"OH! MIO VECCHIO WILLIAM!" ITALO SVEVO AND HIS SHAKESPEARE

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ITALO SVEVO AND HIS SHAKESPEARE

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CARMINE DI BIASE

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“Italo Svevo and His Legacy,” the international conference held at Oxford University in December of 2011, was organized by Giuseppe Stellardi and Emanuela Tandello Cooper. It was this gathering of Svevo scholars which convinced me that there was a need for a volume of essays on Svevo and Shakespeare. It was there that I met Elisa Martínez Garrido, who has done a great deal for Svevo studies in Spain. She was immediately supportive of the idea for this volume and embraced the opportunity to contribute to it by expanding the study she presented at Oxford. It was also at Oxford that Elizabeth Schächter, who had already been immensely supportive of my work on The Diary of Elio Schmitz, gave me the idea of translating Svevo’s “Profilo autobiografico.” And it was this trip to England that made it possible for me, finally, to take a train to Hull and meet Brian Moloney, the Svevo scholar whose ongoing work has been a model for the rest of us to follow. That he has contributed an essay to this volume is for me a very great honor indeed. I must also express my gratitude to Charles Klopp, at The Ohio State University, who had the excellent idea of hosting a conference there on Trieste a few years ago. His interest in Triestine writers has renewed my own. It was there, moreover, at the conference in Columbus, Ohio, that I first met Saskia Ziolkowski, whose wide reading in modern world literature has allowed her to contribute a most illuminating study to this volume. Special thanks go to Dino S. Cervigni, editor of Annali d’italianistica, not only for his generosity and guidance, but for his friendship and encouragement. It would not have been possible to complete this volume, however, without the support of my Department Head, Robert Felgar, who found a way to give me a semester’s leave, prompted by his deep and unwavering respect for scholarship.
Svevo, the Shakespearean Playwright
In 1884 Italo Svevo sent the renowned actress Eleonora Duse an Italian translation of *Romeo and Juliet* with the note, “Il sottoscritto si permette offrirLe pella rappresentazione questo suo dramma che scrisse proprio pensando a Lei. Non chiede altri diritti di autore che quelli che la legge in vigore quando visse gli concedeva. — G. Shakespeare.”¹ Much has been made of Ettore Schmitz’s pen names and this signature is similarly significant: addressing Duse as Shakespeare reveals not only Svevo’s playfulness, but also his personal association with the Bard. Even *Romeo and Juliet*, which at first glance may seem to have little in common with Svevo’s *forma mentis*, was a work he treasured enough to share with the formidable actress.² Although Svevo primarily mentions the tragedies, like *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the magnitude of Shakespeare’s significance to Svevo and the humor of Svevo’s own plays suggest that Svevo’s relationship to Shakespeare’s comedies is also worth exploring. This essay investigates Svevo’s engagement with a comedy that has often been compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.³ First, I consider the various cultural conduits through which Svevo would have received Shakespeare’s play to reveal the necessity of thinking about Svevo in the context of a broader European and even world literary culture. I then put Shakespeare’s play into conversation with Svevo’s *La rigenerazione* in order to explore Svevo’s rich representation of reality, of perception, and of performance itself.

₁ This note is transcribed in Elio Schmitz, *Diario* (137). Not long afterward, Eleonora Duse would be exalted for her ability to perform Shakespeare (Rebora 222).
² Later Svevo would similarly send his own novels to people from whom he sought recognition or whom he admired.
³ Garber, for instance, provides a wide-ranging list of the similarities between *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Shakespeare After All 213-14).
⁴ For this issue, see Morris’s *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*. 
of Trieste shaped how international authors such as Shakespeare were received.\textsuperscript{5} Svevo read Shakespeare in English, German, and Italian, and enjoyed Norwegian, French, Russian, German, and Italian writers whose works responded to \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}.\textsuperscript{6} While Svevo’s background makes a broader consideration of the fortunes of this comedy even more important, Shakespeare’s own status also means that there are many points of contact between him and other significant authors of numerous national traditions. In other words, Svevo’s potential experience of \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} demonstrates both his multicultural background and the indisputable presence of Shakespeare as a world author.

Although, as has often been discussed, Svevo’s work and reception reveal how he and Trieste were in many ways at the periphery of the literary scene in Italy, in the port city Svevo was also exposed to a wider array of responses to and translations of Shakespeare than he would have been had he lived in a city more central to Italian literary culture, such as Rome, Florence, or Milan.\textsuperscript{7} Svevo’s reception of Shakespeare reveals the complications of defining literary centers and peripheries, a current topic of concern in debates about world literature.\textsuperscript{8} In “Goethe, Marx, Ibsen and the Creation of a World Literature,” Martin Puchner explores how “world literature lets us rethink the relation between cultural centers and the periphery” (4). Puchner traces the importance of Goethe’s and Ibsen’s moves from places that can be considered peripheral to more central locations and the “provincialism of the centre” (33). Svevo’s reception of Shakespeare also raises questions about the moving centers and peripheries of world literature, primarily regarding Svevo’s multiple experiences in a single city, Trieste, rather than to his movement about Europe. While critics often discuss the shifting importance of one city over time for literary traditions and circulation, Trieste’s significance to various literary communities even within the same time period is debated.

Svevo’s situation reveals the problems with segregating authors into their national traditions. Milan Kundera discussed this issue in “Reflections: Die Weltliteratur,” claiming, “A nation’s possessiveness toward its artists works as a

\textsuperscript{5} The importance of Trieste’s diversity for Svevo’s development has been explored in several notable works, like Camerino’s \textit{Italo Svevo e la crisi della Mitteleuropa} and Schächter’s \textit{Origin and Identity: Essays on Svevo and Trieste}.

\textsuperscript{6} See, for instance, Svevo’s “Profilo autobiografico”: “Le persone colte di Trieste leggevano autori francesi, russi, tedeschi, Scandinavi ed inglesi” (\textit{Racconti} 801). See also Moloney (Svevo 5-6).

\textsuperscript{7} In the \textit{fin de siècle}, Trieste can be viewed as a crossroad of European culture (as Svevo himself claims) or culturally behind with regard to the rest of the peninsula (as Saba claims).

\textsuperscript{8} “First, for world literature, it is not necessarily an advantage to come from a large nation; there is a provincialism of the centre as well as a provincialism associated with the periphery” (Puchner 6).
Svevo’s European Stage: La rigenerazione & A Midsummer Night’s Dream

small-context terrorism that reduces the entire meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland” (31). As a result of the critical debates that circle around how German, Austrian, Italian, or Jewish Svevo really is, Svevo tends to be compared with other German-language, Italian, or Jewish authors, in some measure to reinforce claims about how Svevo fits into these literary traditions. In part since Svevo’s engagement with Shakespeare raises a different series of questions, Svevo and Shakespeare have rarely been examined together. For instance, despite the fact that Shakespeare was one of Svevo’s “guiding lights” (Cavaglion 4) and is important in a discussion of Svevo’s development as an author, Angela Guidotti, in one of the earliest — and one of the few — monographs on Svevo and the theater, does not mention Shakespeare. Indeed, before this present group of essays, Carmine Di Biase’s “Hamlet in the Life and Work of Svevo” and Elisa Martínez Garrido’s “Della vendetta, della gelosia, della menzogna e del veleno tragico. La traccia di Shakespeare ne La coscienza di Zeno,” both originally presented at the Oxford conference “Svevo at 150,” are among the rare works to concentrate solely on the relationship between Svevo and Shakespeare.

Svevo’s appreciation of Shakespeare exemplifies his lifelong “amore segreto” (Veneziani Svevo 151) of the theater. His first attempts at writing were of plays and in 1881 his brother described the importance the French author Émile Zola had for Svevo’s early conception of drama: “È verista. Zola lo ha riconfermato nell’idea che lo scopo della commedia e l’interesse devono essere i caratteri e non l’azione” (Schmitz 104). Also the subject of one of Svevo’s first articles, Zola often refers to Shakespeare and could have informed Svevo’s reading of the Bard, whom Svevo referred to as a “tragedo verista” in his very first publication, an article on The Merchant of Venice (Teatro e saggi 969). Svevo’s theater is frequently placed in a French and Italian dramatic tradition. He sought out French performances on his trips to Paris, but his dramatic works overall fit uncomfortably in a purely Franco-Italian tradition. As critics have noted, several of his plays are indeed most strikingly similar to those of Ibsen and Schnitzler. Rather than be defined by any purely national one, Svevo’s theater fits into a European tradition, an expression Kundera argues for in his essay on world literature.

