

The Modernist *Bildungsroman* : End of Forms Most Beautiful

by

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Graduate Program in Literature

Duke University

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate Program in Literature
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This dissertation explores the modernist novel's response to the *Bildungsroman*. Through close readings of the three modern versions of the genre — *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, and *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz — it shows that the tensions buried deep in the unconscious of this great narrative of organic development finally erupt as formal problems in modernism, when the classical *Bildungsroman* meets its demise through a relentless dehumanization of form. If the classical *Bildungsroman* presents us with “the image of man in the process of becoming” as Bakhtin has suggested, it argues that the modernist *Bildungsroman* enacts the dissolution of that process in its very form.

For my parents

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INTRODUCTION: The *Bildungsroman* in History

Surprisingly little has been written about modernism's relationship with the tradition of *Bildung* and the genre of *Bildungsroman*. In fact, there is only one book-length study devoted to the subject.¹ Research abounds in the area of classical *Bildungsroman*, but even there, complications specific to the genre seem to make any definition more elusive than illuminating. It is in fact telling that the problematic status of the genre has become a research topic in its own right as an emblem of the larger issues regarding aesthetics as a discipline.² In general, though, *Bildungsroman* is either considered "an exhausted form," thus foreclosing the possibility to think about its relationship to modernism, or it is analyzed with little attention to the theoretical underpinnings of the paradigm of *Bildung*.³

From the outset, it must be noted that a comprehensive reflection on modernism's relationship to the tradition of *Bildungsroman* is not possible without displacing the often unwarranted assumptions about the classical form, which proves to be a difficult task since the classical form itself is very much "a phantom," to adopt Redfield's term. Yet, even amidst the nomenclatural complications, it is safe to say that *Bildungsroman* is commonly understood to be a narrative of development, with a

¹ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, (University Press of Florida, 2006)

² Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996)

³ Moretti's influential study on the genre mostly focuses on narrative structure, while Minden's *The German Bildungsroman* "offers a definition of the genre based on the peculiarities of the texts themselves, not on the idea of *Bildung*" (1997).

young hero gradually resolving his inner conflicts, finding his vocation and finally achieving a harmonious unity with society after coming to terms with his own limitations. Thus, it is taken to be following a strictly teleological trajectory, the stifling sense of compromise and conformism being the inevitable end. While it is true that most of the novels commonly ascribed to the genre follow this basic narrative, reducing it to such simple terms completely ignores the genre's nuanced relationship with the paradigm of *Bildung* and its cultural, historical, aesthetic, philosophical and formal concerns. Missing these concerns eventually leads to a misreading of modernism's treatment of the genre.

This dissertation argues that the modernist *Bildungsroman* arises from the classical genre's inherent contradictions. Given the classical *Bildungsroman*'s investment in organicism and hence the unity of form and content, the modernists react against the tradition of *Bildung* that lives on merely as a relic of bourgeoisie by dehumanizing, subverting and ultimately destroying the old form through its own contradictions buried under a façade of social and aesthetic harmony. In order to fully comprehend modernism's relationship with the *Bildungsroman*, a closer look at the history of the classical genre is in order.

The *Bildungsroman*

Curiously, it is much easier to talk about the history of the term of the *Bildungsroman* than the actual history of the genre itself. The term *Bildungsroman* was first used by Karl Morgenstern as early as 1810, in a lecture entitled “Über den Geist und Zusammenhang einer Reihe philosophischer Romane” (“On the Spirit and Connection of a Series of Philosophical Novels”), later published in 1817 in the third volume of *Dörptische Beyträge für Freunde der Philosophie, Litteratur und Kunst*.⁴ In his later lectures of 1819 and 1820, Morgenstern explains that the genre will “justly bear the name *Bildungsroman* first and primarily on account of its thematic material, because it portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness; and also secondly because it is by virtue of this portrayal that it furthers the reader’s *Bildung* to a much greater extent than any other kind of novel.”⁵

Although the term was first coined by Morgenstern, and applied to the novels of Friedrich Maximilian Klingler, the first theoretical study of the genre appears in Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg’s *Versuch über den Roman (Essay on the Novel)*, (1774), which was published only a few years after Christoph Martin

⁴ Fritz Martini, “Bildungsroman: Term and Theory”, *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*. Ed. James Hardin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) p.3

⁵ quoted in Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978)

