment on this letter is that "Trieste had been favoured by the Austro-Hungarian empire as its only important merchant port; now, under Italy, the city has not such importance and seemed inert" (*Letters* 467). Joyce also makes an explicit remark in *Ulysses* on the atmosphere he found in Trieste at the time of his second stay there between 1919 and 1920, where the idea of the city's decay is closely connected to the idea of death: "Last time I was here was Mrs. Sinico's funeral" (94). Mrs Sinico, who takes her name from Giuseppe Sinico, Joyce's singing teacher in Trieste, had already been a character in "A Painful Case", a story in *Dubliners*, written in Trieste in 1905 and dealing with death and suicide.

My contention is that the relationship involving Joyce, Svevo, and Trieste is reflected in literary references in the two writers' works. It must be clear that the references are not explicit but rather have to be detected below the surface of their narratives. As a matter of fact, Svevo had declared in his lecture on Joyce that when an artist remembers, he creates at the same time, and thus some of the autobiographical data he employs undergoes a transformation in the process of writing.[1] However, there are two passages in *Ulysses* and in *La Coscienza di Zeno* where the above-mentioned link is more evident and invites a comparison. These passages both deal with a funeral, Paddy Dignam's in "Hades" and Guido Speier's in the final section of "Storia di un'associazione commerciale", translated as "A Business Partnership".

It has generally been acknowledged that in this episode Joyce uses the tripartite structure which appears throughout Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This implies that the whole pattern of the episode may be seen as a "descent into Hell". Joyce had already used this structure in one of the *Dubliners* stories, "Grace", which was written in October 1905 in Trieste, and whose characters will appear again in the "Hades" episode of *Ulysses*.

If we also apply this tripartite structure and consequently the pattern of the "descent into Hell" to the passage regarding Guido Speier's funeral in *La coscienza di Zeno*, we can notice several similarities between Joyce's and Svevo's episodes. Leaving aside the concept of structure, which will be dealt with further on, attention should first be concentrated on the two writers' fictional styles.

Hugh Kenner in *Joyce's Voices* maintains that empirical objectivity is the experience of a single narrator and permits only first person narration. In many writers of the twentieth century, like Joyce, this narrative mode is strictly linked to the Point of View, which employs "a foreground character over whose shoulder auctorial infallibility permits us to look" (79) and becomes a code for signalling some limitation of awareness. The modes Joyce employs to test the limits of awareness of someone's system of perception are pastiche and parody. As a matter of fact, as Hugh Kenner points out, "any style is a system of limits, pastiche ascribes the system to another person, and invites us to attend to its recirculating habits and its exclusions" (81). Consequently, "characters must have voices, spoken or unspoken, but the office of distancing and differentiating had to be

entrusted to an auxiliary narrative voice which could not be the voice of any character since no character beholds the book's entire action" (84). The grand design does not come out of a puppeteer-narrator but is a design of multiple misunderstandings; so in *Ulysses* evidence is deceptive, memory is tricky, notation can be ambiguous because "truth is multiple, and the *whole* truth about even a circumscribed situation is probably incommunicable" (90). Literature then becomes what Riccardo Scrivano, an Italian critic, claims it is for Svevo, that is, an infringement of truth, reality, and the concreteness of events. This infringement is achieved through the comic mode, which helps to identify contradictions, and multiplies identities (107). Moreover, the comic mode may shape the narration and create the alternatives to human suffering and destiny. The comic side of events thus unburdens everyday life of its sense of tragedy, making it acceptable.

In *The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses* Karen Lawrence notices that in the three chapters devoted to Leopold Bloom, "the denotative norm continues to establish our sense of external reality and our sense of a narrative presence assuring us that ... the world is still the same" (49). Besides, this second triad of chapters continues to build up our sense of what the world of Dublin and the novel are like. However, Hugh Kenner in his article "The Rhetoric of Silence" states that these chapters bring to the surface the very "artifice of the text" (387). There are also several omissions which are relevant to the plot, and the playfulness in the selection of dramatized details contradicts our initial assumption that the narrative is reporting all significant action. The same playfulness can be found in Svevo's narrative, which shows itself to be a structure without predefined organization, where the plot does not unfold according to the law of cause and effect but presents a series of scattered actions and events in random association. Broadly speaking, the peculiarities of Svevo's narrative, like Joyce's, reflect the writer's complex relationship with twentieth century reality, at a time when doubts and fears about society and man's place in the universe were confirmed and many optimistic hopes were disappointed. Paradoxically, the new mood does not even admit tragedy, but rather chooses parody as its particular means of expression.

