This article argues that Zeno Cosini's famous sense of humor derives from a philosophy of nihilism. Because this philosophy expresses itself as humor, as a mode of communication traditionally considered antithetical to everything associated with nihilism, the root of Zeno’s penchant for joke making oftentimes remains hidden from view. Hence, this article looks at the philosophy that underlies Zeno Cosini’s humor while aiming to assess just how ‘readable’ to others said humor renders this philosophy. This ‘readability’ is considered in light of Zeno’s relationship to three audience groups: those within the narrative who are ignorant of Zeno’s journal; Doctor S., the one character who is privy to the journal’s contents; and the readers of the journal, who know what Zeno’s doctor does but who lie outside the space of the narrative.

Key words: Svevo, Zeno, humor, nihilism

But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout — Haw! — so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs — silence please — at that which is unhappy. (207)

Let me first begin by stating that, though I may have chosen to preface this paper on *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) with this well known quote from Samuel Beckett’s novel *Watt*, I do not intend to show that Italo Svevo’s novel ever fully succeeds at producing the *risus purus*, the so-called “mirthless laugh” that laughs “at that which is unhappy.” The problem lies with the preposition. For Svevo’s is a work whose comic forms inspire the laugh with that which is unhappy, and even more importantly, because of that which is unhappy. As a result, the laughter it incites is not so pristine.

This article argues that Zeno Cosini’s humor stems from a philosophy of nihilism which manifests itself paradoxically as joke making. This is not the kind of humor that laughs at another’s distress but one that seeks to incite laughter because of the subject’s own distress. The result is not the kind of belittlement of another so easily recognized in satire but a paradoxical form of humor that is most often misunderstood by others and thus serves only to distance Zeno from friends and family. Because nihilism is traditionally seen as antithetical to humor, the root of Zeno’s penchant for joke making oftentimes remains hidden from view. Hence, this article looks at the philosophy that underlies Zeno Cosini’s humor while aiming to assess just how ‘readable’ to others said humor renders this philosophy. At stake
are issues regarding the role of laughter to interpersonal communication and the possibility of humor for communicating a worldview of pessimism.

Svevo’s novel dramatizes these issues according to Zeno’s audiences and the varying degree to which each is made aware of Zeno’s comic philosophy. The first audience is the one most blissfully ignorant of this philosophy: the characters of the narrative who experience Zeno’s humor but not his running commentary. These are his family, his friends, everyone who is not reading his therapy journal. Then there is the infamous Dottor S., who is privy to Zeno’s commentary but who is nonetheless a character that interacts with our hero. The third group is of course the reader, who experiences the story through Zeno’s commentary alone, but who does so not as a character and thus not as anyone personally involved in the events of the narrative. The complicated aspect of assessing Zeno’s humor derives from the fact that it must be assessed according to all three audience groups, for the ramifications of each are not always identical. In other words, La coscienza di Zeno, as a novel, dramatizes the interpersonal implications of humor by presenting the comic spectacle both as naturally-occurring social phenomenon — though of course, within a literary artifact — and as artistic production. That this particular novel adds on an extra layer of complication by presenting itself as a diary and by presenting humor as the outgrowth of nihilism makes it an even more worthwhile artifact to assess from this perspective.

What better place to begin than with a marriage proposal?

One of the more well known moments from La coscienza di Zeno makes of the title character’s proposal of marriage to the daughter of his much esteemed boss a tragic-comic production. Having already been misunderstood by the mother of the three daughters who occupy his attention as courting Augusta, the lone unattractive of the lot, Zeno finally makes his true sentiments known to Ada, the one he claims to love. Unfortunately for him, the feeling is anything but mutual. To compound the difficulty of the moment, Zeno angers Ada when he rhetorically asks her how it could be possible that the family believed he would ever court Augusta. Zeno succeeds only at coming across as dismissive of her sister’s worth. It is a scene straight out of Jane Austen, only the implicit mutual attraction of Elizabeth and Darcy has been replaced by Ada’s very explicit distaste for Zeno. Zeno decides to compensate for his loss by proposing to Alberta, the younger sister who resembles Ada. Considering not only that Alberta represents a consolation but also that Zeno propositions her immediately after he is refused by Ada, it seems that his efforts could only succeed in offending the younger sister. The rebuttal, however, is anything but brusque. In a moment of tenderness which speaks to the very real pain Zeno’s inconsiderate sec-
ond and soon-to-come, third proposal minimizes in the reader’s eyes, Alberta tells him not to be offended, because though she will not marry him, she does esteem him highly. “So che siete un buon diavolo,” she says, “eppoi, senza saperlo, sapete molte cose, mentre i miei professori sanno esattamente tutto quello che sanno” (125-26).

