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A Minor Subject: Habit and Subjectivity in Modernist Literature and Philosophy

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In this essay, I intend to investigate some of the aspects of the resurgence of habit at the dawn of the twentieth century by touching upon a series of paradigmatic texts of the modernist canon and by investigating their debts to and consonances with the contemporary philosophies of habit. My thesis is that during those decades – seen as a mere chapter in the longer history of modernity – the philosophical and literary theme of habit served not only as a way to understand and represent the ordinary dimension of life, but also as a means to develop an idea of human subjectivity that could mediate between the centrifugal and the centripetal tendencies that permeated the competing ideologies of the time. The crisis of subjectivity that characterized modernism and which has often been simplistically represented as a disintegration of the subject into irredeemably broken fragments, should rather be seen as the development of a dialectical idea of a “minor subject”, that is, an open, dynamic, multilayered subjectivity still endowed by a certain malleable consistency. Both modernist literature and its philosophical counterparts found in the “minor subject” (here in the sense of “subject matter”) of habit, the opportunity to investigate and represent the porosity between activity and passivity, volition and determinism, individual identity and social structures, that characterize this idea of subjectivity.

I focus on three different representative – though not exhaustive – facets of the issue. In the first section, relying on Virginia Woolf's work, I highlight how some of the narrative techniques developed by Modernist writers can be seen as an attempt to give a plastic representation to the blurred boundaries of subjectivity as captured in the everyday existence of their characters. I then connect these innovations to the theory of habit of Samuel Butler, whom Woolf identified as one of the harbingers of modernity. In the second section I focus on Marcel Proust to discuss how modernist writers proved to be able to combine two opposed views of habit: on the one hand, the view of habit as purely mechanical and leading to inauthentic life; on the other, the idea of habit as essential to the human being's potential for self-perfecting and creativity. The third section is dedicated to addiction, seen as a form of habit in which the subject is radically torn between opposite forces. Following insights from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, I interpret Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* as a meditation on how such a torn subjectivity manifests the essential incompleteness of the human subject and life's insuppressible nostalgia for the inorganic.

Virginia Woolf's blurred boundaries, Marcel Proust's ambiguous authenticity, and Italo Svevo's split selfhood are three interconnected facets of the modernists' interest in the “minor subject” of habit. Investigating the interaction between the philosophical and the literary discourses on habit at the dawn of the twentieth century can contribute to a more nuanced reconstruction of a pivotal moment in the history of thought but also to the contemporary philosophical debate. Almost exactly one century later, the renewed interest in the theme of habit mirrors a situation in part similar to what characterized the ideological landscape of the time, as now too it is concerned with the attempt to reimagine a “minor subject” that mediates between the postmodern pulverization of identity and the temptation of reaffirming anachronistic forms of strong subjectivities.

Keywords: Habit; Modernism; Proust, Marcel; Svevo, Italo; Woolf, Virginia.

A Minor Subject:

Habit and Subjectivity in Modernist Literature and Philosophy

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1. Introduction¹

Going against the grain of the critical cliché that identifies modernist experimental literature with the exaltation of the new, the extraordinary, and the event, recent scholarship has argued that modernist writers and artists were among the first to dedicate a large part of their artistic endeavor to investigating the realms of everyday life and its apparent banality². One of the key aspects of modernist literature is the attempt to penetrate and represent what Georges Perec called the «infra-ordinary» as opposed to the «extra-ordinary»³, that is, the realm of experience that takes place in the ordinary life of individuals. Of course, the contradiction between the two perspectives is merely apparent: the representation of revelatory moments so typical of modernist literature – whether they be called “epiphanies”, “moments of being”, “involuntary memory”, etc. – only makes sense once these are seen as a momentary disruptions of the existential order of the everyday.

The dialectical tension between these two poles is at the core of the challenge that modernist writers – and, in particular, novelists – posed to themselves from both a thematic and a formal point of view. Indeed, the interest in the fabric of the everyday and the way it is occasionally torn apart by epiphanic moments necessitated forms and techniques that could make aesthetically interesting representations of such apparently

1 This essay expands upon some aspects of the research presented in my book F. Bellini, *Un'identità minore. Percorsi sull'abitudine fra letteratura e filosofia*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2021.

2 See B. Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007; L. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; S. Crangle, *Prosaic Desire: Modernist Knowing, Boredom, Laughter and Anticipation*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2010; M. Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; “The Comparatist”, 40, October 2016; E. Rydstrand, *Rhythmic Modernism*, Bloomsbury, New York 2019.

3 G. Perec, *L'infra-ordinaire*, Seuil, Paris 2015.

lackluster material. In search of inspiration, they turned to the «philosophies of habit»⁴ developing in those same decades, and found there conceptual tools and philosophical frameworks that enabled them to penetrate the complexities of the most ordinary aspects of our individual and common experience.

In this essay, I intend to investigate some of the aspects of the resurgence of habit at the dawn of the twentieth century by touching upon a series of paradigmatic texts of the modernist canon and by investigating their debts to and consonances with the contemporary philosophies of habit. My thesis is that during those decades – seen as a mere chapter in the longer history of modernity – the philosophical and literary theme of habit served not only as a way to understand and represent the ordinary dimension of life, but also as a means to develop an idea of human subjectivity that could mediate between the centrifugal and the centripetal tendencies that permeated the competing ideologies of the time. The crisis of subjectivity that characterized modernism and which has often been simplistically represented as a disintegration of the subject into irredeemably broken fragments, should rather be seen as the development of a dialectical idea of a “minor subject”, that is, an open, dynamic, multilayered subjectivity still endowed, nonetheless, by a certain malleable consistency. Both modernist literature and its philosophical counterparts found in the “minor subject” (here in the sense of “subject matter”) of habit, the opportunity to investigate and represent the porosity between activity and passivity, volition and determinism, individual identity and social structures, that characterize this idea of subjectivity.

I will focus on three different representative – though not exhaustive – facets of the issue. In the first section, relying on Virginia Woolf's work, I will highlight how some of the narrative techniques developed by modernist writers can be seen as an attempt to give a plastic representation to the blurred boundaries of subjectivity as captured in the everyday existence of their characters. I will then connect these innovations to the theory of habit of Samuel Butler, whom Woolf identified as one of the harbingers of modernity. In the second section I will focus on Marcel Proust to discuss how modernist writers proved to be able to combine two opposed views of habit: on the one hand, the view of habit as purely mechanical and leading to inauthentic life; on the other, the idea

⁴ As suggested by Marco Piazza this is a recent but already established label that identifies a growing number of philosophical investigations into the theme of habit (M. Piazza, *Creature dell'abitudine*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p. 3).

of habit as essential to the human being's potential for self-perfecting and creativity. The third section is dedicated to addiction, seen as a form of habit in which the subject is radically torn between opposite forces. Following insights from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, I will interpret Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* as a meditation on how such a torn subjectivity manifests the essential incompleteness of the human subject and life's insuppressible nostalgia for the inorganic.

Virginia Woolf's blurred boundaries, Marcel Proust's ambiguous authenticity, and Italo Svevo's split selfhood are three interconnected facets of the modernists' interest in the "minor subject" of habit. Investigating the interaction between the philosophical and the literary discourses on habit at the dawn of the twentieth century can contribute to a more nuanced reconstruction of a pivotal moment in the history of thought but also to the contemporary debate. Almost exactly one century later, the renewed interest in the theme of habit mirrors a situation in part similar to what characterized the ideological landscape of the time, as now too it is concerned with the attempt to reimagine a "minor subject" that mediates between the postmodern pulverization of identity and the temptation of reaffirming anachronistic forms of strong subjectivities.

