ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES 22

Giraffes in the Garden of Italian Literature

Modernist Embodiment in Italo Svevo, Federigo Tozzi and Carlo Emilio Gadda

Deborah Amberson

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Italian Perspectives 22
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge
2012

First published 2012

Published by the
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

LEGENDA is an imprint of the
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

ISBN 978-1-907975-26-4 (hbk)

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for Bob, my father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Many people have helped in the writing of this book. Special thanks, however, are due to Elena Past for her encouragement and her invaluable comments on previous drafts of this text. I am also indebted to Millicent Marcus, my doctoral dissertation supervisor at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank friends and colleagues at the University of Florida for their advice and support. Special mention must go to my friend Gianfranco Balestriere and I thank Dragan Kujundzic, Carol Murphy, Sherrie Nunn, Martin Sorbille, Mary Watt, and Brigitte Weltman-Aron.

I am grateful to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida for providing a Humanities Scholarship Enhancement grant which allowed me to carry out research for this book. Gratitude is also due to Dr Graham Nelson, Managing Editor of Legenda, and to Professor Simon Gilson and Professor Zygmunt Barański, Editor and former Editor of the 'Italian Perspectives' series.

Chapters 2 and 4 include revised elements of articles published in *Forum italicum* 39, 2 (2005): 441-460 and *MLN* 123, 1 (2008): 22-39. My thanks go to the editors of these journals for allowing me to incorporate the updated sections of this material.

Finally, I thank friends who have provided support in a variety of ways, especially Silvia Carlorosi, Francesco Caruso, Fabiana Cecchini, Chris Cook, Ellie Laughlin, Joshua McWilliams, and Mike Volk. I also express my love and gratitude to my mother, Bernie, and my brother and sister, Alex and Jessica, for their support and continued encouragement.

D.A, July 2011

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INTRODUCTION

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Three Giraffes in Italy's Literary Garden

Writing to Bonaventura Tecchi in March of 1926, Carlo Emilio Gadda describes his peculiar status within the Italian literary community as that of a kangaroo or a giraffe: 'Come soggetto strano, come giraffa o canguro del vostro bel giardino: ecco quel che posso valere' [Like a strange character, like a giraffe or a kangaroo in your beautiful garden: this is what I can be].[1] What is striking about Gadda's choice is not so much the undeniably non-Italian nature of the giraffe and the kangaroo but, rather, the somewhat ungainly physicality of both animals. The enormously long neck of the giraffe and the hopping gait of the kangaroo make it impossible to conceive of the animal without thinking of its material body. This cannot be said, for example, of the equally 'exotic' parrot who can be conceived in terms of vibrant colours abstracted from the materiality of the bird. Gadda selects animals that simply cannot be disentangled from their rather inharmonious physicality. In highlighting this insistent materiality, Gadda also designates his central concerns, as his writing, in fact, revolves around a defining nexus of body, subjectivity and style. In other words, Gadda returns insistently to the relation between human subjectivity and embodiment, and he develops a style that performs his vision of human material embodiment. A similar attention to body, subjectivity and style informs the writing of Italo Svevo and Federigo Tozzi, authors whose writing is marked by the same supposed peculiarity that characterizes Gadda's work. In short, it seems that Gadda was not the only giraffe wandering through the harmonious literary Italian garden. *Giraffes in the Garden of Italian Literature* investigates this central nexus in the work of Svevo, Tozzi and Gadda and considers it as evidence of a programmatic attempt to renegotiate human embodiment in order to validate an alternate space of lived corporeality, an authorial agenda that locates these giraffes squarely in the ambit of modernism.

