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Zeno’s Narrative Identity

Narrative identity

It was a philosopher, and not a scholar in literature, who carried out the deepest inquiry on the relationship between ‘character’ as a fictional person and ‘character’ as the sum of moral qualities and ethical aptitudes of an individual. The concept of narrative identity, firstly developed by Paul Ricoeur in Time and Narrative, then in the essay The narrative identity and eventually in Oneself as Another, is his most important theoretical contribution to narrative theory.

In Ricoeur’s words, narrative is “the first laboratory of moral judgement” (Ricoeur 1992, 140). This statement doesn’t mean that literature is a sort of repertoire of themes and materials that can be simply submitted to philosophical reflection. On the contrary, because of its specific form, narrative provides practical solutions for the aporetical problems concerning the definition of identity: who is an individual? How can he can be recognized always as the same person? Can his moral qualities be sufficient to define him? No answer to such questions could be provided without negotiating between the need to acknowledge the existence of stable structures in the individuals and the unavoidable necessity to face the passage of time, namely the fact that those allegedly stable features may alter. As Aristotle explains both in the Nicomachean Ethics and in the Poetics, relying on a double definition, character is an aggregate of traits that allows an individual to be re-identified always as the same (idem, in Ricoeur’s terms): étê – general customs and collective habits – are actually strictly related to êthos, which is the individual temperament or disposition (Ricoeur 1992, 121). According to Ricoeur, narrative identity negotiates between character and experience, giving a temporal shape to those qualities and features that are supposed immutable. Storytelling is its primary way of expression, grounded on a semantic temporal device. In the twentieth century, Wilhelm Dilthey reflected upon this issue, working out the concept of Zusammenhang des Lebens – unity of life – as the way through which one can define oneself just by telling the story of his life. Narrative identity, grounded not on the idem but on the ipse (self), allows the configuration of experience in a plot that includes stable traits in a temporal structure: “the specific model of the interconnection of events constituted by emplotment allows us to integrate with permanence in time what seem to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability” (Ricoeur 1992, 140). Such a configuration
actually denies the fixed permanence of character, and simultaneously prevents any form of radical scepticism in the definition of identity.

Western fiction displays a vast heritage of narrative identities: characters identifiable as consistently the same, characters whose recognisability decreases but does not dissolve, characters comparable to those which analytic philosophers define – as Ricoeur (1992, 148-49) also recalls – puzzling cases. Starting from these theoretical foundations, Ricoeur proposes a re-reading of the history of western fiction, focusing on the dramatic fracture occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century: the balance between permanence and mutability breaks down, structures that formerly made characters identifiable appear undermined, the possibility to recognise a fictional individual as the same is taken to an extreme, beyond which the art of storytelling denies itself.

No modernist character is supposed to be in a position to pronounce, for instance, the motto that defines and immortalises Capaneo among the blasphemers, whilst he is tormented by fiery flakes raining from the sky on the flaming sand in the seventh circle of Dante’s Inferno: «Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto» (Inf. XIV, 51). In Dantean afterlife a clear definition of characters’ narrative identities, which in modern fictional anthropology becomes a crucial and problematic issue, is firmly grounded on an essential narrative pattern, based on the encounter. As damned souls, Inferno’s characters seem to be entirely recognisable and identifiable, but, as Auerbach (1953; 1961) brilliantly argued, they are not merely classified and defined by the group of sinners they belong to. They are what they were whilst alive, though retaining only the main traits of their past self. As a consequence, the dead show the vigour, the passions and the sense of time passing as the living do, but they have lost any kind of contingency and uncertainty. They are alive but they do not undergo the imperfection and transiency of life, so that their accounts, their gestures and their expressions – brought forth by an acute narrative selection – comprise the ultimate truth about their existence.

Capaneo’s words display the power of character as a form of conjunction between a life story and the moral qualities that it embodies, so that the life of an individual can be told in just a few words. Such an archaic and basic configuration of human experience – a narration that erases the passing of time to the extent that it is pronounced in an extra-temporal dimension – cannot be overcome (Kermode 1969; Ricoeur 1984). Even modernist narrative cannot reject the devices necessary to make a character recognisable (Price 1983). Whether parodied or undermined, such devices are not only unavoidable, but they also provide a narrative pattern for at least one kind of modernist character. Devoid of any ontological and existential consistency, ‘character’ – in the ethical sense of the word – re-emerges as a repressed structure in fictional literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. I should like to analyse the case of Zeno.
Characters who do (not) change