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9 Kundera discusses in particular the polycentrism of Central Europe and the case of Kafka, Svevo’s last love with whom he has a great deal in common.
10 Both pieces have been published in the conference proceedings.
11 See also Di Biase’s note on page 67 (Diary).
12 “Il teatro di Italo Svevo è erede di una tradizione importante, quella del dramma borghese italiano e francese e anticipatore del teatro d’avanguardia” (Marasco 182).
13 For more on the similarities between Svevo and Schnitzler, see Schächter, “Svevo e Schnitzler.”
14 For a discussion of Svevo’s theater in a European context, see Gasparro.
While many scholars have labeled Svevo “European,” most modern authors, including Svevo, continue to be discussed primarily within the confines of their national traditions. An examination of Svevo’s potential encounters with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the works it influenced emphasizes Svevo’s participation in a wide-ranging European tradition. In this section, I explore the potential impact of Svevo’s multicultural city, English-language experiences, and German education on the Triestine author’s understanding of *Midsummer*. The kaleidoscopic terrain of this reception, which encompasses not only Italian and French authors, such Goldoni, D’Annunzio, and Zola, but also Turgenev, Ibsen, Joyce, Goethe, Freud, and Wagner, reveals the complexity and richness of Svevo’s experience of the English world author.

When Svevo composed *La rigenerazione* in the 1920s Trieste was no longer Austro-Hungarian, but Italian. While Shakespeare’s tragedies had a larger presence in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Italy than his comedies did, *Midsummer* was a significant exception. In *Shakespeare in Italy* (1916), Lacy Collison-Morley, who translated several of Svevo’s short stories, notes that “undoubtedly the most remarkable Shakespearean revival in Italy of recent years was that of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (161). In *Ariosto, Shakespeare, and Corneille* (1920), Benedetto Croce describes this play as the most exemplary of Shakespeare’s comedies: “La quintessenza di tutte queste comedie (al modo stesso che, rispetto alle grandi tragedie, si può in certo senso dire dell’Amleto) è il *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate*” (106).

In addition to its importance to critics and translators, Shakespeare’s comedy was also a source of inspiration for Italian authors. Gabriele D’Annunzio plays on its title in both *Sogno d’un mattino di primavera* (produced in 1897), written for Eleonora Duse, and its companion piece, *Sogno d’un tramonto d’autunno* (Woodhouse 326-27). While Svevo imagined Shakespeare writing *Romeo and Juliet* for Duse, D’Annunzio wrote a play for her that drew on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In *I malcontenti* (1754), Carlo Goldoni has one of his characters, Gisologo, remark on the variety of Shakespeare’s (or “Sachespir’s”) comedies, including *Midsummer*.

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15 *Italo Svevo scrittore europeo* puts Svevo in a broader context, while some of the essays concentrate on Europe, many emphasize one important aspect of Svevo’s background. Naomi Lebowitz dedicates a chapter to Svevo’s “European Identity” (199-216), arguing that the author “serves in a major way to bring Italian literature itself into a wider experimental atmosphere of modern European culture” (169).

16 For a discussion of Svevo and the classics, see Annoni.

17 “The *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the only one of the comedies that has been generally appreciated in Latin countries” (Collison-Morley 138).

18 *Sogno di un mattino di primavera* is one of the thirteen plays included in volume one of Twentieth-Century Italian Drama, as is Svevo’s *Con la penna d’oro* (House & Attisani).
Svevo’s European Stage: *La rigenerazione* & *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*


Gisologo thus utilizes Shakespeare in a discussion of the possibilities and limits of stylistic variety in comedies, and Goldoni himself refers to Shakespeare in letters and an introduction to his plays. Goldoni’s references to *Midsummer* reveal that, although the comedy became particularly popular in the Italy of Svevo (1861-1928), D’Annunzio (1863-1938), and Croce (1866-1952), Italian appreciation of the play precedes the late-nineteenth century.

While many crucial figures in Italian theater, such as Goldoni and D’Annunzio, refer to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, contextualizing Svevo’s Shakespeare through a discussion of the English poet’s Italian reception alone does not exhaust the conduits through which Svevo perceived the famous dramatist. For instance, A. Leone De Castris suggests that the Russian author Ivan Turgenev, whom Svevo discusses in an early article and mentions in his “Profilo autobiografico,” led the Triestine author to Shakespeare (44). Trieste’s multicultural formation meant that many northern works, including Slavic, Germanic, and Scandinavian ones, were received more warmly and earlier in Trieste than in the rest of the Italian peninsula. Claudio Magris notes that Triestines were “particularly receptive to the first performances of Ibsen’s works” (“Ibsen and Triestine Literature” 15). Though Ibsen’s popularity spread to the rest of Italy as well, his prominence in Trieste again shows how, with respect to the rest of the peninsula, the port-city was often at the forefront of modernist appreciation. The Norwegian author’s influence on Svevo has been noted and is evident in many of his plays, such as *Con la penna d’oro*, *Un marito*, and *L’avventura di Maria*. While this influence may initially seem unrelated to Svevo’s reading of *Midsummer*, Ibsen’s *St. John’s Night*, which has

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19 Goldoni had read Shakespeare in French (Lombardo 3-4).’
20 Nulli’s *Shakespeare in Italia*, written in Svevo’s lifetime, concentrates on the relationship between Shakespeare and Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828), Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827), and Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873).
21 “[The Triestines] were the first to assimilate northern influences and read authors such as Hebbel, Weininger, Strindberg, and Ibsen, and they were later the first to read Freud” (Campanile 152).
22 Triestine writer Scipio Slataper wrote a thesis on Ibsen that was revised into a book, published in 1916.
23 This early appreciation of Northern works in Trieste can be seen as reciprocal, since Ibsen’s friend Paul von Heyse was one of the first authors to esteem Svevo’s work.
24 See for instance Puppa (“Ibsen”), Guidotti, and Rimini 118-45. De Castris argues that Shakespeare and Ibsen were the two most important models for Svevo’s dramatic works: “Come Shakespeare nella giovinezza, così Ibsen dové rappresentare il modello del sognato teatro sieviano nella maturità” (104).
even been referred to as *Midsummer Eve*, drew on Shakespeare’s comedy, providing another example of how varied Svevo’s perception of Shakespeare may have been.\(^{25}\)

Trieste’s unique cultural make-up shaped which plays were performed and how they were received in the city. For example, before *A Merchant of Venice* was staged in Trieste in 1880 some discussion took place over whether the play would be offensive to the city’s notable Jewish population. Svevo’s first published article, “Shylock,” argues for the performance. As his article indicates, Svevo was invested in his city’s theater. Elio Schmitz’s diary reveals Svevo’s youthful following of the actress Gemma Cuniberti, who performed in Trieste (Di Biase, *Diary* 30-32), whom Svevo gave dramatic advice, and for whom Elio Schmitz hoped Svevo would complete a play. Later in Svevo’s life, Livia Veneziani Svevo kept her husband informed about Triestine productions even when he was abroad (Moloney, Hope and Gatt-Rutter 22). These examples reveal that Svevo, in addition to writing plays his entire life, carefully followed Trieste’s theater scene from his youth into his later years. Since theater was a particularly important mode of cultural engagement in Trieste, Svevo’s early love of the theater was not unusual among his peers.\(^{26}\) As Brian Moloney observes, “Trieste in the last decades of the nineteenth century, with at least three theatres regularly staging plays, was one of the most important centres of Italian theatrical life” (*Svevo* 16).\(^{27}\) The theater was also a less public form of entertainment for many Triestines.\(^{28}\) The Triestine culture club of which Svevo was a member, the Società di Minerva, gave talks on several playwrights, including Shakespeare, Goldoni, and Ibsen.

Svevo encountered Shakespeare not just through the works of others or in translation. When Svevo graduated from his school in Seignitz, his friend Anna Herz gave him an English edition of Shakespeare’s works, with a German inscription, “Here I give you your favorite poet” (Gatt-Rutter 31). From Herz’s gift to productions he saw and read about when he later spent time in England,

\(^{25}\) Ibsen later repudiated the play, which has been described as a “fairytale comedy,” and it is the only one of his dramas not to be published in his lifetime. Ibsen also gave a non-extant paper on “Shakespeare and His influence upon Scandinavian Literature” in the 1850s (McFarlane xv).

\(^{26}\) Ruggero Rimini presents the case of the importance of theater to Trieste in the first monograph on Svevo’s theater. See also Camerino “Svevo e il teatro di prosa.” For a more critical view of the importance of theater in Trieste see Russell (32-34).