2. Ordinary Modernism: Virginia Woolf, Samuel Butler and the Crisis of Subjectivity

The most important formal innovations brought about by modernist novels, as claimed by Erich Auerbach in his 1946 masterpiece *Mimesis*, involve the shift from the representation of the life of the characters as a series of chronologically oriented events to the representation of «minor happenings, which are insignificant as exterior factors in a person's destiny, for their own sake or rather as points of departure for the development of motifs, for a penetration which opens up new perspectives into a milieu or a consciousness or the given historical setting»⁵. Modernist writers thus overcome the idea that one's life can be described as a series of episodes determined by events taking place either within the Self – such as decisions, sudden revelations, or the falling in love – or outside of it – such as the encounter with new situations or other characters⁶. By

5 E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003, p. 547.

6 On this issue see also R. Luperini, *L'incontro e il caso: narrazioni moderne e destino dell'uomo occidentale*, Laterza, Bari 2007.

contrast, they embrace the idea that the essence of one's individual existence resides in the more ephemeral dimension of the ordinary life of habits, in which the distinction between inner and outer events becomes more problematic, if not altogether impossible. As the philosophies of habit have repeatedly claimed and variously argued, habit cannot be easily located in relation to the traditional imagined topology of the subject as an object contained within a surface. As an embodied disposition acquired through life in a constant interaction with the environment, habits are neither within nor without. They are, as Bourdieu claimed in reference to his concept of *habitus*, part of the «dialectic of the internalization of the externality and the externalization of internality»⁷. Neither inside, nor outside, they are in between, as suggested by the recurrent paronomastically inspired metaphor that links “habit” in the sense of custom to “habit” in the sense of the dress worn as a way to signify one's profession or affiliation. Philosophies of habit thus question the concept of subjectivity as independent and highlight the many ways in which it is essentially interwoven with other subjectivities and the outer world.

Accordingly, modernist art is dedicated to dispelling the idea that the subject is an object among other objects. By contrast, the subjectivity represented in the modernist novels is not presented as a given, but as «a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self»⁸. Habit formation and evolution are key components of this dynamic and open idea of subjectivity, and the modernist writers' interest in habit is then to be understood as part of this «shift of emphasis» which is, Auerbach claims, «what we might call a transfer of confidence: the great exterior turning points and blows of fate are granted less importance [...]: on the other hand there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of life at any time the totality of [the character's] fate is contained and can be portrayed»⁹. The implicit philosophy of Modernism holds that habits make up the real warp of life, without which the weft of individual events would not hold together.

Virginia Woolf's works exemplify this tendency. In the memoir “A Sketch of the Past”, from the posthumous collection *Moments of Being*, Woolf describes how the crucial challenge of her art was trying to capture the way in which «every day is made

7 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, p. 72.

8 E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, cit., p. 549.

9 Ivi, p. 547.

up of much more non-being than being»¹⁰. This non-being is the ordinary life that passes unperceived and that she also describes as the «cotton wool of daily life»¹¹ or the «Monday or Tuesday»¹² of existence. The non-being is only occasionally interrupted by revelatory «moments of being», sudden existential manifestations of «some real thing behind appearances»¹³. Accordingly, as she wrote in an essay discussing the writers of her generation, modern literature intends to represent life «not as a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged [but as] a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end»¹⁴. As Liels Olson claimed, the «central assertion»¹⁵ of Woolf's novels is that the substance of life is made up of «the ebb and flow of things», that is, «the little things, the ordinary tasks»¹⁶ that occupy most of our time: «Woolf wants to depict the way habit functions, the way habit composes a life»¹⁷ representing the way the character's mind constantly flutters while immersed in habitual tasks.

Trying to create an aesthetically appealing literary representation of habit poses two main problems that Woolf addressed by playing with and transforming the literary forms of the time. The first regards the relationship between habit and character. The dynamic and open idea of subjectivity that is developed in relation to habit requires an innovative take on the construction of characters as constantly caught in a symbiotic exchange with their environments, with their minds perpetually fluctuating between past and present, things of greater and lesser import, their own thoughts and the words of others. Woolf and some of her contemporaries addressed this issue by exploding the traditional use of focalization, that is, the implicit point of view from which the events that take place in the fictional world are perceived and described. In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, the focalization shifts dizzily between characters to the point that it is sometime impossible to attribute individual sentences to a specific voice. Auerbach noted that «the essential characteristic of the technique represented by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person [...] but many persons, with

10 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, Harvest/HBJ, San Diego 1985, p. 70. See also L. Sim, *Virginia Woolf: the Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, Routledge, London 2016.

11 *Id.*, p. 72.

12 *Id.*, *Collected Essays*, Vol. II, The Hogarth Press, London 1966, p. 106.

13 *Id.*, *Moments of Being*, cit., p. 72.

14 *Id.*, *Collected Essays*, Vol. II, cit., p. 106.

15 L. Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 72.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ivi*, p. 68.

frequent shifts from one to the other»¹⁸. The passage from one to the next is so seamless that the reader is led to contemplate the way in which subjectivities merge into each other. Woolf's characters, even though endowed with individual personalities, are not entities but processes, as they are constantly caught in the process of becoming other while realizing themselves¹⁹.

The second issue has to do with the way in which habits call into question the temporal dimension of experience. As the philosophies of habit have repeatedly made clear, habits have an ambiguous temporal dimension: in habit the past is repeated, and as such it approximates memory, but it does not reveal itself as such because it has become unconscious. Conversely, habits are loaded with future as they translate into inclinations to behave in a certain way, but merely as a repetition of a past pattern. This second philosophical aspect of habit is reflected in the embedded temporalities that characterize Woolf's writings. The celebrated opening paragraphs of *Mrs Dalloway* allows for an evident explanation of this second aspect.

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days [...]²⁰.

18 E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, cit., p. 536.

19 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were particularly fascinated by this aspect of Woolf's writing, and they wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus* that she had «made all her life and work a passage, a becoming, all kinds of becomings between ages, sexes, elements and kingdoms» (G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, New York 2010, p. 278).

20 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 3.

The book opens with the representation of a very specific and ordinary moment in the present, but it immediately follows Clarissa's meandering train of thought into the past of her distant memories. The two temporal dimensions converge and overlap in the consciousness of the character, brought together by the correspondence between past and present physical sensations of morning freshness. Clarissa's consciousness fluctuates between remembering and perceiving, and each moment is shown to be brimming with memories, half thoughts, and expectations, as the length of the text expands to a size that inevitably is not proportional to the time of the event itself. It is what Woolf herself identifies as her «prime discovery» and describes as the «tunneling process [...] by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it»²¹. Similar experiments in the manipulation of narrative temporalities are common among modernist writers, and Marcel Proust inevitably comes to mind. In his *À la recherche du temps perdu* this process is expanded and repeated to hypertrophic dimensions, as each minuscule episode in the life of Marcel is shown to contain a host not just of past experiences, but of whole extended periods in the life of the character.

The philosophical substratum of Woolf's aesthetic of the habitual was informed by many influences. Among them a prominent role was played by Samuel Butler, one of the most interesting if disregarded contributors to the debate on habit of his generation. Now mostly known as the author of the peculiar utopian/dystopian novel *Erewhon*, Samuel Butler is also the author of a series of polemical books that attacked Darwin and his theory of evolution and in which the concept of habit played a crucial role, as shown from the title of the first of these, *Life and Habit*. In spite of the fact that the impact of Butler's theories during his lifetime approximates to zero, the changed cultural climate of the early twentieth century proved to be more receptive to his ideas, especially after the publication of his novel *The Way of all Flesh*²² which earned him considerable posthumous success. In her celebrated essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* Virginia Woolf famously claimed that «in or about December, 1910, human character

21 V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol Two, 1920-1924*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego 1978, p. 272.