It is now important to explain what makes parody understandable to the vast majority of readers. In fact, it is no coincidence that both Joyce and Svevo turned to myth, which is a sort of common universal knowledge, and reshaped it to fit their purpose.

Karl Marx had already stated that Greek art takes its own mythology for granted, since the latter is linked to certain forms of social behaviour but also brings about artistic delight. Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, wrote that emotions arising from Greek drama and myth find their counterpart in us; mythological events therefore reflect our innermost passions and feelings. Whenever art allows us not only to understand reality but also to appreciate it, this means that it has touched upon some great primitive image even without naming it. These are images embedded in myths and legendary tales. It is as though words unintentionally recognized their belonging to that primeval language used by Gods and other fairy beings, who eventually share their obscure knowledge with men, thus allowing them to use those words which now awake memories of that old language. Furthermore, Freud recognizes the presence of images and myths handed down from generation to generation and makes it clear that not only the contents of images are important, but also the mental structures which produce these myths. He singles out three stages in the use of myth: 1) the original element; 2) the reshaping of this element; 3) the reshaping of this element in its historical development. In this perspective, images, myths, and legendary tales eventually become the results of merging an original rule with history, and individuals with community. Svevo did find the memory of the old language, but by means of parody he reshaped myth in bourgeois terms, casting a "mythic light" on middle class codes, family and ideology. And so did Joyce.

It is now obviously easier to detect the "original element" in Joyce; *Ulysses* suggests even in its title the myth that will be the connecting thread between the various episodes. In ancient times the character of Odysseus stood for the wandering hero, with his yearning for a knowledge embodied in the expectations of a society which shared the hero's values. But in twentieth century society, where all values seemed to have been lost, heroism has no meaning and the hero himself becomes an outsider. Thus Odysseus has changed into a modern "wandering" Jew, a hero who is now wandering in a social and psychological context which is not his own and whose "quest" will lead nowhere. The Jewishness becomes central both to Joyce's Leopold Bloom and Svevo's Zeno Cosini, the protagonist of *La coscienza di Zeno*, and should be carefully analysed.

M. R. Adams in *Surface and Symbol: The Consistency of James Joyce's Ulysses* points out that "Bloom is the product of several general

ideas, widespread throughout the late nineteenth century, about modern urban life in general, and Jews in particular" (99). Bloom stands outside all religious traditions so that "Joyce gains at once ironic perspective on the various religious formulas and a wonderful sense of Bloom himself as a malleable, formless, indeterminate piece of human clay" (91). It should, however, be borne in mind that Bloom was of Hungarian descent, and this serves Joyce to show his own ideal of bourgeois-international. Since Bloom was not born in Hungary, knows very little about that country and has no Hungarian acquaintances, he does not think of himself as Hungarian and scarcely Jewish, indeed he calls himself an Irishman. At the same time he keeps Arthur Griffith's predicament at arm's length because he has no such inflexible patriotic motivations and Sinn Fein policies were passionately, even chauvinistically, single-minded. Furthermore, in writing *Ulysses* Joyce had clearly in mind the anti-Semitic 1904 outbreaks in Limerick and Griffith's anti-Semitism which was not based on principle but on the characteristically simple-minded and short-sighted suspicion of whatever was not Irish. M. R. Adams, however, skilfully highlights some discrepancies in the character of Leopold Bloom.