\(^{27}\) Elio Schmitz also notes the number of active theaters in Trieste (five) as a sign of the city’s supposed prosperity (see Schmitz 105, Di Biase, *Diary* 66).

\(^{28}\) Isabel Burton, whose husband, the famous translator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, was a consul in Trieste from 1873-1890, recalls reading plays in French, German, and Italian in the port city, with “everybody taking a part, sitting around a table and each reading our part as if we were acting it” (237).
Svevo’s contact with English Shakespeare came in many forms. Svevo and his now famous tutor also discussed Shakespeare, deliberating lines Svevo found linguistically difficult, and Svevo’s notes on Joyce’s work contain numerous references to Shakespeare (Teatro e Saggi 911-65).

Given his interest in the nuances of Shakespeare’s English as well as in Shakespeare’s potential anti-Semitism, the Triestine author may also have puzzled over the mention in Midsummer of the “most lovely Jew”:

Most radiant Pyramus, most lily white of hue,
Of color like the red rose on triumphant brier,
Most brisky juvenal and eke most lovely Jew,
As true as truest horse that yet would never tire
I’ll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny’s tomb.

(III.i.88-92)

Critics continue to debate these lines today: whether one argues that Shakespeare used “most lovely Jew” just to provide a rhyme (Evans 232), to allude to Jews negatively in contrast to the idea of “lovely” (Raffel 59), to abbreviate “jewel” (Wells 287), or to serve as “comic language for ‘youth’” (Brooks 56), these curious lines are part of a broader discussion of Shakespeare’s representation of Jews, a topic Svevo explored in his first published work. An interpretation and translation of the lines above is in part based on what the critic thinks of Svevo’s question, “Shakespeare odiava gli israeliti o non li odiava?” (Teatro e Saggi 969).

Before reading Shakespeare in English, Svevo had read his work in German, most notably Hamlet whose importance to Svevo has been explored by Di Biase (“Hamlet”). Svevo’s early perception of Shakespeare may in fact have been formed through Goethe (Benussi, La forma delle forme 18; De Castris 44). Goethe was significant to Svevo’s developing an understanding of Shakespeare not only because of his literature, but also more practically, since Svevo sold his Goethe, one of Svevo’s “più grandi amici,” in order to obtain his Shakespeare (Ghidetti 52; Di Biase, “Hamlet” 27). “Walpurgisnachtstraum” oder ‘Oberons und Titanias goldne Hochzeit’ (“Walpurgis Night’s Dream” or “The Golden Night’s Dream”).

29 See Svevo’s “Londra dopo la guerra” (1118-50), letters from England (Moloney, Hope andGatt-Rutter), and Schächter’s “Italo Svevo and England” for his cultural experiences in England, including attending Shakespeare performances.

30 Finnegans Wake frequently evokes A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Ellmann observes that Joyce had “upwards of a dozen books on Shakespeare in his flat in Trieste” (59). Svevo’s library, meanwhile, was unfortunately destroyed during the war. James Joyce’s younger brother, Stanislaus, who was also a teacher in Trieste, reports on Svevo’s confusion over a line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 64, “And brass eternal slave to mortal rage.” According to Joyce’s brother, Joyce playfully answered Svevo’s question that he “supposed that Shakespeare was thinking of German bands” (Di Biase, “Hamlet” 30).

31 Line numbers refer to the 1994 Arden edition (Brooks).
Wedding of Oberon and Titania”), which references A Midsummer Night’s Dream in both titles, represents a part of Goethe’s Faust that has often been considered puzzling. Franco Moretti describes “Walpurgisnachtstraum” as a key scene of world literature (38) and it surely would have drawn Svevo’s attention. As Midsummer itself, Faust, which draws on Shakespeare’s comedy, offers a significant model for the dramatic presentation of dreams, a prominent feature of Svevo’s La rigenerazione, which has itself frequently been called Faustian.  

While dreams abound in Shakespeare, their prominence in Midsummer, in terms of plot, title, and allusions, is particularly striking. Svevo, dreams, and Shakespeare cannot be mentioned together without recalling Freud, who frequently cited Shakespeare and referred directly to Midsummer in The Uncanny and The Interpretation of Dreams, which some have claimed was the text Svevo and his nephew began translating together. Not only did Freud interpret Shakespeare and use him to support his own ideas on psychoanalysis, but he also had a huge impact on the critical understanding of Shakespeare. Often called just Dream or, in Italian, Sogno, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is so often read using Freud that one critic made a point of interpreting it without Freud (Greenfield, “Our Nightly Madness: Shakespeare’s Dream Without The Interpretation of Dreams”).

Dreams are not the only important link between Svevo, Freud and Midsummer. James L. Calderwood observes that in this play, “a ferocious stress falls on fathers and on patriarchal authority” (3). The duke, Theseus, states, “To you your father should be as a god” (I.i.47). The emphasis on fathers and patriarchy in Shakespeare’s work has been noted as a major factor for Freud’s interest in him: “The Shakespearean primal scene is Freud’s chief anxiety because it is his chief influence. For Freud, inventing the family romance means finding a place to put Shakespeare. Shakespeare becomes the Freudian unconscious” (Meisel 202)  

Svevo’s La rigenerazione, like his “quarto romanzo” and La coscienza di Zeno, which have both been connected with the play, is also concerned with the conflict between generations. Paolo Puppa describes the attempt of the play’s protagonist, Giovanni, to obtain youth as his “satanic attempt at sublimating the Oedipal complex and other parental obsessions” (“Italo Svevo, Dramatist” 322). As it is hard to avoid Shakespeare

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32 Several critics have referred to Giovanni, a protagonist of La rigenerazione, as Faustian because of his attempt to return to a more youthful state. See Benussi (La forma delle forme 225) and Puppa (“La scrittura in scena” 40).

33 Svevo’s “Profilo autobiografico” refers to his work on the translation of Freud’s work on the dream, which has been interpreted as referring to The Interpretation of Dreams or On Dreams: “[...] si mise in sua compagnia a tradurre l’opera del Freud sul sogno” (Racconti 810).

34 “Shakespeare’s endless subject is also Freud’s: the family romance. The passing authority of fathers and kings is what Shakespeare is about; the absolute authority of time alone is how we know that” (Meisel 201).
in a discussion of Freud’s formation, it is difficult to ignore Freud and psychoanalysis in an exploration of Svevo’s later work, including La rigenerazione. Claudio Magris, for instance, posits that the supposed rejuvenation in the play is due to psychoanalysis.35

Another of Svevo’s German-language influences, Wagner, called Shakespeare his “only spiritual friend” and highlighted the importance of Midsummer to him: “I find there (in Midsummer Night’s Dream) all my thoughts about love indeed, I now find all my thoughts about everything in him” (Inwood 6). Livia Veneziani Svevo asserted that her husband was “Ammiratore entusiastico di Wagner, fu il primo a Trieste a sostenere attraverso il giornale l’estetica Wagneriana” (22). This admiration is significant for Svevo’s private enjoyment, and it is also evident in his writing. In La rigenerazione, the dreaming Giovanni compares himself to Wagner’s Siegfried: “La donna passiva che attende. Attende finché Sigfrido arriva” (Teatro e saggi 737; see also Benussi, “Dove la vita” 161; Bertoni 1553). Svevo shared his interest in Wagner with Joyce, who performed the quintet from Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg in 1909 in Trieste (Martin 66), and reportedly called the work his favorite Wagner opera. Revealing another potential, mediated connection between Svevo and Shakespeare’s comedy, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg drew upon Christoph Martin Wieland’s translation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Küper 153).

Music was a life-long passion of Svevo’s, as the numerous aspiring musicians depicted in his literary works and his articles reveal. In his review of Wagner’s autobiography, Svevo discusses Wagner’s thoughts on other composers, including Mendelssohn (Teatro e saggi 1023). 36 Felix Mendelssohn’s Overture (Op. 21) and Incidental Music (Op. 61), both written for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, are examples of the importance of music to productions of the play and of the famous music the comedy inspired.37 In Svevo’s lifetime several notable productions of the play integrated Mendelssohn’s music: early twentieth-century performances of Angeli’s much-praised translation of the play in Rome and Milan incorporated Mendelssohn’s music (Collison-Morley 161) and the famous productions of Max Reinhardt, who staged it numerous times between 1905 and 1935, also played Mendelssohn’s music. Many experienced the Bard not just through his work and

35 “[...] perché la rigenerazione, forse solo immaginaria, forse allusione ironica alla psicoanalisi, gli ha tolto l’interiore diritto di essere debole e inetto” (Magris, Dietro 121).
36 In the context of Shakespeare’s oeuvre, A Midsummer Night’s Dream has inspired a particularly large number of musical compositions, and music has frequently been played during its performances.
37 Mendelssohn’s pieces have a long tradition of being used in productions of Midsummer, from Ludvig Tieck’s to today: “The Tieck-Mendelssohn production of 1843 was the first time the full-scale A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which became a favorite of German and Austrian audiences, appeared on the German stage” (Halio, Guide 109).
its literary reception, but also through music and the other media created for theatrical productions.