22 In particular after its second publication as part of the revised edition of the complete works of the author by Fifield in 1908. J.G. Paradis, *Butler after Butler: The Man of Letters as Outsider*, in J.G. Paradis (ed. by), *Samuel Butler Victorian Against the Grain*, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2007, p. 364 ff.

changed»²³, forcing the writers who came to maturity around those years—as Woolf herself—to abandon the more traditional literary forms and develop fresh and often disruptive techniques fit to grasp the fleeting and multifaceted character of human nature. «The first signs of it», she states, «are recorded in the books of Samuel Butler, in *The Way of All Flesh* in particular»²⁴.

Woolf's decision to identify in Butler's works the first signs of the momentous change in «human character» that she felt had taken place with the advent of the new century – the modernist intellectual gesture *par excellence* – can be connected to two main reasons. The first and more obvious is the scathing criticism of the stale morals and oppressive mentality of the Victorian era that characterize Butler's iconoclastic work. Woolf is particularly keen in highlighting how the change she is referring to is first and foremost manifest in the social transformation of the time and the swift ousting of the Victorian oppressive and hierarchical moral code. The second reason is the way in which Butler's novel can be read as a literary illustration of the theories of habit that Butler had been developing. As the friend of the author Richard Alexander Streatfeild claimed in the opening note to his first edition of the novel, *The Way of All Flesh* was in part written during the same months in which the author was writing *Life and Habit* «and may be taken as a practical illustration of the theory of heredity embodied in that book»²⁵. By identifying Butler as one of the harbingers of modernity, Virginia Woolf was also making explicit the way in which his theories had notably anticipated many of the theses that would become mainstream among modernist writers.

Butler, in a visionary reinterpretation of Lamarck's theory of evolution, did not see habits as mere behavioral inclinations acquired by the individual throughout their existence, but as predispositions that can be transmitted through the generations. From the weaknesses and idiosyncrasies that children inherit from their parents down to the most basic actions such as walking or even physiological functions such as breathing, most of what any living being does, Butler claims, is habit, a habit that has been acquired in a more or less distant past in the history of life on earth and that has been transmitted from parents to offspring through the ages. More precisely, from Butler's

23 V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*, Vol. I, The Hogarth Press, London 1966, p. 320.

24 *Ibid.*

25 R.A. Streatfeild, *Note to the First Edition*, in S. Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, Penguin, New York 1986, p. 32.

point of view life itself is but habit by a different name. Consequently, the concept of individual identity itself loses much of its sense, as what we are and what we do is vastly determined by the sum of the inherited inclinations that have come down to us through our lineage. As Butler makes clear in one of the passages that strikingly anticipates some of the preoccupation of modernists, individual identity is nothing but an illusion. «Personality», Butler claims, «is one of those ideas with which we are so familiar that we have lost sight of the foundations upon which it rests»²⁶. Even though we tend to think of our identity as simple and definite, determined both in terms of space by the contours of our body and in terms of time by our birth and death, there is nothing like that: «in truth this “we,” which looks so simple and definite, is a nebulous and indefinable aggregation of many component parts which war not a little among themselves, our perception of our existence at all being perhaps due to this very clash of warfare, as our sense of sound and light is due to the jarring of vibrations»²⁷.

The life of the individual is so tightly interwoven to the life of the species and of all species that Butler does not refrain from hypothesizing, echoing Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics and at the same time anticipating some aspects of contemporary ecocritical thought «the probable unity of all animal and vegetable life»:

[All living beings are], in reality, nothing but one single creature, of which the component members are but, as it were, blood corpuscles or individual cells; life being a sort of leaven, which, if once introduced into the world, will leaven it altogether; or of fire, which will consume all it can burn; or of air or water, which will turn most things into themselves²⁸.

These powerful images found a receptive reader in Gilles Deleuze who claimed, in *Différence et Répétition*, that «nobody better than Samuel Butler has shown that there is no other continuity than that of habit, and that we don't have any other continuity than that of the thousand habits making up in us as many superstitious and contemplative 'I's»²⁹. Even though radically questioned and limited, though, the possibility of individual self-determination is not completely banished by Butler. In a conceptual move that in some ways anticipates certain aspects of Freudian thought and that is

26 S. Butler, *Life and Habit*, cit., p. 78.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ivi*, p. 97.

29 Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, PUF, Paris 1995, p. 102 (my translation).

strikingly consonant with Nietzsche's ethical philosophy, Butler asserts that people can not only become aware of the way in which their life is determined by their legacy of habits, but they can also work to gradually modify them to achieve greater fulfillment and happiness.

Butler translates this theory into his novel by making his main character, Ernst Pontifex, the field of conflicting forces: on the one hand, the repressive forces that are the legacy of his family and, on the other, the liberating forces of a deeper will to live that is reawakened by some of the characters he encounters and that pushes him to break free from these bonds. Ernst will eventually manage to strike a balance between these forces by accepting that one's identity is never given once and for all, but it is always a project to be developed by working on one's habits and inclinations and developing that «keener appetite for happiness» which Virginia Woolf celebrated in Butler. Seen from the vantage point of today, these ideas find but an unsatisfactory representation in *The Way of All Flesh*, which relies on traditional narrative forms and displays many naive techniques and clumsy passages. Nonetheless, Virginia Woolf's enthusiasm for Butler's work, shared by several other protagonists of early twentieth-century British and French literature, testifies to Butler's seminal contribution to modernism.

3. Creative Habits. Marcel Proust Between Bergson and Ravaisson

The second aspect of the theme of habit that stands at the center of the modernist creative endeavor regards the opposition between creativity and repetition. As already mentioned, while on the one hand Modernism was notoriously obsessed with the idea of novelty and creativity, on the other it was profoundly aware of the way in which the openness of the subject discussed in the previous section would disqualify all attempts to resuscitate the Romantic idea of the creative genius as a radically autonomous source of creativity. The research of new forms and themes would go hand in hand with the acute awareness that they would not be created *ex nihilo* by a disembodied creative force, but had to be developed through a progressive approximation stemming from a dialectical and critical confrontation with tradition. The conflict between these two stances can be seen as one aspect of the broader issue of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic life which permeated both the philosophy and the literature of the time and that would find in Martin Heidegger one of its protagonists.

Again, habit serves in this context as a privileged point of departure to look for ways to strike a balance between the two opposite dimensions. As the philosophies of habit have shown, in this aspect too habit, thanks to its ambivalent nature, allows for the development of a thought that, like the Roman God Janus, sees both sides at once. On the one hand, habit identifies all that is repetitive, mechanic, dull and, in a word, uncreative; on the other it identifies the human tendency to expand and perfect one's skills by means of gradual and repetitive exercises. As Claude Romano has claimed, different philosophers of habit have inevitably tended to favor, in their analysis, either one or the other of these alternatives, so that they can be grouped depending on their interpretation of habit as «a mere return of the spirit back to matter», or, by contrast, as «the ascent of matter toward spirit, a spiritualization of nature»³⁰.

These two positions could be exemplified by Henri Bergson and Félix Ravaisson respectively³¹. In spite of the affinities between the two thinkers, Bergson identifies habit with an essentially passive component of life, expressive of its more mechanical and inert dimension, while Ravaisson stresses the creative dimension of habit, which is the form of life itself as distinguished from the inert and uncreative realm of the inorganic³². On the one hand, then, there is Bergson's idea of habit as a «fossilized residue of a spiritual activity»³³, sclerosis of vitality and creativity; on the other Ravaisson's identification of habit as «a force that facilitates our movements making them more confident and better adapted to their context»³⁴ and that contribute to our creative interaction with our environment.

This same tension between the two opposing views we find in modernist writers, both at the level of their explicit reflections on their craft and at the thematic level in their works. Accordingly, for example, modernist writers, as part of their interest in the everyday tend to investigate the dull dimension of inauthentic life. In his first published

30 C. Romano, *L'équivoque de l'habitude*, in "Revue germanique internationale", 13, 2011, p. 188 (my translation).

31 This is, of course, a gross oversimplification, as the variety of ideas concerning habit in the nineteenth century philosophy is extremely varied. For a more extensive overview see the recent works by the editors of this issue as well as those by Mark Sinclair and Claire Carlisle.