To call into question the cognizance of one’s knowledge does not bring to mind a compliment, but it is meant of course to contrast Zeno’s self-deprecating humor with the bombastic self-importance exhibited by those fully intent on demonstrating the extent of their learning. This is what ingratiates him to others, usually, and Alberta aims to recognize this by acknowledging that Zeno knows much more than he apparently lets on. Such a compliment bears a second glance, for despite its good intentions, it makes Zeno out to be someone incapable of mastering his own wealth of knowledge. Though Alberta recognizes the extent of his knowledge, which he does not advertise, she does not recognize the extent of Zeno’s self-awareness. The diary we as readers are privy to identifies its author as one completely aware of his wisdom as well as of his weaknesses, an author aware of his perpetual inability to stop smoking, candid enough to admit that his knowledge of musical theory never led to a greater degree of skill at violin playing.1

His counter in this respect is Ada’s future husband Guido, whose confidence masks his ignorance. Zeno does aim to conceal that which he does not want displayed, such as when he masks the tears Ada’s refusal causes by claiming that he got lemon in his eye. But his form of compensation never reaches the pitch of self-aggrandizement. His joking never allows it, for it is impossible to advertise one’s own worth and simultaneously make others laugh. The esteem that the fool holds in the eyes of others arrives in a round-about fashion after the fact, that is, after the laughter has died down and after what caused the laughter fades into the background of the audience’s minds, to be replaced by the esteem felt for he who was capable of squeezing out a grin. This esteem, as is always the case, depends on the whims and tastes of others. Musical talent presents a relevant counter-example. There is no denying that Guido plays the violin well. His skill becomes fact, whereas Zeno’s comedic ability will always remain contingent upon his audience, something that must surely irk an avowed positivist like Zeno. His story concerning the English cat may have made Augusta, Alberta, and Signora Malfenti laugh, but his ability as a comedian will always be questioned by Ada, who does not find his anecdotes funny whatsoever, hence the difficulty of combating one’s rival in love with humor.

Comedy and self-awareness relate to one another not merely, because a great degree of self-awareness is required to create successful comedy,
even if this success is only partial. Zeno is not merely a man who understands his faults, and thus should not be accused of knowing more than even he realizes. What makes Zeno’s self-awareness so important to the whole of La coscienza di Zeno is that it grows out of a personal philosophy that produces the illusion of absent-mindedness or even foolishness at times. This is his philosophy of humor:

Io sempre alla morte pensavo e perciò non avevo che un solo dolore: la certezza di dover morire. Tutte le altre cose divenivano tanto poco importanti che per esse non avevo che un lieto sorriso o un riso altrettanto lieto. (73)

From a distance, such a statement aligns Zeno with the umorismo of Pirandello. It is a philosophical statement enunciated with each joke, a repetition of the belief that there is but one and only pain, and therefore, all else deserves to be treated with the humor that can only be produced if one believes in the inconsequence of the subject matter at hand. Therein lies the difference between the philosophy of Zeno Cosini and the umorismo of Pirandello: Zeno aims to downplay the tragedy of the moment since it is nothing compared to the tragedy of inevitable death. Comedy is formed in the process. Umorismo, though, describes a moment in which a humorist tries to conceal the tragedy of the moment. As a result, the humorist’s audience recognizes the attempt at concealment, and the initial comic scene becomes tragic. The audience recognizes both stages of the humoristic process, whereas Zeno’s audience remains blind to the tragedy at his core as a result of his comic flashes.

Without the “confession” to his doctor there is little to no way of comprehending the driving force behind Zeno’s comedy; we must keep in mind that as readers we are privy to the tragedy behind his jokes, of which the other characters of the novel remain unaware. I am speaking of the tragedy of death, of course. The desire to win over an audience or conquer a rival, which, though also motivating factors behind Zeno’s humor, become mere byproducts of the root cause behind the laughter. His philosophy is so entwined in his personality and way of life, that the tendency to laugh everything off functions like an unconscious Freudian drive, even if Zeno has recognized it as the root force that it is. Usually societal factors come across as Zeno’s most pressing motivation for comedy, such as his relationships with family, lovers, friends, and rivals. Yet these are surface motivations. Even if Zeno’s wit is not always in response to his great fear, that fear is nonetheless always present, if albeit in its latent form.

The exception to this comes in the chapter that details Zeno’s relationship with his father. Zeno elaborates on one of the more important points of
dissension between him and the elder Cosini when he recounts how his father used to scold him for two things: for his distracted nature, and for his tendency to laugh at the most serious things (32). Objecting only to the second of these two points, Zeno confesses to believing that his father “avesse il difetto di considerare come serie troppe cose di questo mondo” (32). Thus it comes as no surprise when the elder Cosini’s mention of the topic of an afterlife to his son results in what Zeno calls, “un bel fiasco” (33). Questioned as to whether he believes that everything ends after death, Zeno responds:

 Io credo che sopravviva il piacere, perché il dolore non è più necessario. La dissoluzione potrebbe ricordare il piacere sessuale. Certo sarà accompagnata dal senso della felicità e del riposo visto che la ricomposizione è tanto faticosa. La dissoluzione dovrebbe essere il premio della vita! (33)

Zeno could only have known what kind of a reaction such an answer would produce in his very religious father. The elder Cosini gets up from the table, downs the remainder of his glass, claims that this is not the time to philosophize, and promptly leaves the room.

Even considering the immense gratification the young Zeno must feel at having provoked his father so artfully, the response cannot be considered only as a form of youthful rebellion or as traditional comic upheaval of a hierarchical order. He introduces the anecdote, after all, by admitting: “Al mistero della morte io ci penso ogni giorno…” (33). Freud himself could not have hoped for a better example of humor, which he describes as “a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of distressing affects that interfere with it” (284). Zeno’s joke becomes a way of skirting the issue that plagues him, not taking death seriously precisely because he takes it deathly seriously. At its core, as Fusco states, “l’expression humoristique est donc pour Svevo [and Zeno] une méditation à quoi il doit de pouvoir parler de plus en plus librement de ce qui, en lui, l’inquiète…” (378).