According to a sort of critical ‘common sense’, well-grounded in readers and general introductions to modernism, characters in modernist fiction become unstable entities, devoid of consistency and split by centrifugal forces (Kern 2011). They ceaselessly change and are unable to individuate the differences between distinct stages of their life and to comprehend the relationship between past and present. Indeed, this character prototype is quite recurrent in modernist fiction. For instance Vitangelo Moscarda, the protagonist and narrator of Uno, nessuno e centomila, uses his voice in order to demolish all the connections between body and interiority, actions and thoughts, because he aims at fleeing the temporal dimension of existence. The end of the novel establishes the ultimate destruction of all the fixed structures necessary to make Vitangelo recognisable: «muoio ogni attimo, io, e rinasco nuovo e senza ricordi» (Pirandello 1963: 1461). Vitangelo’s words seem the very opposite of Capaneo’s motto, to the extent that in this case death grants no integrity and no specific meaning to the account of life, but on the contrary, it effaces the sense of time as well as experiences and memories. Dying is not a unique and unrepeatable event that gives existence an intelligible shape, but it is rather something that can be repeated and multiplied.

On closer inspection, one should acknowledge that mutability is not the main feature of many other modernist characters, whose fictional existence is characterised as ambiguous rather than volatile and alterable. Their narrative identity is not weakened by the furious and chaotic passage of time or by a protean narrator, whose voice and point of view are shifting and polycentric. Rather, these characters seem stiff and mysterious and the access to their inner life is seemingly forbidden. Albertine in À la recherche du temps perdu1 as well as Mrs Ramsay in To the Lighthouse2 are built upon such a pattern. Photographic and pictorial images attempt in vain to grasp the truth about their existence, whereas the story of their life remains full of

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1 Albertine’s body hides an unknowable space, which is uncanny to the extent that no one is able to decipher it. So, it is only while she is sleeping, in a deathlike condition, that Albertine comes to be in Marcel’s possession. See Proust 1988, 583: “L’image que je cherchais, où je me reposais, contre laquelle j’aurais voulu mourir, ce n’était plus l’Albertine ayant une vie inconnue, […] c’était une Albertine ne reflétant pas un monde lointain, mais ne désirant rien d’autre – il y avait des instants où, en effet, cela semblait être ainsi – qu’être avec moi, toute pareille à moi, une Albertine image de ce qui précisément était mien et non de l’inconnu”.

2 Mrs Ramsay, subject of a painting Lily Briscoe is working on, is in the painter’s eyes first and foremost “sealed”. Lily wishes she could not only know Mrs Ramsay but also have an “intimacy” with her, so that she could cross the threshold of the body and access the “secret chambers” in which the woman conceals her “treasures”. See Woolf 1963, 82-83.
blanks. Furthermore, their death does not produce semantic effects; on the contrary it increases and intensifies their opacity. The reader finds out about Albertine’s death through a telegram that Marcel receives just the moment before two letters sent by Albertine herself arrive. The account of her death reaches him in combination with her prayer to come back to live with him. Her death, to which no consistent narration is devoted, in fact coincides with its negation or, rather, with a phantasmatic re-emergence, so that even the ultimate event of her existence proves to be opaque and meaningless. Also Mrs Ramsay’s death is not properly narrated but simply put in brackets, as if it were a purely casual accident occurred in a vague time: «[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]» (Woolf 1963, 199-200). The image of Mr Ramsay’s empty arms – an ancient *topos* present in Vergil and Dante – works both as a metaphor for death and as the sign of an elusive subject whose narrative identity is based on a few permanent traits that make the character simultaneously recognisable and unknowable.

Yet one should reflect on another form of permanence in the shaping of characters. There is a kind of narrative identity in which the self is compelled to recognise every aspect of the experience as identical, as if the inner world were pathologically frozen and unable to feel time passing. Such characters do not change, not because they can rely on a solid self-knowledge that makes the story of their life clear and complete, but because a trauma haunts their interiority. Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, Gonzalo Pirobutirro in *La cognizione del dolore* display stiff and petrified narrative identities, bound to a past that they cannot overcome. In some respects Zeno bears some resemblances to this pattern. Although his story is not tragic as Septimus’ or Quentin’s ones are, he shares their same tendency to annihilate any sense of change, making inner life the space in which the *idem* (the same) has definitely overwhelmed the *ipse* (the self). But a significant difference must be remarked: while Quentin, Septimus and Gonzalo undergo the paralysing effects of permanence – that is of an *idem* that is not able to change – Zeno consciously and unconsciously pursues and realises it. In fact, he stages a story of his life whose narrative rhetoric seems to meet the requirements of a single rule: everything resembles everything.

*Repetitions*

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3 See Proust 1989, 58-60.
The iteration of themes and motives – a typical feature of high-modernist fiction – is an essential narrative strategy in *La coscienza di Zeno* (Contini 1983). In a first-person narrative, though, thematic materials are inseparable from the narrative rhetoric, as *inventio, dispositio*, and *actio* constantly interweave. As a consequence, repetitions must be examined through both the arrangement of themes in the plot and their formal expression.