32 On Ravaisson, see the excellent book by Mark Sinclair: M. Sinclair, *Being Inclined: Félix Ravaisson's Philosophy of Habit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

33 This definition is taken from Bergson's description of Ravaisson's view of habit, but, as already shown by Mark Sinclair, «this memorable phrase[that] was supposed to characterize Félix Ravaisson's ideas [is] evidently more faithful to Bergson's "own" conception of habit ». M Sinclair, *Bergson*, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 91

34 *Ibid.* (my translation).

novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901), for example, Thomas Mann traces the story of the decline of a bourgeois family from the apex of its power to the humiliation of poverty. The narrative is developed through a minute dissection of the habits of the individual members of the family, thus offering a unique extended portrait of nineteenth century bourgeois lifestyle. Mann represents the most minute details of his characters' habits – in terms of their meal preferences, their ways of dressing, their daily rituals, their obsessions – making of this thick fabric of habits the plastic allegory of their being stuck in a way of life that was quickly being challenged by modernity. One of the most memorable examples takes place as Tony Buddenbrook is taking a vacation to escape her father's decision to have her married to a wealthy businessman. She meets Morten Schwarzkopf, a young doctor student, with whom she develops a romantic attachment which, however, does not lead anywhere due to the social gap between the two. During their first encounter Morten instructs her to «trust honey [which is] a pure nature product – one knows what one is eating»³⁵. The sentence will stick with Tony and become a cliché that she would repeat over breakfast throughout her life, becoming a symbol of both the constrained narrowness of her life and her subconscious regrets for having missed the opportunity of a more authentic one. Accordingly, while on the thematic level the depictions of clichés and routines serve as a way to express the sterile and uncreative dimension of habit, on the formal level, as Mann's conscious adoption of the Wagnerian concept of the *Leifmotif* attests, the use of repetitions in his writing serves as a way to multiply the layers of meaning.

The same tension between two opposing images of habit is reflected in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust's work, as has been noticed «unfolds as a long series of routines and repetitions that metamorphose or disappear with time and changing circumstances»; moreover, explicit «reflections on the role, effects, and nature of habit» are extremely frequent throughout the whole work³⁶. For a long time, critics have tended to overlook the role of habit in Proust's novel, leaving it a marginal place in their analysis³⁷. This is also due to the fact that critics have consistently interpreted Proust's

35 T. Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, Vintage, London 1992, p. 99.

36 E. Fülöp, *Habit in À la recherche du temps perdu*, in "French Studies", 68/3, 2014, 344-358.

37 This in spite of the fact that the centrality of the theme in the work is attested by the frequent use of the term *habitude* itself, «qui occupe la quinzième position dans une liste de plus de six cents entrées, se classant juste derrière des mots clés tels que "souvenir", "temps", "imagination", "mémoire", "connaissance" et "réalité"» (M. Piazza, *Proust, philosophe de l'habitude*, in "Revue d'études

vision of habit as more akin to Bergson's rather than Ravaisson's, thus leading to its reductive interpretation as mere fall into inertia³⁸. The radically negative interpretation of the theme of habit in Samuel Beckett's early monograph on Proust further contributed to its discredit. Nonetheless, more recently it has been noted how Proust was influenced and inspired by Bergson as much as by other philosophers and thinkers, including Ravaisson³⁹. In more general terms, however, the inclination to emphasize the negative aspects of habit to the detriment of its positive components can be traced to the already mentioned tendency to read modernism and early twentieth-century literature in light of the categories of the event, the exceptional, and the epiphany. As Gérard Genette noted, in Proust every event is but the «instant of transition, fugitive and irreparable, [...] between one habit and the next»⁴⁰, and recent research is finally trying to give its due to both the evenemential and the habitual dimensions of this dialectic⁴¹. From the very first pages of the *Recherche*, habit enters the scene at a crucial juncture. The novel opens with an extended reflection on the experience of falling asleep, that is, on the moment when, suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, the perception of reality fades into a state in which thoughts, memories and desires merge and blur. The reflection is initiated by the childhood experience of the narrator who, famously, «used to go to bed early». The first few pages are peppered with images and examples of the collapse of distinctions, of confusion between opposites, of a porosity

proustiennes", 5/3, 2017, p. 361.

38 Also due to the biographical proximity between the two authors, critics have often tended to interpret *La recherche* as «le monument littéraire symétrique de *Matière et Mémoire*» (P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 568) in spite of the author's own famous attempt to highlight how «mon oeuvre est dominée par la distinction entre la mémoire volontaire et la mémoire involontaire, distinction qui non seulement ne figure pas dans la philosophie de M. Bergson, mais est même contradictoire par elle». M. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve, Pastiches et mélanges, Essais et articles*, Gallimard, Paris 1971 p. 558.

39 The Ravaisson-Bergson-Proust triangulation here suggested is of course a simplification that does not take into due account the multiplicity of relevant influences that contributed to Proust's autonomous elaboration. For an overview of the philosophical influences specifically related to the issue of habit see M. Piazza, *Proust, philosophe de l'habitude*, cit. and S. Sandreschi de Robertis, *Da Spinoza a Proust: L'abitudine e i suoi molteplici effetti*, in (ed. by) D. Bostrenghi, C. Santinelli, S. Visentin "Spinoza nella culture del Novecento: percorsi attraverso la letteratura e le arti", Le Lettere, Firenze 2022. For a further juxtaposition between Proust and Ravaisson see S. Guerlac, *Proust, Photography, and the Time of Life. Ravaisson, Bergson, and Simmel*, Bloomsbury, London 2021.

40 G. Genette, *Figures III*, Seuil, Paris 1972, p. 111 (my trans.).

41 See E. Fülöp, *Habit in À la recherche du temps perdu*, cit.; E. Fülöp, *Proust's Imperfect, Rhythms of the Recherche*, in "Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui" 12, 2014; C. Carlisle, *On Habit*, cit.; M. Piazza, *Proust, philosophe de l'habitude*, cit.; Id., *Proust et la philosophie de l'habitude. Un élève d'Alphonse Darlu et de Paul Janet*, cit. and the dissertation A.R. Loeserman, *Proust and the Discourse on Habit*, University of Maryland, College Park, 2004 and the recent work by Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis.

between planes of reality similar to that described by Ravaisson. The thinking self becomes confused with the object that is being thought⁴²; the present folds in on itself and embraces the past⁴³; the numbed body becomes the body of another⁴⁴. Such Ravaissonian permeability of self and exteriority that the experience of laying between waking and sleeping produces explodes in the elaborate Proustian style, full of synaesthesias, expansions by means of metaphors and metonymies, and narrative slips that oscillate constantly between past and present.

It is against this background, in which every horizon blurs, and which certifies the *Recherche* as the novel of interstices par excellence⁴⁵, that the narrator tells about how it was an ineffable trauma for him to have to fall asleep in a new bedroom. Indeed, his extreme sensitivity would be put to the test by having to deal with the oscillation between self and non-self in an unfamiliar environment. For a dramatically fragile psychic constitution such as the protagonist's, in fact, a new environment is always the source of much suffering as it amplifies his receptivity to stimuli. Habit enters the scene at this point, explicitly invoked as «aménageuse habile mais bien lente et qui commence par laisser souffrir notre esprit pendant des semaines dans une installation provisoire; mais que malgré tout il est bien heureux de trouver, car sans l'habitude et réduit à ses seuls moyens il serait impuissant à nous rendre un logis habitable»⁴⁶. The features of the new room that prove unbearable to the hypersensitive child are gradually smoothed out or hidden in indifference, as the space finally becomes habitable. The paromasia between *habitude* and *habitable* plays out the meaning of habit for Proust as what enables one to transform space into place, a building into a dwelling, an alien surrounding into the expansion of one's own body and spirit. For this reason, for Marcel the breaking of a habit is as painful as the amputation of a limb, as recounted in these very same pages when the protagonist recalls how, during his childhood in Combray, the intrusion of a magic lantern – supposed to relieve his evening melancholy – had

42 «[...] il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles Quint». (M. Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Gallimard, Paris 1987-89, 4 voll. (vol. I), p. 3).