In the end, Zeno’s need to make his father laugh becomes an outgrowth of his desire to convince his father of the validity of his point-of-view: “Io rinunziai a discutere e convincerlo che a questo mondo v’erano molte cose di cui si poteva e si doveva ridere…” (39-40). But if Zeno truly believes that one “should” laugh at the things of this world, and if he once had hoped to convince his father of this, it does not make a great deal of sense to have treated one of his father’s most sacred subjects with such a deliberate form of adolescent comedy. Zeno, of course, does so specifically to irk the old man. He admits it. But he does so as well because this is the only way he knows how to engage with those aspects of life that his father
considers too serious to joke about. His sense of humor is more than just a tendency in his personality; it is a belief system, a philosophy constructed out of necessity. How then does Zeno’s desire to convince his father of his philosophy reconcile itself to his mode of comic communication? It does not. This is why Zeno simply gives up trying to do so. It is a perpetually futile endeavor to convince someone that one should laugh away the most serious aspects of life by laughing at what that person takes most seriously, yet Zeno persists in his methods because his philosophy pushes him to use this method and this method alone. When it encounters an unsympathetic mindset, such as his father’s, the result is solid incommunicability. The final deathbed slap that marks Zeno’s last form of communication with his father symbolizes in humorous fashion this unsolvable impasse.

Their relationship introduces the reader to the difficulties of Zeno’s predicament, which is how to ingratiate oneself to those whom one desires to be closest to while maintaining a philosophy of nihilism. It is a philosophy of nihilism, which states that everything diminishes in relevance as a result of the inevitability of death and thus should be laughed off like some childhood prank, for it entails the undoing of pre-established values in order to forge new ones. The destructive aspect that marked the 19th Century Russian form of political nihilism has been supplanted here, ironically, by bourgeois humor. And though Zeno’s form of the comic does not usually tend towards the destructive, satirical form, it nevertheless works to dissolve the profundity of everything others take seriously. The situation with his father exemplifies how it can prove disastrous to a relationship, which in this case, Zeno is foolishly trying to sustain through his sense of humor. What results is a perfect example of the contingency of the comic, which here only succeeds in weakening Zeno’s argument, since it is so contingent on the sensibility of his audience. One can sum it up quite simply by pointing out that Zeno keeps cracking jokes, and his father never laughs.

The situation with Ada is similar. Zeno keeps cracking jokes in order to try to win her over, and Ada never laughs. The rest of Ada’s family, though, excluding the little sister who is convinced that Zeno is crazy, does respond to Zeno’s anecdotes with comic appreciation. Despite the fact that he acknowledges that his methods are not achieving their aims with the woman he wants, he persists, hence the tendency by critics to see Zeno as inept. But Zeno is really not that unskilled, just as he is not as clueless as Alberta says he is. He does retain a touch of ineptitude, but it stems less from a social or intellectual inability and more from a philosophical one. He is incapable of adapting his worldview to accommodate others, and because this worldview expresses itself through the comic, his social success depends upon whether or not his audience sympathizes with him. As Freud
reminds us, “A joke... is the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure,” therefore, “The condition of intelligibility is... binding on it” (222). A joke, however, requires that it be intelligible to an audience on two plains. It must be understood intellectually, that is, its irony must be comprehended, but it must also be emotionally intelligible. One must be able to sympathize with what forms the humor in order to appreciate it. Otherwise, one risks, among other responses, offending the audience, as is the case with Zeno’s father, who understands Zeno’s joke perfectly well, but whose religious sensibility disallows him from sympathizing with his son’s wit.

The Laughter of Miscommunication

What makes Zeno’s humor so unintelligible emotionally is that, for all its socio-cultural resonances, it is really a manifestation of an ontological conviction, what I have been referring to as his “philosophy.”6 No other character’s worldview represents the antithesis to this philosophy better than Augusta’s. She is to Zeno in adulthood what his father was to him as a child. Yet despite the fact that both function as philosophical antitheses to Zeno’s philosophy of nihilism, Augusta, unlike Zeno’s father, tends to laugh at Zeno’s joke. This certainly complicates things.

I begin my discussion of the novel’s happy couple by looking at a moment of rather typical domestic disagreement. Zeno claims that in each locale where he and his wife ever stay, she finds at least one item for their house to ship back to Trieste. Zeno believes that it would be much less troublesome to make these purchases while at home, rather than constantly to be forced to consider shipping costs and insurance and all the hassles that accompany these long distance acquisitions. Augusta lightheartedly pokes fun at her husband’s point-of-view in light of his profession: “Ma tu non sai che tutte le merci devono viaggiare? Non sei un negoziante, tu?” (149). She laughs after this. Zeno recognizes that she is partly correct, but objects: “Le merci si fanno viaggiare per vendere e guadagnare! Mancando quello scopo si lasciano tranquille e si sta tranquilli!” (149-50). What is most interesting about this exchange is that this enterprising aspect of his wife, which he describes her reasoning, is also one of the things that Zeno most admires. “Era deliziosa quell’intraprendenza così ingenua! Ingenua perché bisogna ignorare la storia del mondo per poter credere di aver fatto un buon affare col solo acquisto di un oggetto...” (150).