*La coscienza di Zeno*’s third chapter contains an implicit theory of narrative repetition. Except for its initial and final thresholds, the whole novel seems to be modelled after a thematic principle inspired by psychoanalysis (Lavagetto 2001), but only *Il fumo* is actually built around a theme that prevails over chronology and ends up destroying it (Bacchereti 1995; Carrai 1998). As for the following chapters, two of them display the word ‘storia’ (history) in their title; one hints at a punctual event – the death of Zeno’s father – whereas only *La moglie e l’amante* seems to retain a thematic structure. If we analyse their internal architecture, we realize that only the third chapter keeps to the idea that experience can be told subordinating chronology and extemporal memories to a single theme. With the exception of the final diary, only in this chapter does Zeno reach areas of his existence that will never be uncovered again (his childhood, a part of his youth before his father’s death, the period of his life as ‘patriarca’). Moreover, only in this chapter does he try to go through the whole of his experience, sketching an autobiography by means of a strong selection of events, all read through the peculiar lens of the cigarette.

Such a selective cut results in an exemplary handling of narrative time. Mario Lavagetto (1975) showed how Zeno moves among separate fragments of his past, all reconnected to ‘point zero’ of the present enunciation, which produces chaos and blind spots instead of restoring order. In the continuous oscillation between the present of the narration and the past of narrated events, no real change seems to have occurred. The only detectable content is that Zeno is a lifetime smoker. What is really striking, then, is not the temporal confusion, but the persistence of a permanent trait, obstinately identical to itself.

At the beginning of the chapter, Zeno claims that in order to write cigarettes are of utmost necessity, as if all the cigarettes that he has already smoked should merge in the one he has just lit in that moment, in front of his sheets: “Non so come cominciare e invoco l’assistenza delle sigarette tutte tanto somiglianti a quella che ho in mano” (Svevo 2004, 628). Thus, the position from which Zeno writes misinterprets the use of the present in autobiography, which normally creates a perspective necessary to measure the distance from the past (Baldi 2010). It is in this very distance from the past that the writing self isolates and analyses the change, and it is in the

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4 All the quotations from *La coscienza di Zeno* are taken from the Mondadori edition, as indicated in the bibliography. From this point on, I shall indicate only the page number in brackets.
same distance that one’s perspective on life can engender a sort of wisdom, separating the ‘identical’ and the ‘similar’ from the ‘different’. Here the writing self not only mixes the different segments of time, but also intentionally intervenes as to cancel the distance, thus flattening perspective, and dangerously narrowing the space between what is near and what is far, the same and the dissimilar. This process annihilates the chance to reshape events into a form of wisdom. The temporal chaos reinforces the idea that fragments of the past are fundamentally interchangeable, and are marked by a permanence that allows for the destruction of chronology.

Here the typical rhetoric of the ‘perspectival’ telling, based on the pattern ‘At that time I didn’t know … now I see’, or ‘only later would I understand’, is employed in a subverted way. The comparison between the various periods of life, thus, is undermined by scepticism: “Io avanzo tale ipotesi per spiegare la mia debolezza giovanile, ma senza una decisa convinzione” (623). The attitude of the allegedly stoic man, who intrudes into the narration with comments, simulates the wisdom that should stem from a historical approach to one’s existence, as the psychoanalyst is supposed to have suggested: “il dottore al quale ne parlai mi disse d’iniziare il mio lavoro con un’analisi storica della mia propensione al fumo” (628). When no historical analysis is carried out, the subject can move indistinctly from the present of the enunciation to the past of the lived experiences, as no change veritably took place. The narrative mode expected to shape life’s mutations is subdue to the description of an immutable existential structure. The temporal paradox upon which the narration is based is pervaded by opposing tensions: on one hand the tendency to re-read the lived experience, hoping to detect turning points, breaks, and different historical selves; on the other hand, the aspiration to retrace a comforting texture of repetitions. Zeno accumulates the dates of his last cigarettes because he hopes that one day those dates will become historical, crossroads of a narrative scheme in which the negotiation between permanence and change will produce semantic effects (Freccero 1962). The chapter’s palimpsest is supposed to compose a tale of conversion, in which the man of the past, linked to the vice, should be clearly distinguished from the man of the present, restored to health and changed. Yet this palimpsest is ceaselessly unmade and is eventually imprisoned by a philosophy of time, from which any progression is banned: “Il tempo, per me, non è quella cosa impensabile che non s’arresta mai. Da me, solo da me, ritorna” (635).