Beyond their mutual attention to questions of embodied identity, Svevo, Tozzi and Gadda are also bound by the nature of their reception within Italian literary-critical circles, a reception that already suggests their status as 'giraffes'. Indeed, in the case of each author, we note a somewhat arduous or circuitous route toward critical acclaim or recognition. Each of the authors seemed initially to stump the Italian critical establishment, and to generate a variety of responses that ranged from an initial disregard with respect to Svevo, to misrecognition and misclassification of Tozzi, and, in the case of Gadda, a continued emphasis on the curious novelty of his work. Accordingly, after a life spent in laborious and frustrated pursuit of critical acclaim, Svevo achieved enthusiastic recognition both in and beyond Italy

in the final decade of his life. Tozzi's fate at the hands of the critics manifests the most variable and even contradictory itinerary as he was classified and re-classified by successive generations of Italian critics. Gadda was recognized throughout his writing career as a novel and strange author who shared much with stylistic currents and practices of a literary past. Despite this curious status, Gadda achieved what might be described as overnight cult status late in his career when he was embraced by the writers of the Italian *neoavanguardia* in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Turning initially to the details of Svevo's laboured journey to critical acclaim, we must address the 'caso Svevo' [Svevo case], the term applied to the sudden literary celebrity achieved by the author in his sixties. Svevo had, in fact, published two novels in the 1890s, *Una vita* (1892) and *Senilità* (1898). However, beyond a small number of somewhat unflattering reviews, these novels passed almost entirely unnoticed.[2] In the face of a total lack of critical acclaim, Svevo appeared to abandon his literary activities following the publication of *Senilità*. This renunciation, as well as his disillusionment with literature, is made clear in the pages of his diary: 'Io, a quest'ora e definitivamente ho eliminato dalla mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura' [I have now and forever eliminated from my life that ridiculous and noxious thing called literature].[3] Yet Svevo's withdrawal from the field of literature was not definitive. He began working on *La coscienza di Zeno* in early 1919 and the novel was published in May 1923.[4] Initially the novel prompted little critical attention.[5] Svevo shared his despair with his friend James Joyce who responded with reassurances about the quality of the work: 'Perché si dispera? Deve sapere ch'è di gran lunga il suo migliore libro' [Why do you despair? You must know that this is your best book by far].[6] Joyce's support, however, was more than moral and, in fact, in the same letter, he recommended that Svevo send copies of the novel to Valery Larbaud, Benjamin Crémieux, T. S. Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford, critics and writers with whom Joyce planned to intercede on Svevo's behalf. The response on the part of Larbaud and Crémieux was enthusiastic. Larbaud wrote to Svevo in January 1925 praising his work and requesting copies of his other two novels. In effect, this attention in French literary circles marks the beginning of the 'caso Svevo'. Just over a year later, in February 1926, Larbaud and Crémieux edited a special edition of the French literary journal *Le Navire d'Argent*, dedicated to the work of Svevo. In these pages, Crémieux heralds the unknown Svevo as the first and only analytical novelist produced by contemporary Italy (Ghidetti, 19).

While Svevo was being 'discovered' in France, a young Eugenio Montale committed himself to publicizing the author's work in literary-critical circles. Having obtained copies of Svevo's three novels thanks to a mutual friend, Roberto Bazlen, Montale published his 'Omaggio a Svevo' in December 1925 in the Milanese paper *L'Esame*. In this short article, Montale describes the nascent French admiration for an Italian author who, he writes, is possessed of a 'forza spontanea e sincera' [spontaneous and sincere force].[7] Further attention followed. Writing in *L'Ambrosiano* in February 1926, Giuseppe Prezzolini recognized the value of Svevo who, though challenged stylistically, manifests the 'coraggio di guardare nell'uomo quotidiano e comune, con una spaventosa illuminazione' [courage to consider quotidian and common man, with a frightening illumination].[8] Critical debate continued after

Svevo's death in September 1928.[9] Giacomo Debenedetti's 1929 article 'Svevo e Schmitz' is of particular importance here, as the Turinese critic underlines the problematic status of Svevo's Italian identity.[10] In his reflections on the 'caso Svevo', the critic describes a process of legitimization of the Triestine author, a process that he compares with the preparation of an official membership or identity card (Debenedetti, 28).[11] Svevo himself was fully and humorously aware of his status, as he makes clear when, writing to Crémieux in May 1928, he compares his acceptance in Italian literary circles with the introduction of a 'pezzo d'aglio nella cucina di gente che non ne vogliono sapere' [piece of garlic into the kitchen of people who wish to know nothing about it (Svevo, 1966, 874)]. Though Svevo's self-characterization does not suggest the same resolute materiality of Gadda's giraffe, the reference to garlic suggests the body in its insistence on a sensory intensity that contrasts meaningfully with the supposed decorum, grace and measure of Italian literary tastes.