43 «[...] j'avais rejoint sans effort un âge à jamais révolu de ma vie primitive». (*Ivi*, p. 4).

44 «Quelquefois, comme Ève naquit d'une côte d'Adam, une femme naissait pendant mon sommeil d'une fausse position de ma cuisse. Formée du plaisir que j'étais sur le point de goûter, je m'imaginai que c'était elle qui me l'offrait». (*Ivi*, pp. 4-5).

45 I am here referring to Antoine Compagnon's definition of Proust's masterpiece as «roman de l'entre-deux» (A. Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles*, Seuil, Paris 1989, p. 13).

46 M. Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, cit., p. 8.

instead transformed his room into a place of torture, because the intrusion of the images projected on the wall «détruisait l'habitude que j'avais de ma chambre et grâce à quoi, sauf le supplice du coucher, elle m'était devenue supportable»⁴⁷.

[...] je ne peux dire quel malaise me causait pourtant cette intrusion du mystère et de la beauté dans une chambre que j'avais fini par remplir de mon moi au point de ne pas faire plus attention à elle qu'à lui même. L'influence anesthésiante de l'habitude ayant cessé, je me mettais à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes⁴⁸.

The room «rempli de mon moi» is a fitting metaphor for Proust's idea: a thickening on the surface of identity that protects the subject from the outside world and that is formed by the assimilation of the surrounding space by means of the daily rituals that take place in it. The protagonist of the *Recherche* is like the larvae of the trichoptera, stream insects that build protective cases for themselves by cementing the gravel and sand that surround them to their bodies. Thus, from a hotel in Balbec the narrator thinks back to the objects in his room in Paris as «des annexes de mes organes, un agrandissement de moi-même»⁴⁹ that were protecting him from the pain of novelty.

However, the protection offered by habit is acquired at the cost of a loss of sensitivity, a reduction of attention and a stagnation of experience. Habit colonizes all the meanderings of life and dulls the subject's sensitivity: just as the excessive meals of his summer vacation produce drowsiness, so habit builds around the self a comfort zone that risks turning into a self-imposed cage. As, then, for Thomas Mann, so also for Proust habit presents itself at first sight as a necessary evil, defined in the traditional terms of a «seconde nature» which «nous empêche de connaître la première dont elle n'a ni les cruautés ni les enchantements»⁵⁰.

At this level, that of the essayist dimension of Proust's work, habit is characterized by substantial duplicity: on the one hand it is a «pouvoir annihilateur qui supprime l'originalité et jusqu'à la conscience des perceptions», on the other it is a «divinité redoutable, si rivée à nous, son visage insignifiant si incrusté dans notre coeur, que si elle se détache, si elle se détourne de nous, cette déité que nous ne distinguons pas,

47 *Ivi*, p. 9.

48 *Ivi*, p. 10.

49 *Ivi*, p. 466.

50 *Ivi*, vol. III, p. 151.

nous inflige des souffrances plus terribles qu'aucune et qu'alors elle est aussi cruelle que la mort»⁵¹. On the one hand, then, habit is an antivital force that can be neutralized only by means of the temporary liberation brought about by involuntary memory, on the other, it is the necessary condition for survival.

Beneath this duplicity of the function of habit at the level of the explicit theory proposed by the narrator, however, there emerges an implicit conception of habit that is richer and more ambiguous. Up to this point, the representation of habit in the novel can indeed be said to overlap with Bergson's theory, and thus be imagined as a sedative and a screen. However, Proust's implicit theory of habit departs from Bergson as it identifies in habit a more positive and creative component which suggests a closer proximity to Ravaisson's theories. The aspect in which this dimension is most evident is related to the thematic core of Proust's work, that is, where the phenomenology of memory and the theory of art come into contact in his theory of involuntary memory, which, as Proust himself highlighted, radically diverges from Bergson's theories.

Although both of the two forms of memory identified by Bergson express a persistence of the past in the present, it is only memory-remembrance that has the power to show, as a representation, the remoteness of the past. Memory-habit, by contrast, identified as “remembering how” as opposed to “remembering when”, totally belongs to the present: it is generated in the past but, so to speak, ignores its origin. Proust's experience of involuntary memory shares aspects of both forms of memory, but is not merely a combination of the two. On the one hand, while involuntary memory evokes a past connoted as such and is thus certainly a form of “remembering when,” it is also true that it can only be triggered by the spontaneous encounter with an experience in the present that recalls a similar event in the past. Moreover, in order to function as a way to conjure up the past, this experience is to be indulged in, rather than stimulated, thus requiring as its starting point a passive attitude that does not correspond to Bergson's description of memory-remembrance. On the other hand, even though involuntary memory, through its being rooted in the contingency of the present, is in some respects more akin to memory-habit than to memory-remembrance, it does not align with Bergson's view of memory-habit as purely mechanical, sterile and passive. By contrast, involuntary memory is essentially creative and, within Proust's aestheticist worldview,

51 *Ivi*, vol. IV, p. 4.

plays the fundamental role of inciting the individual to pursue their artistic calling. The resurrection of past seasons in the present does not deliver the mere representation of something that is no longer here, but a truer dimension of reality which would otherwise not be merely lost or forgotten, but completely inexistent, as «ne se forme que dans la mémoire»⁵², and goes together with the «obligation [...] pénible»⁵³ to be pursued and preserved in the work of art.

This creative dimension of involuntary memory is directly derived from what I have called Proust's implicit theory of habit. While it is true that habit is represented in the course of the novel as a primarily passive force protecting the subject from the harshness of the external world, it is also true that this same force is the condition of possibility of the recreation of a truer dimension of reality by means of involuntary memory. What distinguishes involuntary memory from voluntary memory is that its “content” is not simply the image of an event in the past, but the web-like structure of repetitive behaviors that in a certain period of the past habit thickened around the subject thus unifying an extended period of its existence. In line with Ravaissou's idea of life as that form of continuity through time that makes of a living being not just *some* being but *a* being⁵⁴, habit is the force that unifies one's multifarious and dispersed experiences into individual life chapters. However, this unity is never to be perceived in the present time, precisely because in relation to the present habit works as an anesthetizer of experience. It is only when it is resurrected in involuntary memory that it reveals its wholeness and its plastic expressiveness. It is then thanks to habit that involuntary memory can work as a way to recall not merely images of specific bygone moments, but whole seasons of past life: if what emerges from the cup of tea in which the narrator dips his madeleine is not a mere instant of the past, but a whole period of his life, it is because the habits that he had developed in that distant time, and that back then would dull the perception of events, did at the same time congeal those scattered experiences into a unity⁵⁵. This is also the reason why the trigger of involuntary memory is a sensation connected to a trivial and prosaic experience such as the taste of

52 *Ivi*, vol. I, p. 224.

53 *Ivi*, p. 219.

54 F. Ravaissou, *De l'Habitude*, cit., p. 6.

55 Eleonora Sparvoli claims, along a similar line, that «the present – the time of the pulverization of the experience – needs, for the self to truly appropriate it, to first consolidate in the repetition and then in memorial crystallization» (E. Sparvoli, *Marcel Proust e le virtù della ripetizione*, in M. Tortora e A. Volpone, *Il romanzo modernista europeo*, Carocci, Milano 2019, p. 132, my translation).

a cup of tea rather than any particularly memorable or significant episode in the life of the narrator.