Shakespeare’s influence on German culture, from music to literature, has been considered particularly notable and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was a favorite in Germany in the early twentieth century.38 Germans, from Goethe’s time on, refer to Shakespeare as “unser Shakespeare,” “our Shakespeare.”39 Many may agree that one could find “perfect” German translations of Shakespeare, as claimed in Svevo’s “Profilo autobiografico”: “Oltre ai classici tedeschi potè conoscere in traduzioni perfette lo Shakespeare [. . .]” (*Racconti* 800). Between 1815 and 1840 eight separate German translations of Shakespeare’s complete works were published, including Ludwig Tieck and Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel’s, the translation Svevo probably had at school and that Goebbels later determined should be the only version admitted on German stages (Habicht 113). Published in 1915, three years after he won the Nobel-prize, Gerhart Hauptmann ends an essay on Shakespeare in Germany with a reflection that more than merely accepting Shakespeare during a time of war, Germany in fact embraces the English author:

Es gibt kein Volk, auch das englische nicht, das sich ein Anrecht, wie das deutsche auf Shakespeare erworben hätte. Shakespeares Gestalten sind ein Teil unserer Welt, seine Seele ist eins mit unserer geworden: und wenn er in England geboren und begraben ist, so ist Deutschland das Land, wo er wahrhaft lebt.

(XII)40

According to Hauptmann, Shakespeare is more alive in Germany than in any other country, including England. Later, in Nazi Germany, Shakespeare’s Nordic sources were underlined and a special relationship between the Bard and the German people posited.41 Critics have called attention to Shakespeare’s importance in nationalist sentiments, from Romantic to Fascist throughout

38 Korte and Spittel point out that “since his ‘discovery’ in the eighteenth century, the German Shakespeare has been created and re-created to serve all political formations on German soil, including the Third Reich and the GDR” (268). For *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the twentieth century in Germany see Hortmann 7.
39 Moloney proposes that Svevo must have read German criticism on Shakespeare (*Svevo* 127).
40 “There is no nation, not even the British, which is more entitled to call Shakespeare its own than Germany. Shakespeare’s characters have become part of our world, his soul has become one with ours: and though he was born and buried in England it is in Germany that he is truly alive” (Trans. Hortmann 3).
41 Friederike von Schwerin-High characterized some nineteenth-century German writers as making, “the aggressive attempt to claim Shakespeare as a German, jingoistically alleging that Shakespeare’s birth in England was an unfortunate accident, that the Germans had gained rightful possession of him by virtue of understanding him better than any other nation, and that Shakespeare was in fact the ‘third German classic’ after Goethe and Schiller” (55).
Europe and the part Shakespeare has played in the “constitution of the Continent’s sense of identity” (Hoenselaars 9).  

Croce described Shakespeare as being disadvantaged by a “German” appropriation, rather than a “Latin” or Italian one, and lamented the German adoption of Shakespeare: “[...] la terza grande sventura toccata allo Shakespeare è stata il suo trasferimento, e non diremo innalzamento, a poeta germanico, e a rappresentante del germanismo o specificamente della poesia germanica, contrapposta alla latina o neolatina” (195). Like many German intellectuals, a number of Italians have in fact claimed Shakespeare as their own. While Germans tended to concentrate on their assumed superior understanding of Shakespeare, numerous Italians pointed to the supposed Italian identity of Shakespeare, noting the abundance of Italian locations, sources, and themes in his plays. The narrator of Svevo’s “Una burla riuscita” alludes to the Italian inspiration, Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio’s Hecatomithi, for Othello: “Vero è che se ne parla di più se la raccontò un uomo come Shakespeare, ma dicesi che anche prima di lui si parlassero molto di quella fatta da Jago” (Racconti 217).

Francesco De Sanctis’s Storia della letteratura italiana, which Svevo read in his exploration of Italian literature, references several Italian works Shakespeare drew upon, such as those of Cinzio and Pietro Aretino. De Lorenzo’s “Shakespeare e l’Italia” (1916) lists thirteen Shakespeare plays as works that are “fondamentalmente italiani” (2), a much higher number — the critic asserts — than any other country, outside England.

In Shakespeare and Italy, Ernesto Grillo claims, “There is no poet, with the exception of Dante, who has loved our land more ardently than the great English dramatist” (97). Grillo also extols Italy’s early discovery of Shakespeare in comparison with that of other nations, such as France (99). The discovery of Shakespeare becomes a point of national pride, demonstrating that Shakespeare was a part of one’s own national tradition before he became part of someone else’s. Shakespeare’s reception exemplifies a need to make great literature one’s

42 For more on the nationalizing of Shakespeare, see Delabastita, De Vos and Franssen; Hortmann; Korte and Spittel; Newman 136-49.  
43 Renowned Shakespeare translator, Diego Angeli (Bevington 383), discusses his own identification with Midsummer in his introduction to Tempesta (1911): “C’è stata un’epoca della vita mia in cui sono stato innamorato di Titania.” Angeli describes searching for the comedy’s Fairy Queen among the rocks of Tuscany and he is not the last person to look for Shakespeare and his characters in Italy. Richard Paul Roe even proposes that the Athens of A Midsummer Night’s Dream refers to the Italian town Sabbioneta, “La piccola Atena” (183-86).  
44 See Bertoni (Racconti) and Martínez Garrido for the relationship between Svevo’s work and Othello.  
45 For more on Shakespeare’s Italian sources, see Marrapodi.  
46 Even the Futurists, who were against Shakespeare and other canonical writers, did not propose to destroy him completely. In “Varietà del teatro,” F. T. Marinetti offers the suggestion: “Ridurre tutto Shakespeare ad un solo atto” (264).
own, which for some includes its nationalization or naturalization. This desire to place authors firmly within their national traditions helps to explain why Svevo and Shakespeare have not been studied together more often, despite Svevo’s comments about the importance of Shakespeare to him: discussing Svevo’s relationship with Shakespeare highlights Svevo’s European background over his belonging to any specific national tradition.\(^47\) The focus on national identity not only obscured Shakespeare’s early reception, but also continues to obscure Shakespeare’s reception in the life of a multilingual author like Svevo, who grew up in Austro-Hungarian Trieste, attended school in Germany, traveled to England for business, had Joyce as a tutor, married a woman who often wrote him in French, and died in Italy.

Another reason for the relative scarcity of work on Svevo and Shakespeare is Svevo’s uncertain fame.\(^48\) Unlike that of other modern authors such as Kafka, Svevo’s place in the world arena remains unclear. If Kafka had made half the comments about Shakespeare that Svevo did, someone would have written a monograph on Kafka and Shakespeare years ago. Starting in the 1920s, comparisons of Svevo and other authors tended to help bolster Svevo’s fame and were not necessarily based on Svevo’s own work. Early twentieth-century French intellectuals perhaps saw calling Svevo “Italy’s Proust” one of the best ways to point to Svevo’s strengths, but Svevo himself was confused by the description (Veneziani Svevo 126). Discussions of Shakespeare and Svevo, meanwhile, link Svevo with an author he loved, “una delle maggiori scoperte di Svevo” (Camerino, “Svevo e il teatro di prosa” 77), and with whom Svevo felt a kinship so close that he presented himself as the English author, albeit playfully.

“The fierce vexation of a dream”: La rigenerazione and Midsummer
This essay proposes to take Svevo’s Shakespearean roots seriously by examining what many consider Svevo’s best play, La rigenerazione, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.\(^49\) Again revealing that writing drama occupied him his entire life, the title of La rigenerazione, which Svevo worked on during the last years of his life, derives from a non-extant play Svevo was working on around 1881.\(^50\) While Svevo was gratified that his novels began to receive

\(^{47}\) Newman has drawn attention to how the focus on a national Shakespeare has caused scholars to overlook how Shakespeare’s reception was multilingual before modern nation-states existed. Newman quotes, for instance, Maurice Morgan who celebrated Shakespeare as “the patron spirit of world empire on which the sun will never set” (137).

\(^{48}\) For instance, Pirandello, not Svevo, makes it into the latest edition of the Norton Anthology of World Literature as an example of Italian modernism.