According to Zeno, Augusta’s initiative arises out of her ability to ignore “the history of the world.” It arises out of her ability to ignore the past and therefore the flux and consequent instability of the world, to ignore the fact that the present does not exist so much as existed, and that the per-
petual passing of time turns man’s presence in this world into a mere transitory moment. Zeno states that one of the aspects of his wife that most stupefies him is that, “Essa … ignorava che quando a questo mondo ci si univa, ciò avveniva per un periodo tanto breve, breve, breve…” (147). His own inability to perceive of his existence outside of the inevitability of his death is what he claims is his sickness. In Zeno’s eyes then, his wife comes across as the picture of mental health: “Compresi finalmente che cosa fosse la perfetta salute umana quando indovinai che il presente per [Augusta] era una verità tangibile in cui si poteva segregarsi e starci caldi” (147). Hence the fundamental difference behind their ways of thinking is the ability and inability to perceive the present as solid, as something fundamentally stable upon which an existence can be grounded. Zeno claims that his wife knows of all the hardships of the world that can make one desperate, but in her hands they achieve stability. Her own stability, which is symbolized by the regular schedule she maintains throughout their life together, therefore does not derive from ignorance. She comprehends the sorrows of this world, and she lives happily nonetheless. To Zeno this is incomprehensible.

More pressing to this discussion is that Zeno’s inability to achieve the stability that his wife maintains so effortlessly is described by him as both his sickness and as what drives his sense of humor. It is his philosophy of nihilism. His constant fixation on death renders the concreteness of the present a laughable illusion. When Augusta laughs after she tells Zeno that he should understand better than anybody that all products are packaged and shipped regardless of where they are bought, she is laughing as a result of the fact that she has “ignored the history of the world.” At least this is how Zeno understands it. Her laugh then becomes a symbol of her own good health and can then be read as a signpost of that mode of thinking that is so unlike Zeno’s, which is symbolized by his desire to make others laugh. It bears stating here that Augusta was always quick to laugh at Zeno’s wisecracks. In the scenes involving his courtship of Ada, Augusta’s laugh echoes ebulliently as a symbol both of Zeno’s failure and success, his success with Augusta marking his failure with Ada. After Zeno’s half-ironic statement that he plans on mistreating his children so they will never love him as much as he loved his own father, and therefore will never have to undergo the same degree of pain he went through when his father died, Ada confesses not to love such an idea since she claims that it diminishes her future role as a mother, and as a result, the value of life. Augusta, though, takes no offense and states that laughter is “una gran bella cosa” (74).

Such a response leads one to believe not only that Augusta understands Zeno’s humor, not only that she comprehends the irony inherent in his words, but that she identifies with it or at least appreciates it, that is, Zeno’s
humor seems both intellectually and emotionally intelligible to her. The assumption that the comic is something wholly subjective buttresses every argument of this article, and it bears bringing up here, because in moments such as these, the presence of an understood comic sensibility actually misleads. Zeno delineates quite lucidly that his wife’s represents a contrary sensibility, one that propels every aspect of her life the way Zeno’s fear of death and subsequent need to laugh at the world pervades every moment of his. As a result the two become like opposite poles whose coming together is effected through humor, since it was Zeno’s comic sensibility that helped win over his wife, even though she does not share in the “sickness” which is the catalyst of that sensibility. The irony that pervades this union is so powerful, that it places the entire force of the communicative aspect of the comic in jeopardy. This is the irony that Zeno’s humor attracts the wrong sister, that his laugh derives from the opposite pole of her laugh’s origins. As a consequence, La consciencia di Zeno calls into question the comic’s very essence as a connective thread, the very idea that a shared laugh signals something fundamentally common in the laughers’ sensibilities.

The objection to be made here is that though Augusta laughs after her comment concerning shipping and her husband’s profession, Zeno does not. Perhaps then her laugh does not actually signal any shared comic sensibility. Also, one may point to the fact that all of the misdirected effort spent by Zeno, which only resulted in the desired woman’s steely silence and the undesired woman’s push to marry him, must also be seen on one level as a tactic. Zeno states quite clearly that provoking laughter is nothing more than his method of ingratiating himself to others and therefore achieving the object of his aims. One of the few times Zeno succeeds at getting Ada to laugh prompts this response from the narrator: “Il riso era mio…” (103), he says, referring to the fact that it was he who made her laugh and not his rival in love Guido. He responds like a conqueror upon the taking of his prize: The laugh was mine, and mine alone! Is this incommunicability or mere strategy, that is, does the laughter necessarily stem from some shared sensibility? Could it not just be a shared momentary sensibility? Though Zeno states that he admires his wife’s “artless initiative,” her comment concerning the shipment of goods does not elicit a sympathetic reaction in that instant.

The exchange concerning the logic of shipping goods is not the only incident in which Augusta’s laugh showcases the extent of her misunderstanding of her husband though. The extended description of Zeno’s affair with Carla revolves around such moments. As a result of the first quasi-kiss, when Zeno briefly replaces the customary braid that caresses Carla’s neck with his lips, he claims to suffer while seated across from his wife at the
dinner table. Augusta senses something is amiss and, while laughing, asks: “Sei stato dall’Olivci che ti vedo tanto preoccupato?” (180). The question means nothing without the laughter that accompanies it. Though she does not know that she has guessed wrongly, Augusta understands that Zeno is concerned with something. This is nothing extraordinary. For a wife to recognize when her husband is worried is only natural. Here, though, something more is going on. It is as though Zeno’s philosophy has been taken up by his wife, who we recognize in this scene as laughing in the face of serious issues. As soon as Augusta recognizes that her husband is worrying about something, she laughs, which then causes Zeno to do so as well. This is not exactly the same thing as Zeno’s joke making, for there is no joke here. It is as if a joke is no longer required. The process of comedic display is bypassed, but the same result remains.