As opposed to Bergson, Proust does not merely depict habit as the heavy veil that hides reality from us but, by contrast, he also identifies it as the silt in which the fragments of our past sediment, and thanks to which they are preserved to be returned, fossilized, in the splendor of a drop of amber. If for Bergson habit was represented as only stiffening, mechanization and decrease of vitality, for Proust it is also that which, by introducing a meander in the flow of life, forces the current to deposit its treasures. In doing this, habit is already in itself creative, as it penetrates the interstices between different experiences at the same time dividing and connecting them, thus manifesting its function of “common limit”⁵⁶ between opposites where passivity fades into activity, body into spirit, the fixedness of the past into the potentialities of becoming and *vice versa*.

One can thus identify in Proust a dynamic tension between the Bergsonian negative view of mechanical habit and the Ravaissonian positive embrace of creative habit. Habit is indeed an antivital force, but only in relation to the present moment, which is always a moment of chaotic dispersion. As it is left behind in the past, habit coagulates duration into a form, and thus preserves the multiple layers of a season of life as a bottle of great wine preserves the peculiarities of a specific vintage; and, like great wines, it too has to be forgotten for a long time in order to develop its more subtle aromas. Once it is resurrected into the present moment by involuntary memory, habit reveals its creative dimension, bringing to completion that revitalizing and creative function that Ravaisson had identified⁵⁷.

4. Addiction and Circular Time in Italo Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*

Modernist writers also proved interested in a more disturbing and troubling dimension of habit, that is, addiction. Addiction can be seen as a form of habit in which repetition

56 F. Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude, précédée d'une introduction par Jean Baruzi*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1927, p. 40.

57 The difference between Proust's and Bergson's ideas of habit, therefore, is not limited to a difference between the aesthetic and the psychological planes, as suggested by Pilkington, who claims that «as an artist, Marcel treats habit in a very Bergsonian manner; as an insecure and neurotic individual, he welcomes habit as a defense against the novelty in life, which he aims to render in his book.» See A. E. Pilkington, *Bergson and his Influence. A Reassessment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, p. 167), but on the connection between the two planes.

does not lead to a gradual fading towards latency of the will, but to the expression of a conflict between two opposing wills: the will that perceives itself as independent, and the opposing force of a parasitic will that constantly deprives the former of its sovereignty over itself. Putting aside both the moralistic understanding of addiction as vice as well as the hygienic paradigm which reduces addiction to a harmful habit, addiction encapsulates one of the most disturbing aspects of human existence: the capacity to act to one's own detriment and against one's will, a capacity in which, as addiction studies show, is the distressing manifestation of the Otherness that inhabits each human being, the inescapable and incurable surplus of the human subject to himself⁵⁸.

La coscienza di Zeno, the masterpiece of Italian modernism published in 1923 by Italo Svevo, owes a large part of its fame to what might be one of the finest investigations of addiction in literary history. Inspired by the author's own obsession for cigarettes the novel pretends to be the autobiography of the neurotic Zeno Cosini, drafted as part of the therapy administered by his psychoanalyst, Dr. S., and published by the latter as a way of punishing his patient for his refusal to interrupt the treatment. The curious – and deontologically abhorrent – decision of the psychoanalyst contributes from the very beginning of the novel to the ambiguity and unreliability of its narration.

In the famous first extended chapter of the novel, *The Smoke*, the protagonist-narrator recounts his morbid relationship with tobacco and his unsuccessful attempts to get rid of his addiction in a humorous escalation culminating in his escape from a clinic where he had locked himself in order to be helped to quit smoking. The smoking habit is presented as the origin and at the same time the symbol of the disease which Zeno hopes to be cured of by Doctor S., and thus serves as the driving force of the biography. The disease itself, which is never clearly spelled out, is one form of that degeneracy of the will which generated a lot of anxiety in turn-of-the-century culture. Zeno, a wealthy bourgeois who is not able to profit from any form of productive work because incapable of taking care of his business, wastes his time playing the violin badly and making himself ridiculous in society with his clumsy manners. He is unable to take any real decision and even his marriage is the result of a series of misunderstandings with the

58 See, for example, J. Orford, *Excessive Appetites: A Psychological View of Addictions*, John Wiley & Sons, New York 2001; G. Heyman, *Addiction. A Disorder of Choice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009; R. Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

family of his fiancée. Smoke, thus, becomes the metaphor of Zeno's inability to commit to any concrete endeavor and of the subconscious force that sabotages all of his attempts to take control of his life.

The central scene of the section is the comic episode dedicated to the «whirl of last cigarettes»⁵⁹. Zeno tells of the numerous attempts to quit smoking that he made throughout his life: he would pick a date, connected to a positive or negative episode or to any random criterion and, with full conviction and purpose, mark it on the calendar, on one of his books or even on the walls of his apartment as the date of his last cigarette. «In the end», he says dispiritedly, «my days were full of cigarettes and resolutions to smoke no more»⁶⁰, as the walls of his apartment get covered with the dates of his virtuous resolutions to the point of becoming «the graveyard of my good intentions»⁶¹ and forcing its tenant to move because «I believed it no longer possible to conceive any further such intentions in that tomb of so many old ones»⁶². In the end, Zeno himself suggests in his self-analysis that the two opposed wills might just be the two poles of a system that all in all works the way it is supposed to, and in which the «last» cigarettes acquire a «more intense»⁶³ taste from the resolution, while the other cigarettes are a way of «proclaiming your freedom»⁶⁴ from the self-mandated imposition «while the future of strength and health remains, only moving off a bit»⁶⁵.

James Joyce – a friend, correspondent and promoter of the author – observed in a letter to Svevo commenting on the book, that he had enjoyed two things above all: the thematic aspect of addiction to smoking and the formal dimension of the handling of temporality⁶⁶. As has already been noted, the two aspects grasped by Joyce in his perceptive reading are essentially connected⁶⁷. The inner conflict within the character is reflected in the way the narrative is constantly broken up by flashbacks, flashforwards and by sideways departures triggered by metonymic suggestions, a narrative technique that has often been connected to the influence of Freud's psychoanalytic method. Just as

59 I. Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, Penguin, London 2002, p. 11.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Ibid.*

66 «Per ora due cose m'interessano. Il tema: non avrei mai pensato che il fumo potesse dominare una persona in quel modo; secondo, il trattamento del tempo nel romanzo». (cit. in I. Svevo, *Romanzi e «continuazioni»*, Mondadori, Milano 2004, p. 628, n.1).

67 M. Lavagetto, *L'impiegato Schmidt e altri saggi*, Einaudi, Torino 1975, pp. 76 ff.

psychoanalysis, relying on the principle of the timelessness of the unconscious, works by associations and disrupts chronology, so Svevo constructs his novel by thematic juxtapositions, continuous shifts in time, and repetitions. However, Svevo's affinity with Freud goes beyond the adoption of the psychoanalytic technique. In particular, the treatment of addiction in the novel suggests a parallelism with Freud's late essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, not necessarily in the sense that the latter were a source for the former, but as two expressions of similar preoccupations in relation to habit and addiction⁶⁸.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle, published in 1920 – that is, three years before *Zeno* – is notoriously one of the most opaque of Freudian works. This is due to the self-critical nature of this writing, in which Freud goes beyond the boundaries he had set for himself and probes the very foundations of his theories. Freud's essay starts with a consideration of a series of varied phenomena that challenge his theories as he had developed it until then. These phenomena have in common two main elements: on the one hand, the presence of repetition, and on the other, the subject's apparent desire for a painful experience that seems incompatible, if not contradictory, with the idea that the main driving force of the psyche should be the pursuit of pleasure. The most obvious example, as the author acknowledges, is that of recurrent nightmares that reawaken the memory of a past trauma. How can this be compatible with the idea of dreams as the space in which repressed desires are fulfilled? Attempting to account for phenomena of this kind, Freud develops a dense argument that leads him into a territory that, in spite of his avowed aversion to the subject, is exquisitely metaphysical.