The position of the chapter – placed just after the Prefazione and the Preambolo – bears a precise meaning. Zeno immediately identifies smoke as the origin of his disease, but this identification doesn’t lead to any narration in which the system of causes is clear, the relationship between disease and its effects intelligible, and its symptoms decipherable. The first chapter becomes a collection of potential beginnings of tales of conversion that are in fact absent from the novel.
Hercules, Tantalus, Napoleon

According to Ricoeur (1992), the promise as the act of giving one’s word is one of the means through which identity’s most dramatic aporia can be solved. The promise is a way to bind the self of the present to the self of the future, facing the passage of time while retaining the sense of permanence. The self who pronounced a pledge coincides with the self who will have kept to it. Within such a commitment the self declares implicitly both to be the same and to be different.

Although the promise plays a chief role in the novel both as a psychic structure and as a narrative device, Zeno always ends up not fulfilling his “propositi”. All given words just remain fixed in the ink of last cigarettes’ dates and the word, reduced to a sort of disease, no longer has any ethical bond with actions: “Senz’essere un oratore, avevo la malattia della parola. La parola doveva essere un avvenimento a sé per me e perciò non poteva essere imprigionata da nessun altro avvenimento” (700). Instead of embodying a form of faithfulness to oneself, the promise becomes a rhetoric expression of false consciousness. The promise to stop smoking, ceaselessly repeated and ceaselessly disregarded, implies first of all a denial of the future. While on the one hand Zeno postpones his future, on the other he aspires to fashion a temporality grounded upon change and progression in order to modify his existence. The failure of this existential project entails also the failure of a narrative pattern. At the beginning of the fifth chapter, the metaphor of the man whose life can provide only a single note expresses this double failure:

Nella mente di un giovine di famiglia borghese il concetto di vita umana s’associa a quello della carriera e nella prima gioventù la carriera è quella di Napoleone I. Senza che perciò si sogni di diventare un imperatore perché si può somigliare a Napoleone restando molto ma molto più in basso. La vita più intensa è raccontata in sintesi dal suono più rudimentale, quello dell’onda del mare, che, dacché si forma, muta ad ogni istante finché non muore! M’aspettavo perciò anch’io di divenire e disfarmi come Napoleone e l’onda. Ma la mia vita non sapeva fornire che una nota sola senz’alcuna variazione, abbastanza alta e che taluni m’invidiano, ma orribilmente tediosa. I miei amici mi conservarono durante tutta la mia vita la stessa stima e credo che neppur io, dacché son giunto all’età della ragione, abbia mutato molto il concetto che feci di me stesso. (685)

Napoleon’s life contains an implicit narrative pattern based on a beginning, a development and an ending, and is composed of a semantic scheme that acknowledges change as a pivotal step in giving the account of a life a more solid meaning. The sound of a single note – the very opposite of the wave’s
three-phases life – is an image not only of Zeno’s alleged “inettitudine”, but also of his ambition toward a consistent narrative identity, one that tells the story of his life as if it were a Bildungsroman. Zeno would like to live like Julien Sorel, as if he were endowed with a plastic character, but he is not able to negotiate between permanence and mutability. Zeno’s single note always sounds the same and lacks beginning, transformation, or ending.

When Zeno hints at Napoleon again, it is not by chance that his compulsion to write dates restarts. Bewildered by Mrs Malfenti, who wants him to marry Augusta, Zeno sends her a bouquet with a note containing only the day’s date:

Corsi da un fioraio e scelsi un magnifico mazzo di fiori che indirizzai alla signora Malfenti accompagnato dal mio biglietto da visita sul quale non scrissi altro che la data. Non occorreva altro. Era una data che non avrei dimenticata più e non l’avrebbero dimenticata forse neppure Ada e sua madre: 5 Maggio, anniversario della morte di Napoleone. (721)

The note aims at fixing a moment that later could prove to be a turning point in Zeno’s life, but it ends up reminding him only of his failure, as Mrs Malfenti will be successful and he will marry Augusta. Recalling Napoleon’s death date as coinciding with a crucial step of his own life, Zeno unconsciously emphasizes the distance between that narrative and existential pattern and his own, grounded on a counterfeit effort to play the role of a Bildungsroman’s hero.

The contrast between Tantalus and Hercules, recalled in the same chapter, has an analogous meaning: “è libertà completa quella di poter fare ciò che si vuole a patto di fare anche qualcosa che piaccia meno. La vera schiavitù è la condanna all’astensione: Tantalo e non Ercole” (730). Tantalus’ punishment – he is forced to stand next to a pool of water, beneath a fruit tree without being allowed to drink or eat – is a static narrative pattern, embodying a frozen temporality and thus a compulsion to repeat the same immutable situation eternally. On the contrary, Hercules’ labours entail a dynamic narrative pattern, which engenders multiple episodes with a beginning, a development and an ending. Zeno would like to experience Hercules’ same sense of temporality, but he inescapably looks like Tantalus. This is not due to the fact that his existence must bear sacrifices and self-denial, but because no existential structure besides repetition governs his life.