\(^{49}\) By comparing Svevo’s La rigenerazione to A Midsummer Night’s Dream, this essay aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship, like that of Cristina Benussi and Paolo Puppa, which explores the richness of Svevo’s dramatic work.

\(^{50}\) See Di Biase, Diary (58-9) for Svevo’s note; see also Cavaglion (173). For more information on the dating, see Bertoni (1473-83).
international attention at the end of his life, much of his dramatic work — according to his wife “il primo dei suoi sogni artistici” (Veneziani Svevo 151) — was left unpublished until Umbro Apollonio’s 1960 collection of Svevo’s plays. In comparison with the status of his novels, that of Svevo’s theater remains even more uncertain, a “‘caso’ all’interno del ‘caso Svevo’” (Kezich, “Sfortune” 158). An examination of Shakespeare’s and Svevo’s plays may have in part been avoided in order not to do Svevo a disservice. For years, studies of Svevo’s theater, in fact, focused on the debatable quality of his plays, or which of the plays deserved attention at all. While both A Midsummer Night’s Dream and La rigenerazione have been considered extremely literary and unstageable, in part because of their large cast of characters, the debate about the stageability of Svevo’s play continues.51

Discussing Midsummer and La rigenerazione together underscores innovative elements of Svevo’s play, particularly in terms of his representation of dreams. This essay explores the importance of the similarities between the two plays’ depictions of the power of dreams to change reality and of reality to seem like a dream. Although problems of perception and self-delusion are dominant themes in all of Svevo’s works, La rigenerazione uses theatrical devices that alter perception in order to explore the complexity of comprehending reality. The meta-theatricality of both Midsummer and La rigenerazione draws attention to how literature can not only reflect dreams, but also shape life.

Before exploring this complexity of perception in these two plays, it will be useful to provide brief summaries of them. The three dreams of La rigenerazione, labeled “Il sogno,” “Intermezzo,” and “Sogno,” structure the play’s representation and provide ambiguous scenes for interpretation. Since the reader or viewer of La rigenerazione can construe the dreamer’s feelings without the character directly stating them, Svevo’s complex depiction of dreams solves a problem critics have noted in Svevo’s earlier theatrical works, namely, that his characters explain their motivations too obviously.52 Following

51 “The idea that Shakespeare’s plays are more suitable to private reading will be repeated by many a great critic for many years to come all over Europe” (Gibinska 60-61). William Hazlitt remarked, “The Midsummer Night’s Dream, when acted, is converted from a delightful fiction to a dull pantomime. All that is finest in the play is lost in the representation” (247). Critics also differ in how performable they believe Svevo’s plays to be: “È parimenti noto che solo alcune regie ‘critiche’ recenti hanno vinto, felicemente, la vecchia scommessa della non-rappresentabilità dell’operato sveviano” (Gasparro 100). For more on the history of the appreciation of La rigenerazione, see Kezich, “Sfortune”: “Man mano che il tempo passa lo stupendo copione di La rigenerazione cresce non solo nella stima degli svevologi, ma anche in quella dei cultori di teatro” (173).

52 In large part due to the depiction of dreams, the play also represents time in an innovative way, a topic Rimini and Bonardi (65) comment upon and Benussi explores in detail (La forma della forme 225-36).
the first act, in which Guido suggests to his uncle that he should get a rejuvenation operation, Giovanni then dreams he is having the procedure. Act two begins with Giovanni actually having had the operation, but its effects are ambiguous, as even the stage directions suggest:


(Teatro e saggi 697)

Giovanni may be dressed better, but he is “invecchiato” again before he speaks. Giovanni, who believes he has been somehow rejuvenated by the operation, pursues the servant girl Rita as a test of his newfound youth. Before he can experiment with his desire, an inebriated Giovanni falls asleep next to the girl, who is also drunk. Giovanni then dreams that he promises Rita to kill his wife, Anna. In the third act, characters discuss what may have occurred between Rita and Giovanni and the effects of Giovanni’s operation. Finally, Giovanni dreams about accepting old age and resigning himself to a marriage without desire.

Unlike many comedies, both *Midsummer* and *La rigenerazione* question the possibility that marriage can provide a happy ending. Potentially forced upon the characters, marriage at times appears insufferable in both plays. *La rigenerazione* alludes to questionable reasons for being and getting married. The play does not provide a clear answer to the issue of what binds the long married Giovanni and Anna together. Emma initially resists Enrico’s advances, which appear especially off-putting given that he openly declares to have loved her even before her husband, his friend, died. By the end of the play, however, the widow considers his proposal, at one point so that she can escape her father. Fortunato, the chauffeur, wavers between wanting to marry Rita and not, unsure of her fidelity. The idea of these characters’ marriages is complicated and not purely felicitous, in large part because of the characters’ inconsistencies.

The many marriages in Shakespeare’s play also offer an ambiguous portrayal of the institution. Oberon, the king of the fairies, desires his queen’s “lovely boy” for himself and, with the help of his jester Puck, causes Queen Titania to desire Bottom, a member of a group of amateur actors, in revenge. Titania’s first lines, addressed in the presence of her “lord” are, “What jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip hence. / I have forsworn his bed and company” (II.i.61-62). Egeus asks Duke Theseus to command his daughter Hermia to marry Demetrius, 

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53 Discussing *Midsummer*, Anne Barton argues, “Unlike characters in a fairy-tale, Theseus and Hippolyta, Demetrius and Helena, Lysander and Hermia cannot live happily ever after. Only the qualified immortality to be obtained through offspring is available to them” (220).
although she desires Lysander. Helen pursues Demetrius, despite his affection for Hermia.

The plays’ many characters falling in and out of love indicate the subjectivity of desire, which points to the complexity of perception, belief, and judgment.\textsuperscript{54} At the end of \textit{Midsummer} all seems resolved since Puck has caused Demetrius to fall in love with Helen, and Lysander and Hermia can therefore marry with the duke’s permission. While magic helps bring about the happy accord, Demetrius had also loved Helen earlier and his inconsistency, be it due to magic, dreams, or caprice, underscores the instability of perception. Earlier in the play Helen emphasized the subjectivity of Demetrius’s preference for Hermia: “Through Athens I am thought as fair as she, / But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so; / He will not know what all but he do know” (I.i.227-229). Helen comments that public opinion makes no difference to Demetrius, since he only knows what he knows.

Underscoring the ambiguity of seeing and the corresponding arbitrariness of judgment, Hermia meanwhile highlights the unfairness of having to adhere to her father’s point of view when it comes to her choice of husband: “I would my father looked but with my eyes” (I.i.56). Similarly, in \textit{La rigenerazione}, characters lament that the others do not understand their perspective. From the beginning, Anna complains that no one cares about animals as she does and therefore cannot understand her worldview, while Emma talks constantly about how no one mourns her deceased husband, Valentino, as they should and therefore reveal themselves to be unsympathetic. Throughout the play characters in fact suggest that Emma should readjust her point of view. In \textit{Midsummer}, Theseus’s response to Hermia points to the possibility, and sometimes necessity, of changing one’s perception to satisfy social expectations: “Rather your eyes must with his judgement look” (I.i.57). Both plays in part explore how imagination is crucial in bridging or overcoming the frequent disparity between one’s own vision and society’s.

The strange transformations in both plays push the limits of what is considered acceptable in society and therefore of what can be accepted as real. In \textit{La rigenerazione} the passing love of an old man, who believes he is young, for a much younger servant girl seems so improper that many of the characters do not believe it possible. Characters comment on the disgust that both sides of the hypothetical match should have for each other: Rita expresses an aversion to Giovanni because of his physical decrepitude, “Schifoso! in bocca! Con quella bocca sdentata!” (698), while Fortunato describes Giovanni’s assumed dislike of Rita because of her lack of worldliness, “È una cosa credibile? Lei, signore, passerebbe il Suo tempo con una fanciulla una bambina che non sa dire niente?”

\textsuperscript{54} “The only constant element in the configuration is the convergence of more than one desire on a single object, as if perpetual rivalries were more important to the four characters than their changing pretexts” (Girard 190).
Giovanni, meanwhile, convinced (or hoping to convince himself) that his operation has worked, continues to pursue Rita. His new reality, while based on self-deception, is more powerful than social conventions or society’s version of reality.