In order to explain these self-destructive drives and what makes them so essentially connected with the notion of repetition, Freud goes back to the image of life at its beginnings, as it emerged from the inorganic substratum. Freud thinks of the first living being as «an undifferentiated vesicle of sensitive substance»⁶⁹ taking advantage of one of the great insights of nineteenth century biology – an insight that had also inspired

68 A reconstruction of this *Zeitgeist* would require a study of the influence of the influence on both Freud and Svevo, as well as on many of the other authors here discussed and on the culture of the time at large, of Arthur Schopenhauer, whom Freud decided to read for the first time, according to what he writes in a Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, precisely as he was writing *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. (A.M. Marietti e R. Colomi, *Avvertenza*, in S. Freud, *Tre saggi sulla sessualità – Al di là del principio di piacere*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2012, p. 134).

69 S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, The International Psycho-Analytical Press, London 1922, p. 29.

Butler and Ravaissou –, namely, that the first and most essential property of living beings is that of being enveloped by a surface that distinguishes the inside from the outside in a reciprocal but asymmetrical tension. Using an image that Gilles Deleuze would later return to, Freud suggests that life is then first and foremost a folding of inanimate matter onto itself that reproduces itself in a series of subsequent folds. The origin and the essence of life has more to do with the surface than with what it contains, which merely follows such surface both logically and in terms of ontogenesis.

The asymmetrical tension between the inside and the outside generates the two fundamental forces that are at the core of life in its varied forms. The first and most primeval – and this is the momentous discovery that Freud reaches in this essay and that destabilizes the foundations of his previous theories – is the tendency to break up the enclosing surface in order to restore the equilibrium of the previous state of inorganic existence: «the first instinct was present, that to return to lifeliness»⁷⁰. The primeval drive to death is balanced by a second force which, even though derivative, is dialectically opposed to it as it struggles to guarantee that the goal of death of each individual living being is reached according to its own immanent reasons rather than by external pressure, because «the organism is resolved to die only in its own way»⁷¹. Each creature, claims Freud, is then, so to speak, jealous of its own death and «resists with all its energy influences (dangers) which could help it to reach its life-goal by a short way»⁷². Both forces are an expression of the more general principle according to which all things tend to maintain or return to a situation of stasis, but while the first force leads to the definitive stasis of the inorganic, the second tends to preserve the state of dynamic equilibrium between inside and outside that is the definition of life itself. The interplay between the two forces inevitably tends to produce a pattern of oscillation through the many returns to the state of relative equilibrium encompassed in the broader odyssey of the return to the inorganic. This interplay activates the «oscillating rhythm»⁷³ of life, which is then essentially, and not merely as an accident, made up of repetitions.

Only by going so far back in the history of life does Freud manage to explain those phenomena typical of human life in which repetition and pain are intertwined. They are

70 *Ivi*, p. 47.

71 *Ivi*, p. 48.

72 *Ivi*, p. 49.

73 *Ivi*, p. 50.

the manifestation, at the level of the most complex form of life reached by evolution, of the call of the inorganic that echoes from its origins in life itself. But every form of repetition in life – whether simple habits, recurrent traumatic dreams or repetition compulsion – is but the surface manifestation of life's deep nostalgia for the inorganic. Like the composer who inserts near the end of the score an *a capo*, life constantly tries to postpone the final chord of the return to the inorganic to its appropriate moment. I a partial affinity with Bergson's thought, repetition is seen as the manifestation in life of that which is opposed to it but without which it could not exist because it precedes it and, inevitably, follows it. The more or less extensive circularities that occur in the course of the individual's life are thus inscribed in a spiral into ever broader circularities: from the individual's birth to its necessary consequent death, to the all-encompassing process of emergence from and return to the organic which constitutes the realm of life as a whole.

Going back to Zeno and his addiction to smoking, one can easily see how it relates to Freud's theories. Addiction is to be traced back to the interplay between the self-destructive drive and the self-preserving drive that delays its success by restraining its impetus. This is reflected in the insistence with which, as we have seen, Zeno shows the inner clash between opposing tensions, a clash that nevertheless allows for an unstable equilibrium but no dialectical solution. Zeno's unconscious desire is to tear himself away from his own mortality, that is, to get free of temporality itself. Seen in this light, the «whirl of the last cigarettes» expresses his hope to break the circularity of his existence and replace it with the linearity of before and after by means of the introduction of a point of discontinuity, symbolized by the dates he writes on the walls of his apartment. It is an impossible hope, of course, and the very compulsion to add more and more promises ironically exposes it, thus making a habit of the gesture that is supposed to break the habit itself. Moreover, as Freud suggests, the original drive that manifests itself in the repetition also brings with it the overcoming of the «Kantian thesis [according to which] time and space are necessary forms of our thought». On the contrary, they appear at an advanced stage in the evolution of consciousness and rest on a substratum, preceding and contradicting them, in which linearity is denied by circularity. In Zeno's incapacity to break free from the circularity of time, therefore, one can perceive the extreme blow dealt to the Enlightenment cathedral built by Kant and

reflected in the modernist crisis of narrative identity. Once it is seen in this light, the passage which ends the section of the text devoted to the «whirl of last cigarettes» takes on an entirely new poignancy:

To reduce its outlandish appearance, I even tried to give a philosophical content to the last-cigarette disease. Striking a beautiful attitude, one says: “Never again.” But what becomes of that attitude if the promise is then kept? It's possible to strike the attitude only when you are obliged to renew the vow. And besides, for me, time is not that inconceivable thing that never stops. For me, and only for me, it retraces its steps. [it. «Da me, solo da me, ritorna»]⁷⁴

Behind the character trying to give an ironic «philosophical content» to his fixation, the author is winking at the reader and – probably hinting at the Nietzschean theory of eternal return – inviting him to ponder over the philosophical content of the novel itself. The wink returns a few pages later, in a game at once ironic and profound in which repetition repeats itself. Zeno is fleeing from the clinic which he had entered to stop smoking, and since he has no money with him he promises to the woman at the door that he would give her a tip the next time: «There's no knowing the future» he quips, «With me, things are often repeated [it. “Da me le cose si ripetono”]: it was conceivable that I might turn up there again»⁷⁵. Zeno's addiction to smoking is thus not only the mirror of an individual's deadlock, but it is the symbol of a metaphysical posture. In the repetition that clutches his life, the call of that which opposes life from within life itself is made manifest, and his clumsy attempts to escape it only tighten the knots that hold him bound to an irredeemably circular temporality.

If the linearity of experience is radically questioned, then the psychoanalytic cure loses all possibility of success. The cure is based on an investigation of his own history by means of which the present is explained in the light of the past, but if all events in life are but a form of repetition – a projection on a smaller scale of the all-encompassing repetition that leads life back to its cradle –, then the enterprise of interpreting the present in the light of the past no longer makes any sense. Guided by the doctor, Zeno had hoped he could return in memory to his lost innocence in order to witness from there the progressive degradation of his soul and for this reason he had agreed to write

74 I. Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, Penguin, London 2002, pp. 13-4.

75 *Ivi*, p. 29.

his autobiography: «I had already cherished the hope of being able to relive one day of innocence and naïveté. [...] Didn't it mean producing, through vital memory, in full winter the roses of May?»⁷⁶. If everything is always already inscribed in repetition, though, such a recovery is impossible, and not because of the unreachable remoteness of the past, but because the purity of innocence that he looks for never really existed except as a fiction: «after pursuing those images, I overtook them. Now I know that I invented them. But inventing is a creation, not a lie»⁷⁷. If repetition breaks the linearity and recollection only proves to be invention, the psychoanalytic project crumbles and, instead of delivering the subject to health, delivers him to the helpless passivity – «I, for the moment, do nothing»⁷⁸ – to which Zeno gives up as the conclusion of the novel approaches and the shadows of war spread over Europe.