Wieland's novel *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766-1767). Widely recognized as the first *Bildungsroman*, Wieland's novel is about Agathon's adventures in ancient Greece, and consists of a series of escapes from those who try to kidnap, convert or enamour him (oddly recalling *Ferdydurke's* protagonist's fate). After his ordeals involving a Bacchic orgy, captivation by the pirates, re-separation from his long lost childhood love and being sold as a slave to a Sophist philosopher who then tries to make him fall in love with a courtesan, the novel ends with Agathon's resolution to live according to the wisdom of Archytas (the ruler). Thus, the initially enthusiastic hero, by the end of the novel, "has been sobered by life's vicissitudes,"⁶ and this state is depicted as maturity and psychological growth.⁷

Blanckenburg is one of the first critics to observe that Wieland's *Agathon* is a new type of novel that raises the status of the novel genre to representative one for the modern age as opposed to the Greek epic. Todd Kontje points out that Blanckenburg, "by emphasizing Wieland's concentration on the psychological development of one central protagonist," identifies the beginning of the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.⁸ Yet, Blanckenburg's lack of appreciation of Wieland's use of irony also complicates

⁶ Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Camden House, 1993)

⁷ For a critical analysis of *Agathon*, see Michael Minden's *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁸ Kontje, 8.

the matters for subsequent critics of the genre, who, for a long time, disregard irony as a structural element of the *Bildungsroman*.⁹

The term *Bildungsroman* does not become widespread until Dilthey uses it in his *Experience and Poetry* (1906), referring to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), which Schlegel identifies as "one of the three great events" of the bourgeois age, the other two being The French Revolution and Fichte's *Theory of Science* (1798). Similarly, Lukàcs considers Goethe's novel "the most important product of the literary transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century", which reflects the ideological as well as artistic characteristics of both periods.¹⁰ The novel tells the story of a young theatre enthusiast of bourgeois background, Wilhelm Meister, who resists his father's and his friend Werner's pressure to join the world of commerce. Through the figure of Wilhelm, Goethe presents a critique of utilitarianism, social fragmentation and capitalist division of labour that were already beginning to reveal their destructive effects. Wilhelm eventually joins a famous theatrical company that puts on a production of Hamlet, but he gradually realizes that he is not very suitable for the stage. Thus, much of Wilhelm's *Bildung* amounts to "his gradual awakening to that very fact," also confirming that "the contingent, self-

⁹Michael Beddow, for instance, points out that Dilthey's interpretation of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister as "an essentially linear, cumulative process of conscious self-discovery" is not challenged until the 1950s when a study by Karl Schlechta provokes a series of fresh readings that underline the pervasive irony of the work (Beddow 71).

¹⁰ Georg Lukàcs, *Goethe and His Age*. trans. Robert Anchor. (New York: Universal Library, 1969)

actuating and largely reactive sensibility of the modern, autonomous self” cannot find its full expression in drama.¹¹

It is interesting that the first draft of the novel on which Goethe began to work in 1777, *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*, was mainly about theater. Thomas P. Saine notes that *Sendung* is set in the 1750s or the 1760s, when “*Bildung* was not even a topic of conversation,” “much less something that the hero would know he should strive for.”¹² Thus, practicing what it literally preaches, *Wilhelm Meister* only gradually attains the form of the *Bildungsroman*, and just as the novel emerges out of its own dynamics,¹³ so it demands to be understood “only on its own terms.”¹⁴

The novel’s shift of emphasis from theatre to “the relationship of the humanist cultivation of the whole personality to the world of bourgeois society”¹⁵ is projected onto the plot through Wilhelm’s eventual recognition of his lack of theatrical talent. In broader historical terms, Goethe’s decision to minimize the role of theatre is also emblematic of the brief life of Lessing’s National Theatre in Hamburg (1767), which only survived for two years. Lessing’s ideal was to establish national theatre as an institution, which would culturally unify an otherwise fragmented Germany, and he

¹¹ Thomas Pfau, “*Bildungsspiele*: Vicissitudes of Socialization in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.” (*European Romantic Review*, 21: 5, 567-87. 2010), 575

¹² Thomas P. Saine, “Was Meister to be a Bildungsroman?” *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*. Ed. James Hardin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999)

¹³ Goethe is known to have described the novel as “one of the most incalculable of my productions—I hardly possess the key to it myself” (qtd in Beddow, 1982: 70).