Yet we know that when Augusta laughs she does so as a result of that healthy disposition of hers which allows her world to rest stable and secure, that disposition which runs so antithetically to Zeno’s. Here, though, her laughter does not come about as a result of a well-placed observation on her end, as it did when she commented on Zeno’s skepticism of the logic of shipping goods. Here, her laughter is presented as a result of Zeno’s discomfort, of his moral suffering in her presence. The fact that it makes Zeno laugh once again calls into question the communicative aspect of laughter, that is, whether or not such an exchange represents a moment of true communication and interpersonal understanding between man and wife. Is this a shared sense of humor? Let us look at what such an exchange leads to. Zeno offers to pay for the washroom Augusta had wanted, so she gleefully gives him a kiss as a thank you. “Ecco un bacio ch’evidentemente cancellava quell’altro, ed io mi sentii subito meglio” (180). It is no stretch to see such an outcome as comical. It is certainly ironic at least, that a tender kiss of gratitude from his wife which derives from her ability to put her husband at ease through laughter leads to a kiss which not only catalyzes, but also justifies in the husband’s eyes, his affair with another woman.

A similar moment arrives not long after. The affair is proceeding along, and Zeno is once again preoccupied as a result, when suddenly Augusta asks him what is the matter. Frightened by the question, he blurts out: “Penso alla vecchiaia incombente!” (182). Like she did before, Augusta responds by laughing at his “suffering.” Like before, she does not know the true cause of his affliction. Here, death, the root cause of Zeno’s life’s sickness, as he states it in the beginning of the book, is presented in the form of impending old age as a way of covering up the real preoccupation of the moment, this being his affair. And once again, Augusta laughs, prompting one to wonder if she ever understands why it is this man she loves can be
so funny. It begs one to ask if any form of true communication is possible with Zeno Cosini. The only people he seems to communicate with is the doctor, and thus, with the reader as well. Though this of course is called into question by the premise that this is a revenge publication, as well as by Zeno’s own statement further into the book that one should never trust a Triestine’s words when spoken in standard Italian.9 The difficulty of determining the truth in this “memoir” is mirrored in the difficulty of adapting a traditional idea of the comic as sense of humor to the one offered by Zeno.

In *La coscienza di Zeno*, laughter is misleading, because it seems to present itself as a traditional harbinger of some kind of shared sensibility. At one point during the chapter that details Guido’s financial troubles, Zeno returns home to a wife who has just found out that her brother-in-law has asked her sister for money in order to help get him out of his financial predicament. “Al posto di Ada io rifiuterei,” she says, indignant (315). Zeno asks her why and wonders if she would help him if he were in the same situation. “Essa rise: «La cosa è ben differente!»” she responds. Would we not also be partly to blame if we were to advise her to loan Guido the money and if he were to lose it? Zeno does not agree with his wife. He does not tell her this outright; he merely inserts his opinion into the narration: “Era un’idea da ignorante…” (316). When Zeno does question Augusta’s point-of-view, she responds that they have two children to think about, prompting him to fire back that Ada and Guido also have two kids. Augusta’s response says much about the way *La coscienza di Zeno* complicates the communicative aspect of the comic:

> Essa si mise a ridere clamorosamente facendo spaventare Alfio che lasciò di poppare per piangere subito. Essa s’occupò di lui, ma sempre ridendo, ed io accettai il suo riso come se me lo fossi conquistato col mio spirito… (316)

Augusta’s laughter, at first a simple response to her husband’s opinions, devolves into such cacophony that it ends up frightening her child. The resulting scare makes of her laughter into an almost diabolic noise that is anything but funny. We are far removed from the laughter Zeno’s wit had inspired in his wife earlier on in the book. More important though, Zeno accepts the laughter as though “conquered with [his] spirit,” leading one to believe that there is something in this laughter that speaks to his worldview. This does not seem so far-fetched. Zeno’s humor makes light of the pains of life since none could ever match the inevitable pain of death. Perhaps then this is the type of Freudian humor that classifies Zeno’s comic sensibility so well in the earlier moments of the book. Yet at the same time, we cannot help but call into question this idea that here Augusta’s laugh repre-
sents a moment of connection between her and her husband. After all, Zeno writes that he finds her ideas ignorant. In response to Augusta’s question concerning the fact that they have two of the children that need to be considered through all this he writes that such a rhetorical flourish is, “vuota di senso” (316).

And yet perhaps Zeno is speaking less about a coming together of opinions and more about a shared spirit of belittlement. In Zeno’s case, this does not revolve around the belittling of another’s ideas, but around the belittling of the pain of the situation at hand through laughter. Zeno’s philosophy aims to inspire another to laugh. He may oftentimes alienate himself from others through his humor, but he never does so deliberately. In opposition to this, Augusta’s comic sensibility erects a wall between her viewpoint and a contrary one. This wall, though, is never defensive, i.e., it is not the kind of humor that aims to distance an emotionally disconcerting moment, such as Zeno’s bad joke aims to do during Ada and Guido’s wedding dinner. Augusta’s laughter is not about defending her own mindset; it is about discounting another’s. Even Zeno’s joke at his father’s expense has less to do with belittling his father’s beliefs than about arguing his own. Ultimately, Zeno is as concerned with death as his father is; Zeno merely differs in how he thinks one should manage this concern. Zeno’s spirit of belittlement is not Augusta’s then. Even in this scene, when Augusta’s laughter responds to a moment of emotional difficulty, as Zeno’s joke making always does, her comic sensibility proves to be in conflict with her husband’s. Nothing communicative expresses itself through this couple’s humor.