Politically speaking, Bloom is many-sided because he is on vaguely good terms with the castle gentry, is said to be a great admirer and intimate adviser of Arthur Griffith, is a known freemason in a country where the masonic lodges are the spearhead of anti-Catholic feelings; and simultaneously, he is an inspirer of the Sinn Fein policy, which was stridently pro-Catholic. Adams mantains that carrying political open-mindedness to an extreme so as to represent Bloom "as being firmly committed to them all simultaneously is to spread him unbelievably thin" (101). As no adequate explanation is given for Bloom's inner contradictions, it may be implied that they stand for everyone's inconsistencies. So Martins concludes that the Jewish character of Leopold Bloom is a symbol into which Joyce projected not only his social beliefs about modern man, but also his own personal and psychological insights. To Joyce, Bloom's Jewishness served "as a vehicle for his own self-pity; his moral complacency; his loneliness; his deep sense of sexual injury; his self-loathing" (106).

As for Svevo, B. Moloney is among those scholars who have stressed the importance of the Triestine writer's Jewish matrix. In his article "Svevo as a Jewish Writer", he calls "Zeno Cosini a stock Jewish character: a schlemiel" (qtd. in Beer 24). The character of *schlemihl*, whose

name reminds one of Italo Svevo's first pen-name, Samigli, is very popular in the nineteenth century Jewish tradition.

In *Peter Schlemihl* (1814) Adalbert von Chamisso tells the story of a man who had lost his shadow and for this reason was doomed to live outside human society. He was only allowed to wander around, writing the world's monumental history. In von Chamisso the original Jewish element of the schlemihl becomes a metaphor of the unlucky man, the dreamer and the good-for-nothing.

Later on, Heinrich Heine in *Romanzero* (1851) identifies the schlemihl with the Jewish Romantic poet. Though sometimes ironical, the features of the schlemihl-poet remain the same as in von Chamisso, with the exception of bad luck deriving from his innocence. The idea of the schlemihl and the poet as innocents is thus established. Although this feature is also observable in many of Svevo's characters, Svevo's Jewish Romantic background is, however, influenced by the new philosophical theories of Schopenhauer, Spencer, and Darwin. As a result, *La coscienza di Zeno* is unquestionably set in the context of twentieth century European culture and its protagonist shares with *Ulysses*'s main character a deep sense of estrangement. There is therefore an undeniable connection between the Jewish Leopold Bloom and the "foreigner" Zeno Cosini (in ancient Greek ξενός means foreigner).

Now a brief account of the two episodes in Joyce and Svevo to be compared will be given, in order to show how the already mentioned tripartite structure works.

Joyce portrays Bloom's journey to Glasnevin cemetery on the occasion of the funeral of Paddy Dignam, who died of "too much Ballycorn" (79). In the same carriage with Bloom there are three other characters: Martin Cunningham, Mr. Dedalus, and Mr. Power. While on their way to the cemetery, they come across Stephen, Mr. Dedalus's son, and this encounter reminds Bloom of his own dead son, Rudy, of the father-son relationship in general, and of his own relationship with his wife Molly and his daughter Milly. Then the four men start talking about suicide, which reminds Bloom of his father's. From the very beginning, the main theme of death is asserted, but there are comic implications which will be fully developed at Dignam's burial. These men will meet Ned Lambert, Tom Kernan, Henry Menton, and other friends of the dead man, at the

cemetery. In this episode Bloom sees the tombstones of illustrious Dubliners, such as O'Connell, Parnell, and Robert Emmet, and there are hints of the physical grotesqueness of decay in death, as well as of different burial customs.

In the final section of "Storia di un'associazione commerciale" ("A Business Partnership") there is a description of what happens after the death of Guido Speier, Zeno Cosini's brother-in-law.

Throughout the book Zeno is convinced of his own inadequacy, and so is his wife's family. But when he and Guido fail in their economic enterprise, while Zeno does not lose his head, Guido commits "suicide". Guido, who has always been the prototype of the hero in Zeno's eyes, does not actually want to die, but takes pills of Veronal just to convince his wife to give him money. Unfortunately, the doctor arrives too late because of a rain storm, so Guido's death is due to the unpredictability of fate. Ironically, the clumsy and helpless Zeno retrieves most of Guido's money by chance, having forgotten to sell some shares when their value was rapidly falling. He then sold them at a profit months later when their value had risen again. Even though he has not really changed, he is finally seen as a "hero" and the saviour of his sister-in-law.