¹⁴ Schlegel, “On Goethe’s Meister”, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

¹⁵ Lukács, 50.

interpreted its failure as a testimony to the public's lack of desire to create something "distinctly German."¹⁶ The definitive edition of *Wilhelm Meister* was written between 1793-95, and it is telling that the novel's agenda gears towards the subject of harmony between the individual and society in the aftermath of The French Revolution. Nevertheless, theatre continues to occupy a pivotal place in Wilhelm's development in the final version, as it does on the German cultural scene. Indeed, in 1799, Goethe teams up with Schiller at the Weimar Court Theatre and together they seek to create a theatre that would refine and educate their audience.¹⁷

Both in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* in particular and in the tradition of *Bildung* in general, theatre seems to be presented as the symbolic practice of "play" as an alternative model of rationality that stands opposed to the Cartesian one driven largely by method. Beginning with Kant's discussion of the "free-play of faculties" as the source of aesthetic experience in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "play" inspires "an emergentist rather than teleological model of narrative rationality"; for play, being "so palpably contingent, experimental, risk-laden, provisional, and variational in character," is essentially "incommensurable with teleology."¹⁸ Schiller, in particular, emphatically states "play impulse" as the "union of reality with form, of contingency with necessity, of passivity with freedom" that "fulfills the conception of

¹⁶ G. E. Lessing. *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. trans. Helen Zimmerman (New York: Dover Publications), 1962.

¹⁷ For more on the idea of German national theatre, see McConachie, Bruce, Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, Gary Jay Williams, "Friedrich Schiller's Vision of Aesthetic Education and the German Dream of a National Theatre", *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2006

¹⁸ Pfau, 2010: 567-569.

humanity”¹⁹ and he even goes as far to claim play as one of the characteristic features of humanity: “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing.”²⁰

In *Wilhelm Meister*, play serves as the catalyst for Wilhelm’s process of socialization, and *Bildung*. In *Theory of the Novel*, Lukàcs attributes *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship’s* status of the *Bildungsroman* precisely to its exploration of social life as a means of individual growth, pointing out that “the development of qualities in men... would never blossom without the active intervention of other men and circumstances.”²¹ But it is in *Goethe and His Age* that he emphasizes the irreducible role of chance in this unique education, which is “intended to train men who will develop all their qualities in spontaneous freedom.”²² Lukàcs suggests that Goethe “sought a unity of methodical planning and chance in human life, a unity of conscious direction and free spontaneity in all human activities” and consequently “hatred of fate, of any fatalistic resignation is constantly preached in the novel.”

So as not to repeat literary criticism’s hasty reduction of the *Bildungsroman* to a teleological narrative in which all events lead to “a particularly marked ending,”²³ it is important to recognize the remarkable role Goethe assigns to chance and irony in

¹⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 76

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

²¹ Georg Lukàcs, *The Theory of the Novel*. trans. Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1988), 134.

²² Lukàcs, 1969: 57.

²³ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. (London: Verso, 1987), 7.

Wilhelm Meister. Jürgen Jacobs, for instance, speaks of the *Bildungsroman* as an “unfulfilled genre” precisely on the grounds that the genre operates with an implied teleology that it only imperfectly fulfills.²⁴ Yet, as opposed to a teleological predetermination, chance is precisely the element that Goethe mobilizes in order to foreground the humanistic ideals of freedom and self-determination.²⁵ It is true that the notion of destiny has an equally significant function in the novel. Yet, it must be noted that in the novel, destiny is always articulated with reference to so many chance occurrences that befall Wilhelm. Evoking Schiller’s formulation of the play impulse as the union of contingency and necessity, for instance, the stranger Wilhelm meets describes “the texture of this world” as formed of “necessity and chance.”²⁶ Rather than articulating it as an inevitable ending, Goethe considers destiny a hermeneutic device signifying potentiality: “There are moments in life, when past events, like winged shuttles, dart to and fro before us, and by their incessant movements weave a web, which we ourselves, in a greater or less degree, have spun and put upon the loom.” Thus, it is not destiny, but chance itself that gives shape to human life, and destiny is nothing but the collection of all the chance occurrences. It is the tension between contingency and necessity that provides the plot movement in *Wilhelm*

²⁴ qtd in Swales, 1978; 11.

²⁵ Pfau notes that the model of *Bildung* that Goethe devises in *Wilhelm Meister* is strikingly different from the one driven by Aristotelian teleology in his botanical writings precisely because it is mediated by contingency. As such, Goethe’s *Bildungsroman* attempts to “cast rationality as an emphatically narrative project, and, hence, an emergent property” (2010: 568).