Other moments though, seem to argue against this idea that the novel presents humor as fundamentally divisive. Zeno punctuates his statement that he cannot connect on any level with his colleague Nilini by referring to the communicative aspect of the comic: “Io non sapevo ridere né con lui né di lui” (340). Later on, Nilini and Zeno frantically try to catch up to Guido’s funeral march through the city only to discover that the coach they have jumped into has been following the wrong funeral. As a result of this discovery, Nilini bursts out laughing uncontrollably, but Zeno does not: “Irritato, io non avevo riso con lui” (370). Such a moment seems tailor-made to fit Zeno’s philosophy of humor. His good friend already dead, he might as well laugh away the pain of having missed the funeral. Yet this moment hits too close to home, and we as readers have already learned that Zeno was always incapable of sharing a laugh either with Nilini or at his expense. Theirs is a sensibility whose differences disallow any possibility of connection on a comic level.
That Zeno explains his differences with Nilini through their inability to laugh at the same things complicates this discussion, for it announces a belief in the communicative possibility of the comic, in laughter’s efficacy to signal a common spirit between the laughers. This may only signal a momentary connection on some minuscule level and not a complete spiritual connection, but it is something. At the same time, it bears stating the obvious. Nilini and Zeno do not share a common sensibility. So though Zeno’s choice of using laughter as a means of stamping his profound disconnect with Nilini points to some unconscious belief in the possibility of connection, there is no connection on display. We must then conclude that the book’s ideological statement is not that laughter has lost its communicative ability, only that such communication is impossible with Zeno.

Zeno’s relationship with his wife represents the greatest example of this. No one laughs in the text more than Augusta. Yet when she laughs away his troubles, Augusta only seems to have absorbed Zeno’s mindset, since by the time Augusta’s laughter starts to mean something more than just a sign of Zeno’s failure to court Ada, he has already told us that her laughter derives from her healthy disposition. After Zeno’s relationship with Carla has resolutely been dissolved, he returns home in poor spirits only to discover that his wife senses that something is awry. Her response, once again, is to laugh: “Ne rise: «Con te non ci si può mai annoiare,” she tells him. “Sei ogni giorno un uomo nuovo.” (255). Thus what makes her laugh, what pleases her in general about her husband, is the fact that he is “a different man every day.” The fact that he seems so on this day because of the fact that he has just lost his mistress only highlights the yawning gap that separates the two of them. The moments when laughter seems to be the conduit by which the couple connects psychologically are the most misleading, because they seem to signal some coming together, when they in fact merely highlight the gap. Similarly, the moments that most clearly admit of a belief in the communicative aspect of the comic are those moments with Nilini, and yet they are moments in which Zeno details a total spiritual disconnect.

*The Paradoxes of Zeno’s Humor*

Those laughs of Augusta’s that misread her husband’s state-of-mind, like those laughs of Nilini’s that symbolize something distasteful to Zeno, resound like the tolling of the church bells in an indifferent town. No one is brought together to worship as a result; all we have then is the chiming reminder in our ears of what should have effected a coming together, but did not. One can then go back to those jokes at Zeno’s father’s expense, or the chuckles that echoed around the Malfenti’s drawing room, in order to
see where all this started. We must recall that though Zeno is trying to ingratiate himself to these people, he does so under the philosophy of nihilistic humor. He does so by elaborating upon the notion that the world holds nothing worth revering and therefore must be laughed at. Only rarely does he project this view onto those aspects of life that others revere. The prime example of this is the bad joke that upsets his father, or when he fools around with the ghost of Guido’s grandfather during the seance. For the most part, the humor revolves around something related to him. His anecdote concerning the English cat represents a prime example, because it elaborates upon his own feelings of exclusion amongst the English and upon his eventual resignation of any attempt to survive there emotionally. What the others are laughing at then, can be seen as the misconception that they are superior to Zeno, at the idea that they are above the symbolic ramifications of a cat’s irate response to a caress. They are laughing under the assumption that their own foundations are more stable than those of a man who could be so dissuaded by the remonstrance of a cat.

Little Anna’s response to this anecdote represents the lone judgment that somehow sees through the façade. “Ma tu sei pazzo, veramente pazzo!” she continues to tell him in secret long after the story was initially told (79). Zeno recognizes the veracity of the girl’s conclusion, in addition to its more threatening aspect:

Essa dovette accorgersi del suo potere e della mia debolezza… Credo che tutti abbiamo nella nostra coscienza come nel nostro corpo dei punti delicati e coperti cui non volentieri si pensa. Non si sa neppure che cosa siano, ma si sa che vi sono. Io stornavo il mio occhio da quello infantile che voleva frugarmi. (80)

That Zeno would turn away from that little girl who sought to poke around and discover something of Zeno is telling, and it speaks to those “delicate and covered” places in our consciences to which we do not voluntarily go. Zeno recounts a similar instance earlier on in the book, only here it is Zeno who takes up the position of the little girl, rummaging around where the other person wants no one to be. He describes the latter moments of his father’s failing health and how a couple of times he looked his father in the eyes, only to have the old man turn his gaze away from his (36). His explanation of this phenomenon speaks as much to his response to little Anna’s searching eyes:

Si dice che ciò è un segno di falsità, mentre io ora so ch’è un segno di malattia. L’animale malato non lascia guardare nei pertugi pei quali si potrebbe scorgere la malattia, la debolezza. (36).
Zeno perceives that the diverting of one’s gaze is not a sign of falsity, but one of sickness, leading us to conclude that what little Anna had discovered was that sickness which Zeno is so prone to discuss in his therapy journal. That she came to make this discovery during one of Zeno’s anecdotes that was meant to cause laughter, only reinforces the fact that his humor is a sign of his sickness, of the philosophy that we have been discussing. Anna, though, did not laugh, but saw through the joke. The comic, then, according to Zeno’s philosophy and how he practices it, becomes a way of refracting the gaze of others, of deflecting those searching eyes away from the places he means to keep undiscovered. We can then surmise that Zeno’s comic tendency acts as both a signpost of his philosophy as well as a means of keeping that philosophy hidden.

