Minghelli, Giuliana. *In the Shadow of the Mammoth: Italo Svevo and the Emergence of Modernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Pp. 238.

Giuliana Minghelli's book represents a noteworthy shift in perspective in the English-speaking criticism of Italo Svevo. Unlike her predecessors, P.N. Furbank, Brian Moloney, Naomi Lebowitz, Charles Russel, and Beno Weiss, who were primarily interested in exploring Italo Svevo's work through biographical lens, Minghelli's approach to Svevo is mainly through theoretical investigative tools. The constant focus on what was called the "Italo Svevo case," a trend that dominated Svevo studies for many years, may be accounted for by a variety of factors, such as the scarcity of biographical details in the English-speaking world, the fascinating intricacies of Svevo's *frontier identity*, and the spectacular turn of his literary fate. This general interest in the novelist's biography reached its peak in 1988 when John Gatt-Rutter claimed to be writing *the Svevo biography* with his *Italo Svevo: A Double Life*. More than a decade later, as the "white areas" on the Svevo map had long been covered, his critics eventually resolved to adopting a fresh perspective in approaching Svevo's work and, therefore, resorting to theories that had become quite successful in literary studies. Giuliana Minghelli's contribution has the merit of being the first book-length study that applies a post-structuralist reading to Svevo's work.

The book is divided into two major sections that roughly correspond to a distinction between theory and practice. Thus, in the *Introduction* and in the first two chapters Minghelli outlines her theoretical premises, while in chapters three to six she provides a textual analysis of Svevo's representative writings: the three novels, several short stories, two plays, and some autobiographical texts. Minghelli's rereading of Svevo contains at its crux the metaphor of the *shadow of the mammoth*, seen as the locus where the "allegory of symbiosis," namely "the crucial poetic and philosophical moment in [Svevo's] writing" (4) unfolds. It is in this shadow that the communion between the vulnerable yet restless man and the *other* develops. The novelty of Minghelli's study lies in the exploration of this area where intersubjective contaminations not only of genders, but also of nationalities and races, as signposts of modernity, occur. By rethinking the areas that have been generally overlooked by traditional criticism, Minghelli's objectives are as follows: (i) to reassess the status of the Svevian woman, so far largely stereotyped as a mere object of male desire, by revealing her involvement in the allegory of symbiosis; (ii) to reconsider the much criticized lack of gender or racial purity in Svevo's male characters; (iii) to investigate the intersubjective space existing between the man and the other, that is, the interval where gender transgression takes place; (iv) to re-evaluate the nature of Svevo's participation in the modernist project.

Minghelli's re-evaluation of Svevo relies heavily on two rather unknown fables that the novelist wrote around 1910, long before he became famous: "La corruzione dell'anima" and "L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana." In the first chapter of the book, "Between Darwinian Origins and Modernist Ends: Svevo's Allegory of Symbiosis," Minghelli puts forward a thorough investigation of these fables, projecting her reading against a background dominated mostly by Darwin and Nietzsche. To Minghelli, the most notable consequence of rereading the two fables

lies in the revision of the interpretative canon that this addition triggers: thus, Svevo's work does not entail the manifestation of the "ironic hero of modernism" (35), but the less visible, yet extant, process of constructing the self through symbiotic interaction with the other.

In the second chapter of the book, "Of Artists, Women, and Jews: Svevo and the Modernist Contamination," Minghelli re-evaluates what critics have called the "feminization" of the classical subject, so visible in the Svevian male protagonists. The chapter presents Minghelli's quarrel with one of the most seminal readings of Svevo, Giacomo Debenedetti's famous essay "Svevo e Schmitz," published as early as 1929. Debenedetti's interpretation, according to Minghelli, is biased not only by a marked nostalgia for omniscient authors, carefully knitted plots and strong, well-defined characters, in short for nineteenth-century narratives, but also by the growing authority of Fascist rhetoric. Instead of performing a genuine analysis of the modernist elements in Svevo, Debenedetti developed his argument into a different direction by turning to what Minghelli calls a "discourse of race" which, associated with a "discourse of gender," sought to elucidate and counteract Svevo's uncomfortable theme of mutual contamination through recourse to the writer's biography. Thus, in accordance with the Weiningerian logic, namely, that the woman and the Jew are equally inferior by comparison to the Arian man, Debenedetti denounced the feminine essence of all Svevian male characters. Contrary to Debenedetti's belief in an obvious similarity between Weininger and Svevo, Minghelli sides with Anderson's powerful statement: "Svevo represents everything Weininger wrote against" (63).