What I now suggest is that the tripartite structure divides the two episodes into three phases, namely:

1) descent;
2) transition;
3) raising.

These three phases are in a sense the stages in Bloom's and Zeno's modern wanderings.

The phase of descent in Bloom deals with visions of death. During the funeral procession from Sandymount to Glasnevin, Bloom thinks of his father's suicide, his dead son Rudy, and these recurring thoughts are verbalized by Martin Cunningham in a sentence left unfinished: "in the midst of life ...[we are in death]". The protagonist, being the only Jew in the carriage, begins to feel a sense of estrangement, which reaches its peak when the passengers tell the story of a Jew called Dodds, who gave only a florin to the man who saved his son from drowning. Bloom would like to intervene, but he is continually interrupted:

- Yes, Mr Bloom said. They where both on the way to the boat and he tried to drown...

- Drown Barabbas! Mr Dedalus cried. I wish to Christ he did!
Mr Power sent a long laugh down his shaded nostrils.
- No, Mr Bloom said, the son himself ... (78)

Any words of Bloom on that story are misinterpreted by the others as a sort of complicity with Jews like Dodds, who was a money-lender. The identification of Bloom with Judas Iscariot, and/or Barabbas is confirmed by comments on Jews as different, unlucky, doomed to live on the margins of society. Bloom thus plunges deeper and deeper into his isolation. As Van Caspel reports in *Bloomers on the Liffey* : "The isolation that Bloom experiences is twofold: ... he is cut off from those around him and he is cut off from his family line, his father having committed suicide, and his son, Rudy, having died as an infant" (89). This feeling of estrangement will increase in the following two phases.

The phase of descent in Svevo's novel also deals with a death and revolves around a suicide. Guido, who has already attempted suicide, finally succeeds against his will. The estrangement of Zeno from his own family and the people around him is hinted at in his reaction to the news of Guido's death:

... Ebbi per l'ultima volta uno slancio d'ira contro il povero Guido: complicava ogni sventura con le sue commedie... Tanto poco credevo alla notizia della gravità delle condizioni di Guido che pur mi era stata annunziata! (426)[2]

Not only does Zeno not share the preoccupations of the people around him, but his cynical attitude reminds us of the way he faced his father's death, which somehow shows that Zeno, like Bloom, has also been cut off from his family. Earlier in the novel, Mr Cosini's last ironic action before dying was an act of disapproval towards his son:

Con uno sforzo supremo arrivò a mettersi in piedi, alzò la mano alto alto, come se fosse saputo che egli non poteva comunicarle altra forza che quella del suo peso e la lasciò cadere sulla mia guancia. Poi scivolò sul letto e di là sul pavimento. Morto!...

Egli era morto ed io non potevo provargli la mia innocenza! (80)[3]

Although more ironical, this estrangement will increase in the following phase.

The phase of transition in *Ulysses* still deals with death, but the presence of comic and revivifying elements casts a new light on death and life themselves:

In the midst of death we are in life. Both ends meet. Tantalising for the poor dead. Smell of grilled beefsteaks for the starving... Gnawing their vitals. Desire to grig people...

The Botanic Gardens are just over here. It's the blood sinking in the earth gives new life. (89)

Who passed away. Who departed this life. As if they did it of their own accord. Got the shove, all of them..... Besides how could you remember everybody? Eyes, walk, voice. Well the voice, yes: gramophone. Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old greatgrandfather. Kraahraark! Hellohellohello amawful!yglad kraark awfullygladaseeagain hellohello amawf krpthsth. (93)

On the other hand, the estrangement is felt deeper by Bloom. As we have seen in the previous phase, he has nothing to do with the Catholic burial service:

- *Non intres in judicio cum servo tuo, Domine.*
Makes them feel more important to be prayed over in Latin. Requiem mass. Crape weepers. Blackedged notepaper. Your name on the altarlist. (85)

The priest took a stick with a knob at the end of it out of the boy's bucket and shook it over the coffin....
- *In paradisium.*
Said he was going to paradise or is in paradise. Says that over everybody. Tiresome kind of job. (86)

But in the meantime this allows him to have an ironical insight into the burial customs of other religions, like those of Jews, who recall over their tombstone inscriptions what the dead have done in life, and Protestants:

Or a woman with a saucepan. I cooked good Irish stew. Eulogy in a country churchyard it ought to be that poem of whose is it Wordsworth or Thomas Campbell...