Yet one might well wonder whether or not Zeno is compelled, against his will or conscience, to observe this rule. In other words, is Zeno’s life an infinite repetition, or does the story of his life, by the means of a ‘repetitive’ narrative rhetoric, aim at erasing any temporal progression? Is Zeno as a writer stronger than Zeno as a character?

Repeating, imitating
In the article *Remembering, Repeating and Working-through*, published in 1914, Freud argues that a patient in treatment who declares his inability to remember anything meaningful of his past actually fills up memory voids—produced by repression—with repeated acts: “the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud 1958, 150). Repression, thus, transforms repressed materials away into actions and conducts, giving rise to the phenomenon Freud named repetition compulsion. What the psyche cannot remember is translated into acts that incarnate and stage memories. This crucial concept, which Freud will deal with in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, can provide the interpretation of the novel with a clearer theoretical frame (Wilden 1969). In *La coscienza di Zeno* the repetition compulsion is not only a theme but also a narrative structure. Both these two levels are often interweaved so that in some cases the content of repetition—what is repeated—is the compulsion itself: the unavoidable need to repeat. From a rhetorical and thematic point of view this weaving highlights Zeno’s attitude to look for similarities between people. To make things that are distinct and different similar is in itself a form of compulsion. Things have no value in themselves in a system within which everything is the repetition of itself. Often Zeno does not grasp differences or specific peculiarities, and sometimes he simply pretends not to grasp them. When visiting the Malfentis, the afternoon in which Mrs Malfenti prays him not to expose Augusta to disrepute, Zeno meets aunt Rosina, Giovanni’s sister, whom he mistakes for one of Mrs Malfenti’s sisters, as we will be made aware of later in the novel.⁵ Zeno addresses both the women, whom he believes are the same person, with the same remark: “Ma Lei, signora, è molto rimessa, la trovo ringiovanita” (755). He attempts to reproduce the same scenario, and, in the second case, he hopes to generate a humorous effect. It could be of interest to compare such a ‘reduction to the identical’, unintentional yet consciously repeated, with another episode. Talking with Guido and Ada, Zeno tries to amuse them with a funny story about a man who is supposedly dead. At the root of Zeno’s joke is an associative process:

A Trieste, anche dopo morto il Bertini, viveva una persona che diceva delle bestialità, camminava in modo che pareva si movesse sulla punta dei piedi ed aveva anche una voce strana. Ne avevo fatto la conoscenza in quei giorni e, per un momento, mi aveva ricordato il Bertini. (738)

The power of similarity is so strong that even distinct individuals can be overlapped and melted with each other. Even a dead man can be brought

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⁵ The episodes are, respectively, at pages 719-20 and pages 754-55.
back to life by the means of words, if they are detached from facts and contradict and alter reality. Guido’s rational explanation of this ‘supernatural’ encounter sets up a sort of mimetic theory – to be interpreted in comparison with Girard’s one (1961) – which sheds a light on the way Zeno handles his own relationships with the others:

È possibile anche che la persona con cui ella parlò, fosse ben più giovane del Bertini, camminasse come un granatiere e avesse la voce virile e che la sua somiglianza con lui fosse limitata al dire bestialità. Ciò sarebbe bastato per fissare il suo pensiero sul Bertini. Ma per ammettere questo, bisognerebbe anche credere ch’ella sia una persona molto distratta. (738)

What Guido considers a simple distraction is actually Zeno’s systematic way to find and build similarities. Regardless the attempt to distinguish himself from others and to separate distinct events, the rhetoric of telling discloses a radical ‘mimetic disorder’ (Antonello 2006; 2009). On the one hand according to Zeno difference is not a value, but it is a source of anguish that must be neutralized (Contini 1983); on the other, difference can also be intentionally emphasized and performed when identification processes with the ‘other’ becomes unacceptable. The fourth chapter is built around the contrast between Zeno’s character and his father’s one. Zeno presents himself as a strong man, whilst in his words, his father appears insecure, weakened, and worried:

Era difficile di trovarsi insieme anche perché fra me e lui, intelletualmente non c’era nulla di comune. (654)

Nell’incapacità al commercio v’era una somiglianza fra di noi, ma non ve ne erano altre; posso dire che, fra noi due, io rappresentavo la forza e lui la debolezza. (655)

Avevamo tanto poco di comune fra di noi, ch’egli mi confessò che una delle persone che più l’inquietavano a questo mondo ero io. (656)

Insomma io, accanto a lui, rappresentavo la forza e talvolta penso che la scomparsa di quella debolezza, che mi elevava, fu sentita da me come una diminuzione. (657)

