Abstract – In spite of radical differences in terms of themes and temperament, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and Italo Svevo (1861-1928) have a lot in common: first, they both were multilingual writers who encompassed diverse languages, cultures and literary traditions; second, they both became professional writers only after having worked in different fields, an experience that had a significant impact on their work and worldview; and finally, they were both pivotal figures in the emergence of literary Modernism, intended as a reaction to the fin de siècle crisis on a transnational level. In this paper, I focus on this latter aspect by comparing the works of the two authors, especially those from the 1890s, in the light of their role as precursors of Modernism. Their juxtaposition reveals how both authors were influenced by the same philosophical concepts, the same scientific debates and theories, and the same literary models, as well as how they reacted in similar ways to these influences. In particular, I focus on the way they tackled the turn-of-the-century epistemological crisis by proposing an ethical alternative to the destruction of Kantian gnoseology based on a radically innovative view of the relationship between health and sickness, good and bad, and identity and difference.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Italo Svevo, Modernism, medicine, transnational literary studies