Bottom, similarly, embraces his new reality as a man Titania desires. He gives orders to the fairy servants and, like Giovanni, not only accepts his new role, but also helps make it real by playing the part. At the same time, revealing once more the arbitrary nature of perception, Bottom sees just part of his new reality: he ignores that he has the head of an ass, even though his friends run away in fear on account of his transformation. When Bottom returns to normal, he again readjusts his understanding. The love of a queen for an actor with a head of an ass seems so unacceptable in retrospect that both Bottom and Titania believe that they dreamed the experience.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the levels of abstraction from reality through dreams, magic, fairies, and performance allow for playfulness with society’s structure and strictures. Likewise, the dreams and senility of Giovanni in *La rigenerazione* create a space in which the less conventional can be explored. Giovanni’s removal from reality helps him to imagine alternative models of society. As Claudio Magris has argued, “il vecchio è il grande anarchico in quanto, detronizzato dalla realtà, gioca con la sua facciata e si trincera in una stilizzazione della vita” (*Dietro* 120). For instance, Giovanni wants to pretend that Rita is the “padrona,” a *contessa*. When Rita resists Giovanni’s request because it seems unnatural, Giovanni responds, “Tu non lo sai, ma si può pensare tutto a questo mondo. Basta volere e si può credere che il polo nord sia andato al polo sud” (727). For Giovanni, imagination can completely reconfigure society. In *Midsummer* Theseus similarly observes how madmen, lovers, and poets all have the imagination to transform and reverse reality: “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (V.i.7-8). To ignore society or write literature requires the ability to see beyond the accepted perception. Commenting specifically on poets, Theseus remarks,

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.

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55 Giovanni’s wife helps bring her husband and Rita together, believing her husband’s interest in the girl is innocent, while Rita’s fiancé refuses to believe his future wife’s account of Giovanni’s attempted seduction: “Come se il vecchio signore sarebbe disposto di perdere il suo tempo con una fantesca. Con quale scopo poi? A quell’età egli ha altri pensieri” (746).

56 Many of Svevo’s plays are considered more obvious critiques of society and its norms than his novels, as Weiss comments: “Svevo may be considered a proto-feminist in his plays — although not his novels — because he deals extensively with the position of women in society, considering them victims of a system ruled by a double standard” (*Svevo* 112).
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing,
A local habitation and a name.

(V.i.12-17)

A poet can create a reality, as Giovanni argues that anyone can reimagine the world. The lines between dream and waking, between literature or imagination and reality, are blurred in La rigenerazione and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Both plays suggest that dreams, literature, and imagination can create reality, or what is believed to be one’s waking state.57

Since the lovers’ tales result from their own experiences in the forest in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, what Theseus comments on as imagined folly has happened, but many of the characters cannot clearly distinguish between what they experienced in a dream and what in reality. Demetrius, for instance, asks, “Are you sure / That we are awake? It seems to me / That yet we sleep, we dream. Do you not think / The Duke was here, and bid us follow him?” (IV.i.192-94). The superficially happy endings of the play can occur in part because so many of the characters remain unsure of what truly took place. Dreams play an important role, in Shakespeare’s comedy as well as in Svevo’s, contributing not only to their resolution but also to their polysemy, for in both works, dreams cause confusion about the plays’ realities for the characters and even, at times, for the reader or viewer.58

La rigenerazione concludes with a dream that potentially provides a sense of closure not offered by the conscious action in the play. In Giovanni’s final dream he promises to dedicate himself to his wife and her animals, and the last lines of the play read,

Io ti amo. Amerò per amor tuo le tue bestie, i passeri, i gatti, i cani. E lavoro per te. Lavoro volentieri per te. Per onorare te salvo la gente e la nutro. Questo è il dovere di noi vecchi giovini.

(Teatro e saggi 767)

In the dream Giovanni seems to resign himself to living as an old man, accepting his role in life. He will no longer seek youth and imagines giving up desire, advancing the “dismal proposal of conjugal friendship” (Puppa, “Italo

57 Shakespeare’s and Svevo’s plays repeatedly ask which is more real, reality or dreams: “The whole question which is balanced, and balanced nobly and fairly, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, is whether the life of waking, or the life of vision, is the real life” (Chesterton 195).
58 “Any attempt to issue definitive pronouncements about A Midsummer Night’s Dream risks being baffled by an elusive doubleness and ambivalence that leave us feeling, as Puck’s Epilogue implies we should feel, much like the lovers and Bottom looking back on their mysterious experiences in the wood” (Calderwood xxvi).
Svevo, dramatist” 321), a life without desire. Giovanni had earlier contemplated how giving up sex would solve mankind’s problems, a solution that would ultimately lead to the end of humanity: “Un altro che ammazza la moglie. Il danno viene tutto dal sesso. Quanto migliori sarebbero gli uomini se non avessero sesso” (713). Giovanni’s proposed avoidance of sex and supposedly healthy dedication to animals, not to human society or creativity, ignores how living involves struggle, putting him in a long line of Svevo characters who reveal how, in Biasin’s words about literary disease, “real health is actually death” (80). Since he dreams the end to La rigenerazione, Giovanni only imagines this frightening closure and submission to animals. In the preceding dream he was determined to kill his wife, but remained harmless in his actions. The violent dream did not cause Giovanni to be violent on stage; it is thus left unclear whether the hypothetical end of Giovanni’s story is any more likely to come true than Zeno’s imagined apocalypse at the end of La coscienza di Zeno, which proposes a similarly frightening version of health.

*All the World’s a Dream*

Critics have also interpreted this final dream as quite real in that it reflects Giovanni’s future. P. N. Furbank, for instance, points out that “the only significant events take place in the old man’s dreams” (214). Dreamed action and real action seem reversed in Svevo’s play, raising the question of which one of the two is more important. *Midsummer* has likewise been interpreted as overturning the relationship between dreams and reality. Garber persuasively argues, “For *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a play consciously concerned with dreaming; it reverses the categories of reality and illusion, sleeping and waking, art and nature, to touch upon the central theme of the dream which is truer than reality” (*Dream* 59). The confusion over what has occurred, and whether what may have occurred matters, raises the question of what constitutes “real” life. Giovanni requests that his family not destroy his belief in his operation, which can be as real in life as it is in a dream if he perceives it to be so:

Certo, qui non vi possono essere dei dubbi. O l’operazione c’è o non c’è. Se c’è io debbo essere un altro di quello ch’ero e voi non potete ridere di me. Ed io mi sentivo un altro. Anche nel sogno, ma anche nella viva realtà con gli occhi aperti. Perché ridere? Distruggere tutto questo?

(*Teatro e saggi* 758)

59 See Gioanola’s discussion of the line “Il danno viene tutto dal sesso” in *Svevo’s story: io non sono colui che visse ma colui che descrissi* (151-62).

60 For more on health and disease in *La rigenerazione*, see Saccone (213-38).

61 Guidotti’s “Il personaggio di Zeno tra romanzo e teatro” deals extensively with the important commonalities between Zeno and Giovanni.
While Giovanni originally posits that there are two options, the operation happened or not, he soon complicates this by claiming that thinking it has happened is the same as if it actually did. The expression “con gli occhi aperti,” like the many references to eyes in *Midsummer*, draws attention to the difficulty of ever seeing clearly, as well as to the power of belief to influence perception.

The reality of the actions and conversations in *La rigenerazione* is often undercut. Giovanni comes onto the stage for the first time upset that his grandson Umbertino has been run over and perhaps decapitated: “Magari non lo fosse ma è vero, è proprio vero. Io lo vidi andare sotto a quelle ruote di ferro. (*Brivido*)” (*Teatro e saggi* 660). It turns out that the grandfather had misread the situation and that Umbertino remains unhurt. Giovanni did not truly “see” anything, or rather what Giovanni saw did not happen. Depending on how the play is staged or how the reader interprets Giovanni’s state of mind, the reader may, like Giovanni and most of the other characters, believe that Umbertino was killed, a depressing beginning for the drama. While it matters that Umbertino has not died, a turn of events that changes the play’s generic direction away from tragedy to comedy, neither Giovanni nor, in all likelihood, the reader completely sets aside the emotions felt at Umbertino’s believed demise: “Questa testina rotonda e ricciuta sotto ad una ruota. È naturale che quest’immagine non mi lasciò più” (674). Giovanni’s shocking, imagined experience of his decapitated grandson remains more vibrant and memorable than the event factually occurring in his life. After Giovanni’s confusion, it is also hard to trust any action that does not occur in front of the audience, or is explicitly marked as reality for the reader.62 Reality and dreams blend together in the play, especially since the reality is strange enough that the dreams do not seem entirely unrealistic.63

Opening with a strange scene involving the death of birds, *La rigenerazione* foregrounds the problems of perception from the beginning.64 Because of a mother bird’s confusion about the stability of the house shutters, the baby birds fall to the ground when Anna closes the shutters and are consequently eaten by a cat. Anna is horrified. While the episode reveals Anna’s love of animals, it also points out the crucial and deceiving nature of perception: “Perciò gli uccellini

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62 The play’s audience would have the additional problem of the dream sequences that may not be immediately recognizable as dreams since they have a great deal in common with the action of the play. As with *Midsummer*, much of the viewer’s sense of the action’s reality would depend on the staging. Svevo provided clear and interesting stage directions for the first two dreams, including the use of blue lights and the sound of snoring to mark the scenes as dreams.