Entered into the rest the protestants put it... Well, it's God's acre for them. Nice country residence. Newly plastered and painted. Ideal spot to have a quiet smoke and read the *Church Times.* (93)

Moreover, the other elements which throw a positive light on the process of estrangement are shown by many quotations from Shakespeare:

Love among the tombstones. Romeo.
Gravediggers in *Hamlet.* Show the profound knowledge of human heart. Daren't joke about the dead for two years at least. *De mortuis nil nisi prius.* (89-90)

Similarly, the transition of Zeno is positively affected by the revivifying effect of recovering the money Guido had lost, so that Guido's death and Zeno's own life acquire a new meaning:

Guido, dacché vivevo con lui, era divenuto per me un personaggio di grande importanza. Finché era vivo lo vedevo in una data luce ch'era la luce di parte delle mie giornate. Morendo quella luce si modificava in modo come se improvvisamente fosse passata attraverso un prisma. Era proprio questo che mi abbacinava. Egli aveva sbagliato, ma io subito vidi che essendo morto, dei suoi errori non restava niente. Secondo me era un imbecille *quel buffone* che in cimitero coperto di epigrafi laudatorie domandò dove si seppellissero in quel paese i peccatori. I morti non son mai stati peccatori. Guido era ormai un puro! La morte l'aveva purificato. (426)[4]

It is interesting to notice that both Joyce and Svevo refer to the gravediggers' dialogue in *Hamlet* with the same ironical purpose, which is explained in the sentences "i morti non sono mai stati peccatori" and "de mortuis nil nisi prius". Bloom misquotes "de mortuis nil nisi bonum"— of the dead speak nothing but good— which becomes — of the dead speak nothing except before [they are dead].

This is also the sense of the quotation referring to Trieste, which was mentioned above in Joyce's letter to Ezra Pound.

Even Zeno's sense of estrangement becomes deeper because he is the only one in his family who knows the truth about Guido's death:

Una dose forte, ma poco più forte dell'altra volta. Mi fece vedere alcune boccette sulle quali lessi stampato: Veronal. Dunque non veronal al sodio. Come nessun

altro ora io potevo essere certo che Guido non aveva voluto morire. Non lo dissi però mai a nessuno. (427)[5]

And while all the family is preparing for the funeral, Zeno does not seem concerned with death, as he is too involved in his financial operations on the stock-exchange. The irony lies in the fact that Zeno is working hard for the first time in his life and overcomes his own inefficiency. The climax of this estrangement is reached when Zeno, completely absorbed in his brother-in-law's business, follows the wrong funeral procession:

La vettura continuava a procedere dietro il funerale che si avviava al cimitero greco.
- Il signor Guido era greco?- domandò sorpreso.
Infatti il funerale passava oltre il cimitero cattolico e s'avviava a qualche altro cimitero, giudaico, greco, protestante o serbo.
-Può essere che sia stato Protestante!- dissi io dapprima, ma subito mi ricordai d'aver assistitto al suo matrimonio nella chiesa cattolica.
-Dev'essere un errore!- esclamai dapprima pensando che volessero seppellirlo fuori posto...
-Ci siamo sbagliati!- esclamò...Era il funerale di un altro!...
Scendemmo dalla vettura per orizzontarci meglio e ci avviammo verso l'entrata del cimitero cattolico. La vettura ci seguì. Mi accorsi che i superstiti dell'altro defunto ci guardavano sorpresi non sapendo spiegarsi perchè dopo aver onorato fino a quell'estremo limite quel poverino lo abbandonassimo sul più bello. (431)[6]