In the end, we have a book that uses humor to dramatize the philosophy of its protagonist, who is using that humor to keep others from discovering his philosophy. That this is possible derives from the fact that Zeno’s comedy is always moving in two directions. The first moves towards the spectators within the events of the novel. They are the characters we have been talking about up until now: his father, the Malfentis, Guido, Nilini. They know nothing of the real reasons behind Zeno’s joke making, for they are not privy to the comments he puts down in his therapy journal. The one who does retain the privilege of hearing these confessions is Zeno’s doctor, who represents the other spectator of the novel. Since this is this same journal that we are reading, the doctor as the privileged spectator stands within the text as a surrogate for us readers. The reader, like the doctor, gets to hear everything, whereas the characters within the novel only hear what Zeno actually says out loud to them.11

This is of course patently obvious, but it bears stating, because it brings up an important complication concerning Zeno’s form of comic expression. Zeno’s “philosophy” uses the comic form of the joke or funny anecdote in order to express Zeno’s particular breed of nihilism. He is not just a comic spectacle; he is a comic artist too, and his life story is the work of art.12 Much of the time we laugh, because Zeno is purposefully trying to be funny, if not necessarily to his therapist and to us, at least to those with whom he interacts within the narrative. Thus his life becomes a comic work of art, one that he is in the process of forming. And yet as we have seen, the people in Zeno’s life do not really understand the comic element to his displays. Zeno’s father never thinks his son is ever being serious, because he does not comprehend that the sign of his seriousness is his joke making. Zeno’s wife also sees him as lighthearted and serious oftentimes when he is not. Because these characters never come to recognize the tragedy underlying Zeno’s facade, the text presents us with two kinds of comic form. The
one presented to the reader retains a dark underbelly. We understand the
tragedy behind Zeno’s antics. But because we also understand that he too
recognizes the tragedy underneath it all, he comes across as a type of artist
who has turned his life story into a spectacle for the reader. To the charac-
ters within the text, though, Zeno is simply a comic spectacle. This is how
Zeno is capable of using his comedy both to highlight his philosophy as
well as to keep it hidden from others. It is highlighted for the unknown
reader and kept hidden from the people in Zeno’s life.

What Zeno’s attempt to cover up his philosophy then implies, is that
his comedy is really just a rhetorical strategy. To an extent, it is rhetoric,
and we should not pretend that it is not. An ability to incite laughter can be
a socially productive attribute after all, as it oftentimes is for Zeno. “Spesso
la lietezza m’aveva favorito con le donne” he boasts (74). This “happiness”
emerges as the afterglow of Zeno’s comic tendencies, the same that ingrati-
ate him to the Malfentsis, for example. No doubt they are what ingratiate him
to the reader as well. A shared sense of the comic in La coscienza di Zeno
may not signal some deep interpersonal connection, but it retains its ability
to produce momentary and superficial social success. Zeno may originally
want to convince his father of the validity of his philosophy, but he does not
wish to do so at the expense of his position in society. By the time he has
reached the moment in his life when he wants to take a wife, he is more
concerned with achieving his social aims than with winning any philosophi-
cal debates. To achieve these social aims, he cannot let others realize how
sick he believes he is. Though he realizes that his humor is a sign of that
sickness, others do not. In the end, Zeno is incapable of renouncing his
philosophy of humor, because it represents who he is, but he is also unwilling
to renounce it, because of its social merit as a means of winning others
over and of concealing his own potentially depressing worldview.

But this social merit is exactly the problem. Zeno’s humor is only
construed as a sign of his sickness by Zeno. Thus in putting it to social use,
it can never directly express who Zeno is and thereby can only distance him
from others, even when those others laugh. Thus his humor directly dis-
tances him from his father and Ada, and it serves to indirectly distance him
from Augusta, since she does not comprehend what it is representative of.
Anyone who reads Zeno’s comedy as indicative of an easy-going personality
is duped. If you do not appreciate such a personality — as Zeno’s father
and Ada do not — then the humor pushes you away. If you do appreciate
such a personality — as Augusta does — then you appreciate it for the
wrong reasons and are pushed away nonetheless. The disconnect that arises
between Zeno and others derives from the residual effects of his comic
sensibility, not from a desire for interpersonal distance. He may not want to
let everyone know what he is thinking all the time, but this does not mean that he is attempting to deceive others. Throughout his life, Zeno uses humor to bridge distances, never fully comprehending how it is this very same tactic that pushes others farther away. But it is not that the form of his comic attempts is what creates this distance; it is that the techniques of his attempts are incompatible with the nihilism at the humor’s core.