If psychoanalysis fails, though, and in this light it cannot but fail, is there any possibility for healing left for the subject? In the last section of the novel, the narrator eventually addresses this question and answers in the affirmative. The opening of the chapter marks a radical caesura with the previous sections of the novel with a shift from the form of the memoir to that of the diary, which of course entails a change in the implicit addressee. If until the end of the previous chapter Doctor S. had remained present as a silent but attentive listener to Zeno's confessions, here he is kicked out of the scene from the very peremptory first sentence – «I'm through with psychoanalysis»⁷⁹ – as both «the narrative voice and the worldview of which it is the bearer radically change»⁸⁰. This mutation prepares for that further twist that takes place in the last few pages: the diary entry dated March 24, 1916, in which Zeno claims to have eventually found the cure for his illness by himself. These pages signal a veritable «gnoseological jerk»⁸¹ in Zeno's adventure in the light of which the entire previous journey is tinged with new colors. «I am cured!»⁸², declares Zeno, and it is evident that the healing is far more real than the one that, a year earlier, the doctor had announced to him when he had finally succeeded in framing his patient's illness within the predictable

76 Ivi, p. 404.

77 Ibid.

78 Ivi, p. 433.

79 Ivi, p. 402.

80 M. Tortora, *Zeno Antieroe modernista*, in R. Luperini e M. Tortora, *Sul modernismo italiano*, Liguori, Napoli 2012, p. 186 (my translation).

81 Ivi, p. 187.

82 I. Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, cit., p. 434.

Oedipal triangle. In light of the discovery of repetition as the essential dimension of human temporality, psychoanalysis' grim obsession with past time – whether as trauma, as the imprints of the parents, or as guilt – turns from being a means of cure to a symptom of illness. By contrast, it is in a Nietzschean vitalistic embrace of the present that Zeno eventually finds his health as he rediscovers, in the shadows of war, his capacity for action and a new openness to the future. The beginning of the new phase is marked symbolically by the way in which dates, that had featured so prominently in the episode of the «whirl of the last cigarettes», serve a totally different function at the opening of each diary entry making up the last chapter. Instead of being the emphatic signals of an hypothetical dramatic change that would sever the future from the past by means of the present moment, they serve to record the rhythm of the present of each day, which is shaped by the past but not enslaved to it, and open to the future without being obsessed with it. From the platform of the present, the subject can now extend its gaze toward an apocalyptic future, and imagine the «enormous explosion» that would reduce the earth to «a nebula [which] will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness»⁸³. Instead of leading to a nihilistic melancholy posture, though, the catastrophe is simply presented as the mirror in which all life, with its inevitable intermingling of progressive and regressive forces, sees its destiny and accepts it.

If psychoanalysis stubbornly seeks the meaning of the present by digging into the past, Zeno realizes that it should rather be found in the openness to the future: not in retracing the paths of one's childhood, but in the project of finally becoming not just elderly, but adults. In the light of this realization Zeno wishes he could rewrite his story, thus repeating it once again but in the light of his renewed understanding:

The doctor, when he has received this last part of my manuscript, should then give it all back to me. I would rewrite it with real clarity, for how could I understand my life before knowing this last period of it? Perhaps I lived all those years only to prepare myself for this⁸⁴!

The psychoanalyst's resentful decision of publishing the manuscript against Zeno's will does not allow the readers to know what the healed character's opinion of his life

83 *Ivi*, p. 437.

84 *Ivi*, p. 435.

would be. The doctor's perspective represents the stubborn and obtuse belief that health passes through a bringing back to consciousness that which has sunk into the unconscious, according to the principle that identifies being with its history. As opposed to this notion, the healed Zeno of the present finds his health in the identification of being with becoming, in embracing repetition not as the guilt carried on one's shoulders but as the rhythm of constant transformation, for which it is the future that sheds light on the present.

Zeno's healing, thus, has the paradoxical form of the discovery of illness as the very essence of life, rather than its degraded form: «sorrow and love – life, in other words – cannot be considered a sickness because they hurt»⁸⁵. Health coincides with the abandonment of the very idea of health as immaculate innocence. By contrast, health lies in the ability to recognize the universal illness while keeping at the right distance, being aware that «unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal. It doesn't tolerate therapies»⁸⁶.

The novel's swift conclusion with its abrupt change of tone, in which a vitalistic stance overpowers the previous abandonment to melancholy, invites the juxtaposition of Svevo's novel with Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*. In that case, too, the closing of a novel entirely devoted to the decadent escape into reverie and an almost obsessive contemplation of illness (and in which unsurprisingly memorable pages are dedicated to smoking, the perfect symbol of all this), takes the form of a sudden interruption due to the breaking out of war which leads to a radical reaffirmation of reality over reveries. In both novels the Great War offers the subject with the terrifying mirror of a planetary catastrophe that is nevertheless, at the same time, an opportunity for healing, or at least a return to the mud of the real from the rarefied air of the magic mountain.

If in the ending of Mann's novel the possibility of a different fate is only hinted at in the question with which the novel concludes⁸⁷, *La coscienza di Zeno* offers a more fleshed-out idea of health as keeping the right distance from oneself. The means to achieve this distance, as represented in the novel, are two: work and irony. Having finally got free from Olivi, the manager of Zeno's businesses appointed by his late father

85 Ivi, p. 434.

86 Ivi, p. 435.

87 «Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow, may it be that Love one day shall mount?» (T. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1949, p. 716).

who forced Zeno into an everlasting position of filial passivity, he takes charge of his own affairs and thus regains a healthy relationship with reality⁸⁸. Instead of losing himself in the wandering reveries of a successful future, he sets to work and grasps the success that the dramatic situation of war offers him. In this way, he combines a proper balance between a position of passive acceptance of reality and an active attempt to develop one's project in it. Zeno discovers the second tool, irony – the rhetorical figure that looks at things from a distance – as something that he already possessed, and finds it embodied in that figure of «health personified»⁸⁹ that had always been beside him, and who is the silent heroine of the novel: his wife Augusta. The novel's ending, with the belated victory of health, merely echoes his wife's laughter at the end of the chapter *The Smoke*, a laughter that does not mean mockery, but affectionate acceptance of a destiny in which repetition is not shunned, but embraced.

By means of an interpretation that moves from the metaphysical issues raised by Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one thus gets a fresh understanding of the novel which, starting from a confrontation with the negativity that inhabits life itself, ends by embracing the cheerful attitude of Zeno who eventually learns to «smile at life as well as at my illness»⁹⁰. As Maria Anna Mariani has noted, in this way Zeno seems to echo the way in which Nietzsche had dissolved the opposition between health and illness, which «must be accepted with a smile that, at the same time, says yes also to life»⁹¹. A way of saying yes to life that is a discovery of how, in the shadow of life itself – the side inhabited by death drives, illness, and repetition – also lies the source of a precarious but genuine happiness, the same idea that led Svevo to suggest to his correspondent Valerio Jahier that the acceptance of illness might be the only available cure: «why would we want to cure our illness? Do we really have to take away from humanity what is best about it?»⁹².

88 On the important but often overlooked theme of work in Svevo see G. Miceli Jeffries, *Darwinismo, Machiavellismo e "creative destruction" nella rappresentazione del lavoro e degli affari in Svevo*, in "Annali d'italianistica", 32, 2014, pp. 215-234.

89 I. Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, cit., p. 645.

90 *Ibid.*

91 M.A. Mariani, *Svevo e Nietzsche*, in "Allegoria", 59, 2009, p. 77.

92 Quoted in G. Palmieri, *Schmitz, Svevo, Zeno. Storia di due «biblioteche»*, Bompiani, Milano 1994, p. 35.