In the second half of the book (chapters three to six), Minghelli switches from theory to practice and proposes a reading of Svevo's major texts in light of her own theoretical insights. Although meticulously carried out, her textual analyses do not reach the same intensity as the theoretical exposition outlined in the preceding chapters. All too often, Minghelli chooses to retell in her own words the Svevian scenes that she is about to interpret, a habit that makes some passages sound prosaic. A sort of lexical pedantry also surfaces in the text to the point of becoming annoying. While in the theoretical sections of the book, the use of post-structuralist jargon is appropriate, in literary analyses it becomes more of an abuse, especially when repeated excessively. This is the case with the word "economy," which seems to proliferate ceaselessly in stilted compounds such as "economy of pedagogy," (139) "male economy," (157) "economy of desire," (193) to quote only a few examples. Of course, one cannot reduce the whole section to these regrettable occurrences, but it is equally true that they impair the fluency of the argument to a certain degree.

Hence, the sense of a gap that seems to come between the two parts of the book. Moreover, it seems that *La coscienza di Zeno*, of all the texts surveyed by Minghelli, is the only one closer in spirit to the Svevian fable of the man and the Mammoth. This is not to say, however, that the rest of Minghelli's interpretations are infelicitous, but to observe that only Svevo's last novel lends itself best to the type of reading proposed in the theoretical opening. It soon becomes clear that Minghelli's reading aims at identifying the coherent progression that runs through

Svevo's entire work, from its first rather sketchy emergence in *Una Vita* to its full-fledged materialization in *La coscienza di Zeno*, a development that may be summarized as man's constant search for symbiosis with the other. Perhaps Minghelli ought to have elaborated more on the sharp irony inherent in Zeno's fate, as he eventually chooses to step outside the shadow of the other at the end of a novel that seemingly stages the fable of man and the Mammoth in each of its eight chapters. It is nevertheless Minghelli's merit to have intuitively perceived the rich potential buried within Svevo's fable and to have extended its significance beyond a supposedly limited usage.

While the book makes a contribution to Svevo Studies, and, to be sure, will stimulate further debates within the Svevian community, its internal configuration is rather uneven. After a first part convincingly articulated, in which fruitful suggestions are played out with rigour and eloquence, the second part appears to be trapped in its own shadow.

SORIN TOMUTA

University of Alberta

Leake, Elizabeth. *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. 200. ISBN 0-8020-8767-1. US.\$ 50.

When the 'Silone Case' first broke in the Italian press in 1996, many people simply refused to believe the story. It was impossible that Ignazio Silone, one of the most celebrated anti-fascists of the 1930s, whose novels had educated a whole generation of people across the world about Mussolini's Italy, could have *spied* for the very regime he seemed to have opposed. As more and more evidence emerged about Silone's betrayal, it became harder and harder to go into denial about what had happened. Most people now accept that Silone had passed information to the police over a fairly extended period of time. Arguments remain over *why* and *for how long* the politician/writer had been a spy. The traditional defence of Silone – that he spied to save, or try and save, his brother Romolo from fascist imprisonment, have now been more or less debunked. Silone had probably been passing information to one specific member of the police authorities since 1919, and appeared to have done so right up to 1929. If anything, the arrest of his brother in 1928 on trumped up bombing charges led to the end of the spying, and not to its beginning. In fact, it seems, the saga of Romolo's arrest led Silone to *stop* informing, to take a moral decision, and to abandon the Italian Communist Party. Only a few 'heroic' supporters of Silone now try and claim that all the documents are either false or irrelevant.

Elizabeth Leake's interesting book is not aimed at a detailed discussion of the 'Silone case,' but it does take its lead from that case. Leake's aim is to revisit Silone's work (and life) in the light of this startling new information about the man himself. This is done through what Leake terms a "psychoanalytic approach to Silone's texts in light of the archival material the study presents" (10). To this end, Leake examines not only Silone's fiction, but also some of the extraordinary material