

## NOTES & REVIEWS

### Fables and Phantoms:

#### **An unpublished little fable by Italo Svevo among the papers of a well-known Triestine spiritualist<sup>1</sup>**

*Col mezzo di una trappola puerile, ad un fanciullo riuscì di prendere un passero. Il fanciullo, sorpreso, prima di torcere il collo all'incauto animale gli chiese: "Come mai ti lasciasti prendere ad astuzia sì semplice?" Il passero rispose: "Vissi sempre fra gente buona".*

*(By means of a childish trap, a young boy succeeded in catching a sparrow. The surprised boy, before wringing the incautious animal's neck, asked him: "How come you let yourself get caught by such a simple trick?" The sparrow replied: "I've always lived among good people.")*

(Ettore Schmitz)

This hitherto unpublished little fable by Ettore Schmitz — for so he signed his name here, dropping his then unlucky pseudonym, Italo Svevo — was found in the pages of the guest book of Nella Doria Cambon (1872-1948), a Triestine poetess and animating force of an illustrious urban salon. Svevo set this fable down, sometime between 1908 and 1910, among the signatures, the lines of verse, and the formalities left by other, then better-known writers: the novelist Giulio De Frenzi (in the world Luigi Federzoni, future Minister for the Colonies), the playwright Giacinto Gallina (who jotted down a few verses in Venetian dialect), the critic Silvio Benco (one of the first to review Svevo's works favourably), and all of the other most prominent writers of the Trieste of that time. Much higher-sounding names, however, could be heard ringing in Cambon's circle. She was in contact with Gabriele D'Annunzio, with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and with some of the most important figures in the Irredentist struggle, such as Petitti di Roreto and Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia. Indeed, taking part in some of the special gatherings of her salon were none other than Alessandro Manzoni, Dante Alighieri, Fogazzaro, Mazzini, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Savonarola, and even the Buddha. In spirit, of course, for Cambon was one of the most fervent apostles of that highly contagious vogue of spiritualism that from the middle of the nineteenth century had irresistibly infected first the United States and later on the whole of Europe. Among the

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly different version of this article, written by Riccardo Cepach, appeared in Italian in *La Repubblica* (September 16, 2005, p. 58).

papers of this spiritualist poetess, which the Museo Sveviano acquired recently at an auction and from which this little fable by Svevo emerged, there are hundreds of pages of quickly transcribed messages from the disembodied. Conveniently tidied up and typed out by a secretary, these messages assume almost the form of the minutes of a business meeting, except that presiding over it, invariably, is “papà Manzoni,” the guiding spirit who gives the poetess advice and recommendations, addressing her affectionately as “cara Nella,” and making suspicious comments about Italian Fiume. (Cambon’s guest spirits had the grace to humour the mistress of the house in her ideas about art, politics and occultism; once, the famous psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso appeared in a séance in order to make amends for having been sceptical about spiritualism.)

That Svevo took part in at least one of these gatherings was a well-known fact, confirmed by his daughter Letizia, who remembers how, in 1910, the writer and his wife went to the Cambons’ residence: “At Nella’s house there was a man who would go into a ‘trance’ and he and Father spoke at length. My father asked him to guess the name of a person who was dear to him, and this man tried for a long time but he did not succeed. My father and mother left that place with the distinct impression that this man was deceiving Doria.” It is not difficult to imagine the irritation of the mistress of the house at the insistent scepticism of her guest. Still, it bears remembering that Svevo, who might have been inspired by this very episode when he wrote the famous scene with the three-legged table in *Confessions of Zeno*, was indeed interested in spiritualism, though for reasons that were somewhat different from the messianic ones of Cambon. Attesting to this is the sketch of a story, “Un medio ingenuo” — or “A naive medium” — in which he explicitly cites a popular book on occultism and makes reference to the then renowned Eusapia Paladino, a Neapolitan spiritualist. There is also a mention in a letter to his wife, in which he writes, “Now that I’m dealing with spiritualism I believe in it” (but whoever knows Svevo will think at once of how that “now” does not mean “from now on” but is instead a sly “for the moment”).

And now, recalling this aspect of Svevo’s tireless curiosity, arrives this very brief, very simple fable, providing further testimony to the visit at the Cambons and setting itself perfectly in the *corpus* of Svevian fables, true to the characteristics of the genre — *brevitas* and moral content — and to its compensatory role of writing exercise for the “failed” and insincerely repentant novelist. Svevo, in fact, after the failure of his first two novels, *A Life* and *As a Man Grows Older*, declared that he had abandoned forever “that ridiculous and harmful thing called literature”; but a number of studies, done years ago, have shown that the long, pretended silence that reaches down to *Confessions of Zeno*, the drafting of which begins in 1919, is very rich in literary ventures of various kinds: letters, essays, stories, plays, and of course fables. And it is not by chance that the main character of this unpublished little piece should be a sparrow. Sparrows, or other little birds, appear in all of the many fables that

punctuate *Una burla riuscita* (1926),<sup>2</sup> one of the last and most accomplished of Svevo's novellas, written after fame and success had finally come to him. In this work, fables serve as an inexhaustible source of narrative ideas and therefore also of consolation for the protagonist, a failed novelist named Mario Samigli. Here is one of his fables, a variation on the one that Svevo left for Cambon:

*Un uccellino acciecato dall'appetito si lasciò impaniare. Fu posto in una gabbiuccia ove le sue ali non potevano neppure stendersi. Sofferse orribilmente, finché un giorno la sua gabbia non fu lasciata aperta, ed esso poté riavere la sua libertà. Ma non ne godette a lungo. Reso troppo diffidente dall'esperienza, dove vedeva cibo sospettava l'insidia, e fuggiva. Perciò in breve tempo morì di fame.*

(80)

*[A little bird, blinded by hunger, let himself get caught in a lime trap. He was placed in a cage so small that he could not even spread his wings. He suffered horribly until one day his cage was left open and he could have his freedom again. But he did not enjoy it for long. His experience had made him too mistrustful. Wherever he saw food, he suspected a trap and fled. And so after a short time he starved to death.]*

Samigli, one of the author's several literary alter-egos, assumes here the appearance of a retrospective portrait, and on the whole an affectionate one, of Ettore Schmitz, that unlucky writer who, years before, had not dared to sign himself Italo Svevo.

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<sup>2</sup> Svevo, Italo, *Una burla riuscita*, ed. Bruno Maier. Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1993. See also the recent translation by J. G. Nichols, *A Perfect Hoax*. London: Hesperus Press, 2003.