Non poteva però sfiuggirmi l’evidenza della sua debolezza e solo perciò non discussersi. Mi piaceva di vederlo felice nella sua illusione di essere tanto forte quand’era invece debolissimo. (664)

The image of the father is that of an individual totally devoid of vigour, tired, and gloomy, as if he were already dead before dying; his son however describes himself as dynamic, smart, and unconventional. Zeno associates his father with images of heaviness and inertia, and with an absolute repulsion for any kind of movement: “Per lui il cuore non pulsava e non v’era bisogno di ricordare valvole e vene e ricambio per spiegare come il
suo organismo viveva. Niente movimento perché l’esperienza diceva che quanto si moveva finiva coll’arrestarsi” (656). According to Zeno, such an aversion proves an extreme lack of desire to improve himself:

Già quello che ho registrato in questi fascicoli prova che in me c’è e c’è sempre stato – forse la mia massima sventura – un impetuoso conato al meglio. Tutti i miei sogni di equilibrio e di forza non possono essere definiti altrimenti. Mio padre non conosceva nulla di tutto ciò. (655)

The father embodies a sort of nostalgia of the Ptolemaic geocentric order: “Anche la terra era per lui immobile e solidamente piantata su dei cardini. Naturalmente non lo disse mai, ma soffriva se gli si diceva qualche cosa che a tale concezione non si conformasse” (656). In symbolic and narrative terms, the contrast between father and son grants a supposed balance to the chapter, whose ending should reverse the losing portrait of the father. The slap in Zeno’s face is supposed to be the sign of his father’s regained strength. This reversal seems to confirm that Zeno’s account describes a process, a development, and a transformation of the self that coincides with a shifted symbolic value of the father-son relationship.

Nevertheless, such a development is in fact deceptive. While Zeno’s mother’s death is experienced as an opportunity for becoming adult, his father’s is depicted as a catastrophe, the very end of paradise – “Il paradiso non esisteva più e io poi, a trent’anni, ero un uomo finito” (654). If the former engenders a change, a new beginning, and a development, the latter produces a paralysis. Actually, though, no narrative pattern is more dynamic and finalised than the one that conceives the ending and the ‘destruction’ of a world. The paralysing effects produced by the grief are described through a dynamic metaphor, so that the contrast and the difference between the two deaths are partially neutralized. This, however, does not denote Zeno’s insincerity in describing feelings of ineptitude and petrifaction, rather, it suggests that maybe he is just pretending to believe that his mother’s death is in some respect different from his father’s.

But this is not the sole difference that Zeno counterfeits. A close analysis of the chapter reveals that the dissimilarity between father and son is weaker than one might think. An interpretation based solely on such a polar opposition could prove to be faulty. Absent-mindedly Zeno belies his self-portrait as a strong man: “La mia solita debolezza! Scommetto che oggi ancora sono tanto incapace di resistenza, che se qualcuno ci si mettesse sul serio potrebbe indurmi a studiare per qualche tempo l’astronomia” (660). Explaining the reasons for his tardiness the night his father fell ill, Zeno blames himself for his usual weakness (“solita debolezza”), which made him unable to cease conversation with a friend. Of course one could argue that here “debolezza” means ‘laziness’ or ‘compliance’, but Zeno reverts to the same word that he repeated in order to emphasize the sense of an
irretrievable difference. Thus, the symbolic contrast upon which the first part of the chapter is built collapses, as so does the alleged reversal that the slap incarnates. Nothing overtures, because what was supposed dissimilar is actually contiguous and the epochal turning point – the end of paradise, what should have changed Zeno’s life forever – is yet another uncrossed threshold. Such an immobile stance – a sort of escape from change – is the result of a series of ‘false movements’, and conflicts and differences are staged merely in order to dramatize the telling of life. Even the mimetic rivalry as described by Girard in terms of conflict is no longer applicable.

The relationship with Guido undergoes a similar scheme. As Zeno meets his love rival, an inferiority complex, as well as envy, and hate arise as effects of the mimetic desire, so that the wish to become the other, mediated by a triangular relationship, turns into the impulse to destroy him. Yet even the desire to kill Guido, openly expressed by Zeno, appears incongruous with respect to such a model. After having spent the evening at Malfenti’s household, the two supposed friends take a night-time walk through the streets of Trieste, stopping on the top of a climb, where Guido lays on the wall that separates the upper road from the lower one. It is in that very moment that Zeno experiences the desire to push him off: “Debbio confessare ch’io in quel momento m’accinsi veramente ad uccidere Guido” (775). Zeno accurately describes Guido’s position and points out how high the slope is: “Gli pareva di fare un atto di coraggio esponendosi a una caduta di una decina di metri” (774). At the end of the episode he affirms his murdering instinct once again: “Certo non avevo dimenticato che poco prima avevo voluto ucciderlo, ma ciò non aveva alcun’importanza perché le cose di cui nessuno sa e che non lasciarono delle tracce, non esistono” (777).