63 Benussi points out the power of dreams to change the course of the play’s action.

64 For a discussion of the importance of the emphasis on death in this scene, see Bonardi 62-63. For their significance in understanding Anna’s character, I refer to Rimini (*La morte nel salotto* 184). For their relationship to Svevo’s depiction of animals more generally, see Bertoni (*Teatro e saggi* 1488).
credettero che la persiana fosse parte del muro” (Teatro e saggi 620). The birds’ lack of full understanding suggests that the humans in the play will face analogous difficulties and Giovanni’s later confusion about his grandson makes clear how human beings’ perception of reality often leads them similarly astray. As those of the mother bird, human instincts should not always be followed: “Però quella piccola madre ebbe l’istinto sbagliato. Come poté pensarsi di fare il nido fra la persiana e il muro?” (Teatro e saggi 620). The play establishes the need to check one version of reality against another, or potentially face death.

The birds’ confusion about the difference between the shutters and the wall also points to the fictiveness of the play’s performance itself. The shutters suggest the tenuousness of the “fourth wall” of theatrical representation. The birds misunderstood what is moveable, or staged, and what is unchangeably real. Shakespeare’s comedy also contains many scenes that highlight its own theatricality, as Bevington writes: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream (c. 1595) is justly famous for its meta-theatrical calling attention to its own theatrical devices” (45). The many dreams in La rigenerazione and Midsummer emphasize the plays’ theatricality, since the dreams’ fictitiousness can be read as alluding to the fictitiousness of the plays themselves. The last act of Midsummer contains a play in which Snug warns the audience not to be afraid when he plays the part of the lion:

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You ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creepes on floor,
May now perchance, both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
Then know that I as Snug the joiner am
A lion fell, nor else no lion’s dam;
For if I should as lion come in strife
Into this place, ‘twere pity on my life.
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(V.i.214-21)

If Snug were not just acting, he would be afraid of himself; and his speech makes clear to the on-stage audience that he is performing and calls the attention of the off-stage audience to the theatricality of the entire play. Freud discusses this moment in The Interpretation of Dreams: “Dieser Löwe ist also vergleichbar dem Löwen im Sommernachtstraum, der sich als Schnock, der Schreiner, demaskiert, und so sind alle Traumlöwen, vor denen man sich nicht fürchtet” (270) (“This lion is, therefore, like the lion in A Midsummer Night’s Dream who is unmasked as Snug the joiner; and of such stuff are all the dream-lions of which one is not afraid” (325)). As Snug is the reality behind the performing lion, so in dreams friendly lions represent something else. Freud’s

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65 Pirandello, author of several famously meta-theatrical works, draws on Midsummer in I giganti della montagna (Puppa, “I giganti della montagna”).
analysis emphasizes the intertwining of reality, dream, and literature that Shakespeare’s play explores.

Like Snug, Snout explains his role in the play, that of a wall. Not only does Snout announce that he is playing a wall, but when audience member Theseus kiddingly mentions that the wall should curse, Bottom responds from the stage: “No, in truth sir, he should not. ‘Deceiving me’ is Thisbe’s cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see — it will fall pat as I told you” (V.i.182-85). Bottom breaks the fourth wall on stage to discuss an actor playing a wall. The actors playing lovers speak through a chink in the wall that Snout makes with his hand, an interaction that ultimately leads to death. In Midsummer and La rigenerazione the deaths due to moving walls are not necessarily tragic: in Shakespeare’s work the deaths are performed in a play; in Svevo’s, animals, not humans, die. Perhaps more humorous than tragic, these deaths nonetheless highlight the dangers of faulty perception through metatheatrical devices.

Within La rigenerazione there are several staged performances. Giovanni, for instance, carefully stages his kiss with the servant girl Rita, revealing that the kiss is an enactment of what Giovanni believes his desire should look like, rather than an action springing from desire:

(sì guarda intorno) Mi pare benissimo tutto. (s’accosta in punta di piedi molto malsicuro a Renata e vede la flanella) Via quella pezzuola. Quella è destinata alle maniglie. (Renata la lascia cadere a terra e mette la mano sulla bocca) Più naturale, te ne prego. Sdraiati come se tu fossi in un letto. Così! Scusa se adesso aspetto un poco per pensarci. Come si può rubare un bacio se si dovette prima prepararlo, confezionarlo. (siede su una sedia, si copre gli occhi e pensa per qualche istante, poi s’avanza verso Renata e si china a darle un bacio sulla guancia) Oh, Pauletta! (Teatro e saggi 726)

Giovanni thoughtfully prepares the scene, removing unnecessary “props” and providing stage directions, including to act “naturally.” He even complains that he has to stage the scene, an intent emphasized by his use of “prepararlo, confezionarlo.” Finally, he calls Rita by another name, establishing that he sees the woman as fulfilling a constructed role. While plays within plays, and characters acting a part in them, have a long history, the impossibility of distinguishing Giovanni from a part he is acting raises the modern question of whether there is ever an instance when we are not performing ourselves — an issue similar to that permeating La coscienza di Zeno, which not only depends on an unreliable narrator, but also asks whether a reliable narrator is possible at all.

Giovanni is not the only character of La rigenerazione who blurs the line between performance and life. When counseled to slowly alert others to the fact that he is alive, Umbertino wonders about staging his own post-death appearance, suggesting that he could dress up as a ghost: “Anche la nonna mi
credeva morto? Vuoi che m’involga in un lenzuolo e le apparisca come uno spirito?” (667). This line points to the difference between evoking death and having the dead appear on stage, since imagining a boy’s death or seeing a ghost have distinct effects. The power of Giovanni’s image of Umbertino’s death contrasts with the farcical idea of putting on a sheet and pretending to be a ghost. Similarly, the disparity between imagination and appearance in _Midsummer_ is another reason critics have posited that the play should be read, rather than performed, as Hazlitt, for instance, suggests: “Thus Bottom’s head in the play is a fantastic illusion, produced by magic spells; on the stage it is an ass’s head, and nothing more” (248). Some critics believe that in viewing the fanciful, the fancy is lost.

Svevo’s interest in the problems of staging the fantastical are revealed by the subtitle of another of his plays, the only one performed in his lifetime, _Terzetto spezzato_. _Una fantasia in un atto_. In _Terzetto spezzato_ Umbertino’s joke becomes reality when a widower and his wife’s clandestine lover summon the dead, beloved woman, to them. The unusual nature of Clelia’s appearance is made more bizarre by the men’s requests of the departed to give them practical career help. The play’s subtitle, _Una fantasia in un atto_, indicates that the play is most likely not an attempt to represent reality accurately, whether the title points to Svevo’s own “fantasia” or to the notion that the strangeness of the play’s actions should be viewed as “fantasia,” as a dream. Beno Weiss has interpreted the entire play as existing in a dream state: “By imitating the logic of dreams, Svevo is free to mix fantasy and reality through the means of absurdity in a vision in which the one integrating factor occurs in the reader’s mind” (“Terzetto” 220). The audience or reader has to make sense of the weird on-stage actions, as one would a dream.

In part due to its title, _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ has a long history of being interpreted as a dream, perhaps most famously by Samuel Coleridge, who wrote, “I am convinced that Shakespeare availed himself of the title of the play in his own mind as a dream throughout” (252). The idea that the entire play could be a dream is, furthermore, suggested by a character within the play. At

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66 Barilli writes on this matter: “Terzetto spezzato, come tutto il teatro di Svevo (e anche di Pirandello), parte da situazioni ‘borghesi’, ma esasperandole, portandole al paradosso. Qui siamo al banale triangolo marito-moglie-amante, ‘spezzato’ però dal fatto che la moglie è morta e ritorna in spirito” (84).

67 Guidotti connects _La rigenerazione_ and _Terzetto spezzato_ together because they both center on “esperimenti” (_Zeno e i suoi doppi_ 139), one on a rejuvenating operation and the other on bringing a woman back from the dead.

68 The centrality of “fantasia” for understanding _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ has also been noted: “Questo dramma è una piccola costruzione dedicata alla Fantasia, il Tempietto del Sogno” (Olivero, “Sul Midsummer Night’s Dream di William Shakespeare” 4).
the end of *Midsummer* Puck proposes that the audience may have dreamed the play:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream,  
Gentles do no reprehend:  
If you pardon, we will mend.  