Zeno has fallen into a trap created by the paradox of his philosophy. He does not see laughter as an expression of joy. The only time someone’s laugh ever actually pleases him is when it represents a victory, such as when he finally succeeds at making Ada laugh and responds with, “il riso era mio!” This pleasure has nothing to do with a belief in the validity of laughter, and thus, in the veracity of joy. His jokes are meant as tactics, either to win a lover, to win an argument, or to avoid a difficult situation. At the root of this belief in laughter as a tactic lies a deep suspicion of the validity of expressing joy. His humor is a symptom of his disease precisely because it cannot be a sign of optimism, even momentary optimism. The resultant miscommunication that arises does so as a result of the fact that the comic, which is the form his pessimism takes, to the rest of the world is so antithetical to a nihilistic philosophy. Beckett writes that the laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy is the risus purus. This may be so, but the world is not so easily convinced, hence Zeno’s difficulty.

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1 Barilli calls Alberta’s assessment, “a fitting recognition of Zeno’s superior dilettantism” (119). I agree that Zeno is a dilettante, but I would argue that the fact that he recognizes this plays an important role in his individuality. Thus I do not agree with those critics who, like Barilli, grant Zeno “the official license of ‘the man without qualities’” (Barilli 118-19).

2 According to Fonda, Zeno’s is the humor of the neurotic, linked to the child’s, according to Freud, in that both consist of “uno scompenso con l’ambiente” and both derive from “uno scompenso con la realtà” (74). Fonda goes on to argue that Zeno’s humor becomes the means by which the author of the diary manifests his aggression against his father, father-in-law, Guido, Ada, which would otherwise be illicit behavior as a result of moral, social, and other obstacles (78). Such a view, however, proves too reductive. Zeno’s jokes against Guido fit this category, at least during his courtship of Ada. More often though, Zeno’s humor is a byproduct of more complicated issues, which I will discuss.

3 For a discussion on Zeno and nihilism, particularly its relation to such thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Vattimo, see Carravetta, “Svevo soggetto postmoderno” as well as Federici, “L’eccentricità e l’ex-centricità dei protagonisti Sveviani,” in Italo Svevo tra moderno e postmoderno.
According to Brenkman, this idea of nihilism may shed some light on the complicated relationship of innovation and that most peculiar of literary genres, the novel: “The modern aesthetic imperative to innovate seems to combine two forces…; on the one hand, innovation is will-to-power…; on the other hand, innovation is a crisis-ridden search for the means of expressing the relentlessly changing reality of a world devoid of meaning…” (830). Thus, Zeno’s philosophy, whose expression is humor, propels the formal innovations of what I at least see as one of the early twentieth century’s most innovative novels.

For a summary of those critics who see Zeno as inept see the first footnote to Bonadeo, “Ideale e Reale.” In opposition to this view, Bonadeo argues that Zeno’s unfulfilled attempts to achieve his ideals result in a realization that such ideals are in fact illusory and vain. Therefore, “L’ideale appare così non più romanticamente come lo scopo per cui l’uomo lotta…ma come la sorgente di dubbi, incertezze ed errori…” (402).

“[Zeno’s] concern, even fascination, with death…indicates the ontological problem which pervades the whole of his expression and explanation of his life. Zeno is actually attempting to identify his being, to grasp the continuity of his essential self as he exists in time” (Davis 46).

Minghelli argues that “Zeno’s virtuality — the evasion of the present to live under the reign of potentiality — appears as relational, played out intersubjectively with an other in whose shadow Zeno can be dissolved and redrawn” (162). She sees the female characters in this role of other. But Zeno never succeeds at “redrawing” himself, since his past can never be “dissolved.” It is this aspect of his virtuality that stifles him, resulting in comic scenes that depend on the disparity of deed and intent.

Biasin: “In La coscienza di Zeno…disease is the real and metaphorical element which presides over the structure of the narration and becomes crystallized in its major components—the psychoanalytical, the sociological and the ontological” (86).

The disparity between fact and fiction within Zeno’s memoir, and thus, within the novel itself, is a topic too large to bring in here. Many critics have dealt with this issue. In particular, see Moloney, who states that Freud warned against asking patients to recall their pasts, something Zeno would have been aware of since he has read up on psychoanalysis. As a result, “in Zeno we have to do with an unreliable narrator who, whether he knows it or not, is lying” (313-14). See also Savelli, who finds unremitting ambiguity sown into every one of Zeno’s utterances.

In response to this moment in the text, Minghelli writes: “As the personification of health and legitimacy, Augusta grants Zeno’s story the possibility of endless renewal” (180). I would argue instead that Zeno’s rejection of Augusta’s worldview derives from a recognition on his part that the possibility for renewal that her “health” implies is nothing but a chimera. He rejects her “health” precisely because it offers something it cannot deliver.

That Zeno warns us of believing everything said by someone from Trieste in standard Italian is akin to the disconnect signaled by Augusta’s laughter at what Zeno says. Zeno’s comedy around his wife functions as a form that contradicts its content rather than affirms it. How much this is also the case with the very language of the text is of course unknowable. Perhaps then the people within Zeno’s life story know more of him than the doctor ever could because Zeno communicates to them in his native dialect. But then, all the instances of miscommunication within the narrative undo such a notion. At times the novel comes across as very postmodern.
12 As a counterexample, consider him in relation to Don Quixote, whose biography also becomes its own breed of comic artwork. Unlike’s Svevo’s creation, Cervantes’ gallant-to-be never laughs at himself, because initially he does not realize that he is thought of as funny. Zeno never really laughs at himself either, but at least he understands that the spectacle he is putting on will be construed as comic.

13 Federici: “…il testo sveviano enfatizza l’eccentricità proponendola come strategia narrative attuata intenzionalmente per contestare i valori culturali dall’interno della società” (55).

See also Dombroski’s chapter on Zeno in Properties of Writing: “Zeno knows his place in a world that has remained relatively stable” (106).

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