Tozzi criticism has manifested a very curious evolution that saw the author described as everything from a naturalist to an expressionist, from an a-ideological author to a conservative Catholic and, finally, from an intellectually naïf narrator to an erudite student of modern psychology. Turning initially to what might be termed the naturalist phase of Tozzi criticism, we must start with Giuseppe Antonio Borgese's identification of the edificatory value of Tozzi's writing. In fact, subsequent to Tozzi's early death in 1920, Borgese co-opted his work into a project of novelistic reconstruction that rejected the fragmentism of artists such as the *vociani*. This literary agenda is described in Borgese's 1923 *Tempo di edificare*, where he describes Tozzi as 'uno dei primissimi edificatori nella nuova generazione letteraria d'Italia' [one of the very first builders of the new literary generation of Italy].[12] Other early critics, however, such as Alfredo Gargiulo dismissed Tozzi's work on the grounds of its pathological 'esasperazione egocentrica' [egocentric exasperation].[13] Largely sidelined for the three succeeding decades, Tozzi was resurrected, so to speak, in the 1960s when critical attention finally conferred on him overdue recognition as one of the most important, most modern and most innovative of the *narratori* of the Italian Novecento. As in the case of Svevo, Giacomo Debenedetti made a significant contribution to this critical debate, so it is he who should receive credit for much of the attention paid to Tozzi. With his 1963 reading of *Con gli occhi chiusi*, Debenedetti liberated the author from the confines of the Sienese provinces in order to place his innovative work firmly in the narrative avant-garde of expressionism.[14] Debenedetti offers a portrait of an a-ideological author for whom narration is equivalent to the act of the 'primitive' who paints animals on the walls of his cave in order to dominate a frightening reality.[15] Conceptual sophistication, moreover, is absent: 'le sue idee, sempre comunque assai embrionali, sono di tutt'altra natura da quelle che si ottengono attraverso i libri o la elaborazione mentale e intellettuale' [his ideas, always however quite embryonic, are entirely different from those developed in books or through mental or intellectual elaboration (Debenedetti, 2001, 60)]. For Debenedetti, then, Tozzi's is not a naturalist narrative because it records events instead of explaining them (Debenedetti, 1988, 92).

Though largely accepting of Debenedetti's claims for a very modern Tozzian expressionism, many critics have subsequently offered convincing counter-arguments to this portrait of a naïf author without ideology. Ferruccio Ulivi, Paolo Getrevi and Franco Petroni amongst others have discovered an ideological Tozzi in their exploration of the religious and, specifically, Catholic dimension of Tozzi's inspiration.[16] Addressing, amongst other concerns, Tozzi's previously overlooked association with Domenico Giuliotti and *La Torre* (1913), the Catholic journal that they founded together, these critical voices opened the door to an analysis of a social and ideological conservatism in Tozzi's early work as well as in his later novels. A further evolution in Tozzi criticism is evident in the analysis of the author's studies in psychology. In fact, Debenedetti's portrait of a talented dilettante was definitively replaced by that of an erudite though self-taught intellectual, thanks to those critics who addressed the author's studies in the field of philosophy and psychology and, in particular, his intellectual passion for the work of William James.[17] This brief sampling of divergent and even mutually contradictory positions concerning Tozzi illustrates the degree of critical confusion that, for decades, enveloped the work of this Sienese giraffe.