(V.i.409-16)

Puck’s closing words connect literature to dreams, suggesting they can have the same unsettling effect and be similarly interpreted. In addition, believing something viewed in life or on stage was a dream can make it understandable. Bottom wants to turn his incomprehensible experience with Titania, which he believes was a dream, into literature: “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’, because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke” (IV.i.212-17). The play reveals how things that do not fit into one’s worldview become art and that literature, like dreams, is a way to explore what is not openly permissible in life. While the characters’ experiences in *Midsummer* and *La rigenerazione* raise questions about whether lived or dreamed experience is more significant, *Midsummer* and *Terzetto spezzato* interrogate the difference between believing that a work of art represents a dream or reality. Both Shakespeare and Svevo suggest the power of dreams and literature to understand and shape lived experience. Svevo’s literarization of life and use of dreams are topics of much important critical exploration, with frequent emphasis on the significance of Freud and Svevo’s modern sensibility for his depictions. Putting Shakespeare and Svevo in dialogue with one another shows how Svevo is at the same time grappling with age-old questions, including the meaning of literature and problems of perception. Furthermore, the comparison of their plays reveals how *La rigenerazione*’s portrayal of ambiguity and perception not only echoes those

69 McLuskie writes, “After his experiences with the Fairy Queen, Bottom assumes that he has been dreaming. He is quite unable to provide a coherent account of the events of his ‘dream,’ but sees the potential for transformation into art” (*Reading Dreams* 153).

70 In reference to *Midsummer*, Garber observes, “The act of artistic creation, so clearly a conscious parallel to the subconscious activities of memory and imagination, is now brought before our eyes directly in a series of fictional artifacts: a sampler, a ballad, and a play. The availability of art as an ultimate form of transformation, a palpable marriage of dream and reason, emerges as a logical extension of the recognized dream state” (*Dream* 77).
in *La coscienza di Zeno*, but also how Svevo uses traditional and modern metatheatrical devices to create ambiguity on the stage.

**Becoming World Literature**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is often considered one of Shakespeare’s most original plays and one of the few for which he invented the plot, although a number of sources, from Ovid to contemporary folktales, have been identified as significant sources for the play’s conception. Because Shakespeare represents fairies on his stage, critics have argued about the extent of the playwright’s own belief in them, pointing out his ingenuity in employing folkloric “elements that had hardly appeared in literature before his time” (Briggs 45).  

*La rigenerazione* likewise engages contemporary ideas, particularly about science, to explore the relationship between fantasy, belief, and reality. Critics have proposed that the medical operation that occurs in *La rigenerazione* was inspired by early twentieth-century experiments that involved transplanting genital glands from monkeys to achieve rejuvenation. The ultimately failed rejuvenation of Giovanni can also be read as a critique of the power of psychoanalysis to heal (Magris, *Dietro* 121). As critics have noted, Svevo felt that psychoanalysis was more important as a source of inspiration for authors than as an actual cure. In *La rigenerazione* Svevo engages contemporary ideas about science, as well as a rich European literary tradition that includes Shakespeare, to offer a provocative play about the power of perception.

Giovanni argues, “Ciò non importa perché io non ti parlo perché tu intenda. Io sto costruendo il mio mondo; quest’è l’importante” (727). It is less important to Giovanni whether the operation was successful or if anyone believes him, than how he can use his perception to “create his own world.” Svevo’s play reveals the power of imagination, and therefore of literature, to reshape the world.

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71 In the early twentieth century the debate over Shakespeare’s belief in fairies was the subject of numerous studies, for instance Rohde 43; Latham 221. More recently Michael Hattaway has argued against these lines of inquiry (26), claiming that the question of what Shakespeare thought is unproductive. Regardless of Shakespeare’s personal credence, *Midsummer* draws on contemporary beliefs to explore problems of perception while remaining a provocative, powerful play even today, when the idea of the reality of fairies has long ceased to be a topic of common discussion.

72 Just the title of *Le teorie del conte Alberto* points to how important scientific thought experiments were to Svevo’s dramatic ideas.

73 “It is most likely the Voronoff cure that attracted great publicity in the Triestine press of the period. Serge Voronoff (1866-951) was a Russian physician and biologist known for his experiments on rejuvenation by means of transplanting genital glands from monkeys” (Weiss, *Italo Svevo* 152).

74 Svevo’s *Profilo autobiografico* emphasizes the significance of scientific theories, which may seem to be true, for literature and creativity: “Il secondo avvenimento letterario e che allo Svevo parve allora scientifico fu l’incontro con le opere del Freud” (*Racconti* 809).
world. This power to reshape the world, or at least our understanding of it, is one of the qualities that define a writer’s work as world literature. Another of those qualities, and perhaps the most salient of them, is the writer’s ability to influence other writers, thinkers, and artists. For instance, the remarkable significance of just one of Shakespeare’s plays to Freud, Wagner, Ibsen and Goethe — who were among Svevo’s sources for La rigenerazione — demonstrates the depth of the Bard’s power to inspire.

Svevo has also inspired a wide range of modern authors. James Joyce championed Svevo in the 1920s and Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s press published Svevo’s The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl in 1930. More recently, J. M. Coetzee has written about Svevo’s importance and Paul Auster mentions Svevo’s later two novels in Brooklyn Follies. Since Svevo — as Weiss writes — is “widely recognized as one of the initiators of the modern European novel” (“Terzetto” 21), it is surprising that he — unlike Joyce, Woolf, and Coetzee or Manzoni, D’Annunzio, and Calvino — is not referenced once in The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists (2012). Svevo’s exclusion from this volume may be related to the two reasons previously mentioned in the discussion of why Shakespeare and Svevo have not been compared more often: first, Svevo’s evolving fame and, second, the question of what being European means, since most modern authors are more frequently analyzed within the confines of national traditions. These two reasons are closely linked, since critics at times emphasize Svevo as “European” rather than “Italian” to draw attention to his importance. 75 In many cases, being called European has less to do with an author’s sources or education, and more to do with the author’s relative importance or alleged representativeness of his or her time.

Claudio Magris characterizes Svevo as an author whose “grandezza è una scoperta che non è ancora compiuta” (“Italo Svevo”). For a long time efforts to situate Svevo within a national tradition also related to his position — still to be fully and firmly established — within the literary canon. There was a sense that an author had not made it until she or he had made it at home, with home being considered his or her nation. Eugenio Montale even suggested that Italy needed to rescue Svevo from world literature: “Si può pensare che in Italia la sua fama, sempre crescente, sia appena cominciata. Del resto un importante lavoro critico lo ha riportato dall’ambiguo mondo della Weltliteratur a quella della nostra più alta letteratura nazionale” (175). For Montale, considering Svevo within the scope of Weltliteratur, rather than as an Italian, might cause the Triestine to be lost and remain understudied in his own country.

75 Knaller comments, “A partire dagli anni sessanta, dalla revisione del caso Svevo, la reputazione dell’autore triestino è cambiata da quella di un emarginato della letteratura italiana in una di un autore modello della modernità europea, citato accanto a James Joyce e Marcel Proust” (47).
To be considered a European author can be a step toward becoming a world author, a reputation due in large part to the debated “slippage” (Dainotto 124) between the two terms. Much like the city of his birth, Trieste, Svevo’s importance varies considerably depending on the national, transnational, or international perspective. Some studies of European literature point to Svevo (and to Trieste in general) as a source of major significance, but other studies overlook him (and his city) completely. Over fifty years after Montale made his statement about Svevo and world literature, Svevo’s role in the Italian, European, and world literary landscapes is still undecided. While critics have avoided comparing Svevo with Shakespeare partly because of Svevo’s uncertain status, especially in terms of his drama, I suggest that such a juxtaposition can in fact shed light on the power and complexity of Svevo’s theatrical representations. A comparison of Svevo’s and Shakespeare’s plays reveals how Svevo drew upon a wide range of authors in writing his thought-provoking play, while also showing the extent to which Svevo adds to this tradition with his innovative representation of dreams and the complexity of perception. Because of Svevo’s extensive engagement with this literary tradition and, at the same time, his creativity in constructing a recognizably modern drama, his importance goes beyond his moment. More than just an interesting instance of the use of psychoanalysis in literature or a parody of contemporary science, Svevo’s La rigenerazione offers a significant example of European drama, written in Italian.

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76 See Dainotto on the complex relationship between “European literature” and “world literature.”


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