The persistence with which he expresses his intentions towards his future brother-in-law should be cause of suspicion, as Zeno appears to be insincere. A further contradiction at once arises: “Egli mi prese per il braccio e, amorevolmente, mi fece rizzare. Poi, con ogni riguardo, sempre appoggiandomi, mi fece scendere la piccola erta” (776). One should ask why Zeno dwells on defining the height of the slope as “piccola”. It is of no interest whether the slope is actually high or low in order to decide if a fall from that wall could have caused a fatal wound. A single adjective (“piccola”) manages to undermine Zeno’s openly declared impulse to kill Guido and hints that such a desire could be inauthentic. Zeno is inclined to kill his rival only when his death seems highly unlikely. Although the text does not make this explicit, the word choice – “piccola”, as the one that incarnates a symptom – cannot be ignored in an unreliable narration.

When Guido dies, Zeno does his utmost to fashion himself as the one who can save his friend’s property, whereas he disregards and even represses his responsibility for his death (Paolini Giachery 1993). The desire to kill him is as inauthentic as the effort to save him, after his death occurred. Mimetic
theory does not explain the continuous and contradictory shifting of positions that Zeno’s telling embodies. On the contrary it nearly confines it into a symmetric system where hate, rivalry, and conflicts are clearly accountable and located in fixed positions. Triangular desire could be acted as a means to intentionally dramatize the story, under whose apparent contradictions and reversals an uncanny form of permanence dwells.

*Time, character and neurosis*

At the very beginning of the novel, in the *Preambolo*, Zeno stages the act of writing, depicting himself whilst attempting at self-treatment with the help of a pencil and a paper. The relationship between the experienced life and the written one here seems clearly focused. It is not possible to grasp life translating it into words, because either life flies away or words make it estranged as soon as they try to capture it. No choice is given between loss – “intravvedo delle immagini bizzarre che non possono avere nessuna relazione col mio passato” (627) – and alienation – “Il mio pensiero mi appare isolato da me” (626). Zeno’s rhetoric fluctuates between these two poles expressing a sense of frustration for either memories that seem to be muddled or events whose meaning is unclear. Telling the story of his father’s death, Zeno affirms “Ricordo tutto ma non intendo niente”. Such a statement implies not only that remembering and comprehending are detached, but also that the self that writes and the one that has lived are separated.

Zeno’s father, who in his son’s words embodies ‘the Other’, yet seems to share both smoking and adultery (see p. 655). Furthermore, he is used to write notes on a little book:

> Egli mi rimproverava due altre cose: la mia distrazione e la mia tendenza a ridere delle cose più serie. In fatto di distrazione egli differiva da me per un certo suo libretto in cui notava tutto quello ch’egli voleva ricordare e che rivedeva più volte al giorno. Credeva così di aver vinta la sua malattia e non ne soffriva più. Impose quel libretto anche a me, ma io non vi registrai che qualche ultima sigaretta. (657)

In this case the act of writing is associated not simply with the need to catch the experience but also with an effort to fight distraction, which could be defined as the bad habit of ‘forgetting the future’, a trait of those who do not forget what they have already done but what they haven’t yet done. Zeno’s father’s demand to write on a booklet has a symbolic meaning. Zeno ends up annotating the dates of his last cigarettes and uses the booklet not as a journal, but as a catalogue of intentions continuously unfulfilled. The booklet, thus, bears a collection of memos that expire and promises that, far from being kept to, are always repeated and unceasingly broken. As Zeno meets Giovanni Malfenti, who could be considered as a substitute for his father, the little book reappears, even though no explicit connection
is made between the new one and the one his father gave him. Giovanni, to whom Zeno attributes such qualities as strength and firmness of purpose, writes in his own hand three precepts or commandments – “comandamenti” (687) – on Zeno’s little book. Such a parodical image – a sort of God who engraves with his finger the Tablets of Law – hints more clearly at Zeno’s father, explaining how the fathers’ generation, in comparison with the sons’, has a profoundly distinct relationship with time. When Zeno could have employed the little book in order to fix some memos for his businesses, he forgets to check it, spoiling its purpose (see p. 690). In doing so, he actually forgets his future. While in the previous chapter Zeno made every effort to depict his father as immobile, boasting about his own vigour and ability to project himself into the future, here he unintentionally reveals such a contrast as groundless. Incapable of handling his memos, he proves to be unable or, rather, reluctant to move from the sole realm that truly suits him: the present, turned into a motionless duration within which no change occurs.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that Augusta is the character that Zeno mostly imitates:

Il presente per lei era una verità tangibile in cui si poteva segregarsi e starci caldi. Cercai di esservi ammesso e tentai di soggiornarvi risoluto di non deridere me e lei, perché questo conato non poteva essere altro che la mia malattia ed io dovevo almeno guardarmi dall’infettare chi a me s’era confidato. (787)

It is first and foremost Zeno – described and interpreted as volatile and devoid of any qualities – who longs for a re-establishment of the Ptolemaic order of the world, an order in which things stand still and time does not pass. It is no wonder if the father’s repulsion for movement returns here transmuted into Augusta’s blissful indifference: “Se anche la terra girava non occorreva mica avere il mal di mare! Tutt’altro! La terra girava, ma tutte le altre cose restavano al loro posto” (787). The contiguity between Augusta’s view of life and Zeno’s wish to imitate her discloses a whole system of contrasts and oppositions within the novel as tenuous and insubstantial. Zeno tries to tell the story of his life using distinction, but his own words seek for the ‘similar’ and the ‘identical’ and converge towards them. His eagerness to resemble others in fact conceals his wish to become a sort of ‘universal mediator’ – “Certo il mondo sarebbe meno aspro se molti mi somigliassero” (749). Far from being merely an imitator, he aspires to be a model to be imitated in order to establish a system of identity and permanence moulded on his very face.

If Zeno is not a good violin player, it does not depend on an inability to keep the time, what would at least produce chaos; his notes tend toward repetition, while he is unable to change musical figures:
C’è una lieve paralisi nel mio organismo, e sul violino si rivela intera e perciò più facilmente guaribile. Anche l’essere più basso quando sa che cosa sieno le terzine, le quartine o le sestine, sa passare dalle une alle altre con esattezza ritmica come il suo occhio sa passare da un colore all’altro. Da me, invece, una di quelle figure, quando l’ho fatta, mi si appiccia e non me ne libero più, così ch’essa s’intrufola nella figura seguente e la sforma. (742)

It is the “paralisi dell’organismo” that does not enable the progression of notes as well as that of time, so that Zeno undergoes the present as the repetition of something that prevents from reaching the future. That is why he names himself “l’uomo del presente”, who believes that “conoscere il futuro” (651) is impossible, because for him things just recur – “da me le cose si ripetono” (651).

It is in the last chapter of the novel that the dissonance between dimensions of time distinctly arises – the past produces only distorted memories; the present makes perception short-sighted, unable to grasp distances and dissimilarities; the future does not foster a sense of waiting. Keeping a journal and recording dates of lived events, Zeno ratifies the supremacy of time’s abstraction. The absence of future, which is a repressed counterpart of the ruling present throughout the novel, can only resolve in an apocalyptic ending, namely in the sole destructive future that the narrator is able to acknowledge.

The character as a recognition device surfaces in the novel as a skeletal form, devoid of any ethical consistency. Both the need to negotiate with permanence and that of preserving the sense of time passing are overwhelmed and annihilated. Such a supposedly obsolete structure, here comes to be the most powerful mean in order to undermine narrative time, subvert the sense of change, and trap the self. At the very core of Zeno’s identity, instead of a changeable and puzzling ipse, lies a frozen and compelled idem. Far from being born by theological and moral frameworks, Zeno’s idem – his being always the same – might be interpreted as a modern and mundane variant of the condition of Dantean damned souls, whose punishments can only be eternally repeated and to whose character no possibility of change is granted. It was Proust that, describing a water lily drifting on the river Vivonne, found out the closeness between the image of damned souls, who are forced to re-stage the main traits of their life in the pain of the eternal punishment, and the temporality of neurotics, who are trapped in the repetition compulsion:

Poussé vers la rive, son pédoncule se dépliait, s’allongeait, filait, atteignait l’extrême limite de sa tension jusqu’au bord où le courant le reprenait, le vert cordage se repliait sur lui-même et ramenait la pauvre plante à ce qu’on peut d’autant mieux appeler son point de départ qu’elle n’y restait pas une seconde sans en repartir par une répétition de la même manœuvre. Je la retrouvais de promenade en promenade, toujours dans la même situation, faisant penser à certains
neurasthéniques au nombre desquels mon grand-père comptait ma tante Léonie, qui nous offrent sans changement au cours des années le spectacle des habitudes bizarres qu’ils gardent toujours; pris dans l’engrenage de leurs malaises et de leurs manies, les efforts dans lesquels ils se débattent inutilement pour en sortir ne font qu’assurer le fonctionnement et faire jouer le délic de leur diététique étrange, ineluctable et funeste. Tel était ce nénuphar, pareil aussi à quelqu’un de ces malheureux don’t le tourment singulier, qui se répète indéfiniment durant l’éternité, excitait la curiosité de Dante […]. (Proust 1987, 167)

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