Gadda was, of course, fully aware of the classificatory difficulties he posed for the critical establishment, as his self-definition as giraffe illustrates. However, although it has become commonplace to claim that Gadda was not appreciated by his contemporaries, there are many examples of critical interventions that suggest quite the opposite.[18] Though largely appreciative of Gadda's work, these earlier critics frequently underscore his novelty and the resulting difficulty in locating him within a contemporary literary context. In 1931, Carlo Linati wonders whether a charmingly baroque author such as Gadda can find success in a period dominated by neoclassical writing.[19] Raffaello Franchi describes a Gaddian art that is 'veramente singolare' [truly singular].[20] Writing in the same year, Giuseppe De Robertis identifies a complex, bristling, and utterly novel author who, despite being a humorist, is *Italian* (the word is underlined to highlight the singularity of the concept).[21] Elio Vittorini hails an excellent and novel author whom he locates in a specifically Lombard historical tradition of satire that seemed to have disappeared entirely at the close of the seventeenth century.[22] Reviewing *Il castello di Udine* in 1934, Gianfranco Contini further broadens the temporal spectrum as he draws Gadda's work toward the Renaissance 'pasticheurs', from the Italian macaronic tradition to Rabelais.[23] What this gradual extension of the classificatory field illustrates is precisely the need to stretch the contemporary spectrum of critical categories in order to find a suitable niche for this Milanese giraffe.

Beyond these shared difficulties of classification within a literary-critical canon, what else binds these authors? What justifies a study that focuses on these three writers whose publications cover such a broad span of time, from the 1890s to the 1960s?[24] Why not include the other, no doubt numerous, cases of Italian authors who have achieved recognition late in their literary careers or, alternatively, who have been hailed as entirely novel within an Italian context? The short answer, as indicated above, is what I consider to be the distinctive nexus of body, subjectivity and style that emerges in the work of the three authors and that prompted, at least

in part, the difficulties of critical classification. The longer answer, on the other hand, broaches the particularities of their treatment of human embodiment and, in fact, diminishes the apparent difficulty of classification within an Italian context by placing their work against the broader backdrop of a European and international modernism preoccupied with questions of corporeality. In fact, we might note a critical tendency of sorts to classify each of these three authors by means of reference to non-Italian authors. Svevo is frequently associated with the Mitteleuropean culture of his native Trieste and becomes, then, an Italian(ish) version of Robert Musil with Zeno, in particular, becoming a Triestine 'man without qualities'. In addition, Svevo's representation of memory in *La coscienza di Zeno* has prompted comparisons with Proust. On 'discovering' Tozzi, Debenedetti establishes influential parallels with the nightmarish qualities of Franz Kafka's literary universe. Gadda, on the other hand, is often termed the 'Italian Joyce' as his supposed encyclopaedism and his macaronic style are connected with the work of the Irish author. Alternatively, he is associated with French author, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, on the grounds of a shared attention to a Rabelaisian physicality and stylistics.[25]

The non-Italian authors selected as points of reference are all, of course, undisputed giants of literary modernism, a classification traditionally avoided by an Italian critical orthodoxy that preferred the specificity of terms such as Decadentism, Symbolism, Crepuscularism, Futurism, and Hermeticism.[26] The modernist label is, indeed, notoriously vague, covering a diversity of artistic movements that, housed in various countries, stretched from the militant avant-garde movements of the first two decades of the twentieth century, through the arguably more conservative 'high' modernism of the 1920s, and on to the more overtly politicized production of the 1930s. Modernism, therefore, is characterized by its great formal and ideological variety, a circumstance underscored by a broad spectrum of critics. While Eugene Lunn, for instance, defines the movement in terms of 'multiple revolts against traditional realism and romanticism',[27] Michael Levenson identifies a generalized sense of crisis, a term that, though overused, 'still glows with justification'.[28] Richard Sheppard identifies no fewer than nine distinct traits or tendencies in a modernism that he too defines as a response to a perceived moment of crisis.[29] While it is not my intention here to review the entirety of critical positions on modernism, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the critical tendency to approach literary modernism by means of a recurrent set of critical oppositions central to which is that traditional account that attempts to distinguish between a conservative high modernism of aesthetic and subjective autonomy and a social modernity of mass culture and technological innovation.[30] Indeed, Matei Calinescu describes an 'irreversible split' between 'modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization — a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by the development of capitalism — and modernity as an aesthetic concept'.[31] Moreover, Calinescu elaborates, cultural or aesthetic modernity is defined by its 'radical antibourgeois attitudes' and its disgust in the face of 'middle-scale values', a disgust that generates the 'consuming negative passion' of cultural modernity (Calinescu, 42). Central to this critical paradigm is the emergence of a mass culture

industry whose 'prearranged harmony' is described by Adorno and Horkheimer as a 'mockery of what had to be striven after in the great bourgeois works of art'.[32] Moreover, so-called high modernism locates itself, for Adorno, in antagonistic opposition to this mass cultural model.[33] This critical view became one of the most influential representations of literary modernism. Indeed, though Andreas Huyssen sets out to interrogate the reasons behind the critical resilience of this 'great divide' between 'high art' and mass culture, he writes that 'modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture' (Huyssen, vii–viii).[34]