While for Bloom the funeral procession takes place in the phase of descent, in Zeno's case it is postponed to the phase of transition, thus acquiring the more positive connotation that "in the midst of death, we are in life". As a matter of fact, Zeno will not enter the cemetery:

Perplessi ci consultammo. Evidentemente non si poteva sapere se il funerale si trovasse già dentro o fuori. Allora decisi per conto mio. A me non era permesso di intervenire alla funzione forse già cominciata e turbarla. Dunque non sarei entrato nel cimitero. Ma d'altronde non potevo rischiare di imbattermi nel funerale, ritornando. Rinunciavo perciò ad assistere all'interramento e sarei ritornato in città facendo un lungo giro per Servola (432).[7]

However, in the final phase of raising, both Bloom and Zeno experience the catharsis of modern heroes. Unlike the ancient mythological heroes, they may or may not achieve little truths or improvements in their lives, but in their heroism they are not prevented from saying: "Thank you. How grand we are this morning!" and "In quel momento c'era nel mio animo solo un inno alla *salute* mia e di tutta la natura: *salute* perenne!" (433).[8]

Note, Notes, Anmerkungen

1 The lecture "James Joyce" was delivered in Milan in 1927 by Italo Svevo and originally translated by Stanislaus Joyce.

2 This and the following translations are taken from *Confessions of Zeno*, trans. Beryl de Zoete, London: Sacker and Warburg, 1962. "Anger surged up in me for the last time against poor Guido: how he complicated every misfortune by playing the fool like that!...So little did I believe really that things were as bad with Guido as they were reported to be (398).

3 With a supreme effort, he struggled to his feet, raised his arm high above his head, and brought it down with the all weight of his falling body on my cheek. Then he slipped from the bed on the floor and lay there – dead!... He was dead and it was impossible for me to prove my innocence (82).

4 Guido had been a very important person to me. So long as he was alive I saw him in a peculiar light, and in that light part of my days was passed. When he died the light was suddenly refracted as though it had passed through a prism. It was that which dazzled me so much at first. He had had many faults, but I saw at once that now he was dead nothing remained of them. In my opinion *the wit* who, in a cemetery full of laudatory epitaphs, asked where the sinners were buried, was a fool. The dead never have been sinner. Guido was pure now. Death had purified him (398). §*The wit* [my italics] is not the right translation for "*buffone*": I suggest that "fool" suits better and brings out Svevo's original reference to *Hamlet*.

5 It was certainly a strong dose, but not so much stronger than the first time. He showed me several little bottles, all labelled: "Veronal". Not veronal and sodium then. I could appreciate the significance of this better than anyone. I knew now that Guido had not intended to kill himself. But I have never said a word to anyone (399).

6 Our cab was still following the procession, which seemed to be going on to the Greek cemetery. "Was Guido a Greek Catholic?" he asked in surprise. And the procession was, in fact, passing the Catholic cemetery and proceeding toward one of the others, Jewish, Greek, Protestant, or Serbian. "Can he have been a Protestant!" I wondered. But I at once remembered having gone to his marriage in the Catholic Church. "It must be a mistake!" I exclaimed, thinking for a moment that they were going to bury Guido in the wrong place... "We must have made a mistake," he said...It was someone else's funeral!... We got out of the carriage to see where we were, and made our

way toward the entrance into the cemetery. Our carriage followed us. I noticed that the survivors of the other dead person looked at us with surprise, unable to explain to themselves why, after having accompanied him so far, we abandoned him at the very last moment (403-4).

7 We took counsel together in our perplexity. There was evidently no means of discovering whether the funeral was already inside the cemetery or not. Then I made up my mind. It was obviously impossible for me to burst into the middle of the service, which perhaps had already begun, and interrupt it. So I decided I would not enter the cemetery at all. On the other hand I could not risk meeting the procession on my way back. So I gave up all thought of taking part in the burial and decided to go back to the town, making a long detour beyond Servola (404).

8 At that moment my soul was filled with *joy*: *joy* in my own well-being and in the perennial well-being of nature (405). § Again "*joy*" [my italics] is not the right translation for "*salute*": what Svevo actually means is 'health'.

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