At the core of this oppositional paradigm is the formal and stylistic sophistication of the modernist text, a quality that, for Adorno, exemplifies its attempted refusal of commodification. As with modernism itself, modernist form and style resist monolithic description. In broaching a body of artists bound by a self-conscious experience of modernity as something entirely new, critics have identified in the modernist experimental bent an aesthetic self-reflexiveness with respect both to artistic tradition and to the formal component parts of the given medium. Lunn describes this as a tendency amongst modernists to highlight 'the media or materials with which they are working, the very processes of creation in their own craft' (Lunn, 34). In addressing the specifics of the literary field, he underscores the modernist adoption of a form that 'reveals its own reality as a construction or artifice', a goal achieved by a variety of means including 'visual or linguistic distortion to convey intense subjective states of mind' (Lunn, 35). Lunn also points to a modernist inclination toward simultaneity and juxtaposition or montage, a practice by means of which 'narrative or temporal structure is weakened, or even disappears, in favour of an aesthetic ordering based on synchronicity, the logic of metaphor, or what is sometimes referred to as "spatial form"' (Lunn, 35). In this paratactical configuration, narrative organization abandons sequential logic in favour of an art that is 'without apparent causal progression and completion' (Lunn, 35).[35] This is the vision of a modernism described by Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane as indicative of a 'new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life'.[36]

I present this sampling of positions on modernism in order to differentiate a traditional critical stance from the more recent scholarship that tends, for the most part, to minimize ideological and aesthetic oppositions between modernism, high or otherwise, and modernity. Instead, many scholars now propose a modernism that is deeply implicated in the social, economic and technological paradigm shifts that define modernity as a whole. While Astradur Eysteinsson writes that modernist aesthetic practices do not 'directly *reflect* social modernity or lend us an immediate access to its distinctive qualities', he argues that modernism constitutes an 'attempt to *interrupt* the modernity that we live and understand as a social if not "normal", way of life'.[37] Jonathan Crary goes further and insists that 'any effective account of modern culture must confront the ways in which modernism, rather than being a reaction against or transcendence of processes of scientific and economic rationalization, is inseparable from them'.[38] It is this desire to locate modernism

within the social and economic context of technological modernity that animates Bradbury and McFarlane's well-known description of a modernist art 'of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology [...] Modernism is then the art of modernization' (Bradbury and McFarlane, 27). Marshall Berman provides an equally all-encompassing definition of a modernism contingent upon a 'maelstrom of modern life' that encompasses the 'industrialization of production' responsible for the transformation of human experience and environment, the acceleration of life, and the transfer of millions of people to the urban centres of the West.[39]

What emerges in this correlation of the experience of modernity with modernism is a modernist art of the living human who is both the subject and the object of modernization. Moreover, this same modernist art insistently underscores the embodied dimension of human existence, namely, the fact that modernity is experienced in and through the material human body. Thus, notwithstanding its great variety, literary modernism might be understood as a stylistically self-conscious engagement with the experience of human embodiment in the face of a social and technological revolution felt on, by, and in the body, modifying not only the rhythms of its daily movements, practices and interactions, but also its epistemological and ethical status. This is very much the case made by Sara Danius in her study of the definitively 'high' modernist Proust, Mann and Joyce. Indeed, Danius places this living embodied subject of modernity at the forefront of modernism, as she convincingly argues that technological innovation is not just a feature of the aesthetics of high modernism but is, in a real way, constitutive of those same aesthetics (Danius, 3). Modernism, then, responds to a perceived crisis of human epistemological authority, a crisis that is, first and foremost, one of a human sensorium outstripped by the accuracy and scope of technological devices such as the camera and the phonograph. Accordingly, the human body becomes the site of a subjective and even inexact encounter with the phenomena of reality. Indeed, Danius identifies modernism as a 'general gravitation toward a conception of aesthetic experience based in a notion of the immanence of the body' (Danius, 194). Ulrika Maude adopts a similar stance as she writes that modernism charts our relationship with our own bodies and our reality in the light of technological innovation.[40] Tim Armstrong underscores the indissoluble bond between the material experience of modernity and modernist discourses on embodiment when he writes that a broad ideological variety of modernists 'saw the body as the locus of anxiety, even crisis'.[41] Moreover, he identifies a fascination with, specifically, the 'limits of the body', whether in terms of corporeal energies or perceptual capacities, and he defines modernism as an attempt to 'intervene in the body' (Armstrong, 1998, 4, 6). Literary modernism, then, must be considered as a generalized albeit varied re-negotiation of human embodiment, a re-negotiation that is not just aesthetic in scope but is also an epistemological and ethical reflection on the lived experience of a radically transformed social and economic reality. It is, moreover, in this chorus of assorted modernist voices that Svevo, Tozzi and Gadda's stylistically

informed attention to the body and embodiment finds resonance. In this light, their zoological peculiarity in a harmonious garden of Italian literature suggests an affirmative engagement with embodiment as, beyond the traditional Italian canons of literary measure and prescriptive grace, each author charts new embodied ethical practices and maps alternate sensory and corporeal regimes.

The chapters that follow plot this modernist interrogation of embodiment. The chapter entitled 'Corporeal Revolutions: Interrogating Modern and Modernist Embodiment' aims to contextualize, both artistically and socially, the corporeal meditations of Svevo, Tozzi, and Gadda. As such it addresses, firstly, the broader context of the body of social and technological modernity. The chapter opens on the radical contradictions of a human body that is at once the subject and the object of modernization. As the subject of modernity, the body houses increasing knowledge about itself and its environment. Yet, as object, the body succumbs to the weight of this knowledge. As the evolutionary sciences open the door to the concept of biological regression in the atomistic living body, the objectified human form poses a threat to the ideal of progress and, paradoxically, to a society conceived in terms of a hierarchized organic metaphor. This hazardous body must be rendered docile and, by virtue of the intensification of the disciplinary regimes identified by Michel Foucault, must become an efficient cog within an industrial capitalist edifice described by Karl Marx in terms of its dehumanizing instrumentalization of the labouring human body. The modern metropolis is the space in which these developments are most deeply felt and lived. Indeed, this chapter will also encompass reflections on the embodied experience of urban modernity and will focus, in particular, on discussions of the bodily shock triggered by the encounter with the urban centre. This technologized and shock-ridden metropolis will be linked with a critique of modernity that encompasses an alleged loss of epistemological authority on the part of the human sensorium as well as concerns regarding a perceived destabilization of the body both in its organic and gendered dimensions. My discussion of the perceived crisis of modernity will encompass thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel as well as the more dubious reasoning of Max Nordau and Otto Weininger. These discourses concerning the body of modernity provide a social and cultural context for a modernism that, rather than simply diagnosing and lamenting a crisis of the human organism, moves beyond this critical space in order to reclaim and revalidate the ethical and epistemological subjectivism of this imperfect living body. This chapter will consider these modernist bodies focusing, in particular, on those configurations that foreground hypersensitivity, infirmity, potentiality, sensorial empiricism and gender, considerations central to the writing and thought of Svevo, Tozzi and Gadda.

Having explored the question of modern and modernist embodiment, I will move to a sequence of three critical-interpretive chapters that deal separately with the thought and writing of each author. These chapters are organized chronologically and begin, therefore, with Italo Svevo in the chapter entitled 'Corporeal Arrhythmia: Svevo's Stylistics of Limping and Potentiality'. In his novels *Una vita* (1892), *Senilità* (1898) and *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), I argue that Svevo proposes an arrhythmic embodiment by means of which the body adamantly asserts its