²⁶ *Wilhelm Meister*, 38.

Meister, culminating in Wilhelm's final realization towards the end that perhaps, "what we call fate" is really only "the pattern in chance events."²⁷

Almost immediately after this realization, Wilhelm is presented with his "Certificate of Apprenticeship", marking his entry into The Tower Society, and he discovers that his story of apprenticeship was being recorded all along. There is an unmistakable touch of irony in this turn of events that undermines the novel's own investment in the idea of free and spontaneous self-determination, as Wilhelm realizes that there were many times in his life "when he thought he was acting freely and unobserved", "only to discover that he had been observed, even directed."²⁸ This is only one of the many instances of irony in the novel, but it is telling that Wilhelm does not cease to make misguided judgments following his entry to the Society. After his belief in fate is supposedly suspended, for instance, Wilhelm asks Therese to marry him, and "lets his fate depend on her decision alone," without any "qualms of conscience about circumventing his guardians and overseers on this important issue."²⁹ His continuing commitment to fate is ironic given that he will in fact end up marrying Nathalie, not Therese. Thus, Wilhelm's *Bildung* is never really completed, and begins anew with every experience, which is often undercut by another ironic situation. In fact, even the novel's famous closing sentence --"I don't know about kingdoms", said Wilhelm, "but I do know that I have found a treasure I never deserved" --which is often read as his ultimate reconciliation with society, calls into

²⁷ *Wilhelm Meister*, 302.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁹ *Wilhelm Meister*, 310.

question whether Wilhelm has achieved *Bildung* after all.³⁰ For *Bildung* involves self-cultivation, progressive self-awareness and appropriating one's own past, whereas Wilhelm's characterization of his ultimate happiness as an undeserved treasure hints at the possibility that he still regards his own development as something external to himself. Yet, irony is also intrinsic, and in a sense, prerequisite to the self-perpetuating structure of *Bildung*, given that it is the manifestation of self-consciousness.

It is interesting that in his influential study *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti never acknowledges the important function of irony in the novel. Consequently, his appraisal of the *Bildungsroman* does not go beyond the level of plot, and ultimately ignores *Bildung*'s inherent organicism and its investment in the harmonious unity of content and form. His interpretation of *Wilhelm Meister*, for instance, is oriented towards the same event as the novel itself, marriage, which serves as a metaphor for the harmonious integration of two different social groups. Moretti suggests that, by virtue of this metaphor, the *Bildungsroman* "narrates how the French Revolution could have been avoided, how the two dominant classes of the epoch who can continue to live in a symbolically contact world, respectful of 'natural' inequalities: avoiding the risks of an open and conflictual society."³¹ Moretti argues that this perfect narrative the *Bildungsroman* provides could only be convincing "in so far as historical experience

³⁰ Ibid., 373.

³¹ Moretti, 64.

continued to make absolute cohesion and totalizing harmony not only a desirable ideal, but a conceivable one too,” and that is why the genre fades out of sight during the course of the nineteenth century when it was understood that the change brought about by The French Revolution was permanent, and when “a world which had opened itself to a ceaseless clash of values and an erratic development with no end in sight could no longer recognize its own features in the bright normality of Wilhelm Meister, nor believe in such a total and easily available happiness.”³²

Moretti’s otherwise cogent argument misses one crucial point; perhaps the world never believed in such a total and easily happiness, including Goethe himself. Indeed, Lukàcs claims that “the clear-sighted realist Goethe” could not have entertained the illusion that “the miserable and backward Germany of his day” would ever achieve the social realization of his ideals.³³ The *Bildungsroman* is structurally founded upon the contradiction between the ideals of humanism and Germany’s concrete historical situation. The French Revolution makes the breach between the two all the more obvious and insurmountable. It must be noted that Goethe’s dismissal of the violence of the Revolution in spite of his belief in its “social and human content” adds to the intrinsically contradictory nature of the genre.³⁴

Nevertheless, Goethe was writing in a moment of history when capitalism still seemed as a viable means of liberation from the fetters of feudal society, and was thus regarded as potentially fertile soil for the cultivation of humanist ideals. Although the

³² Ibid., 73.

³³ Lukàcs, 1969: 56.

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

ideals of humanism already begin to be crushed under the reality of capitalism (as it is evident in Wilhelm's desire to escape from the world of commerce into the world of theatre), Lukàcs argues that Goethe did not consider this antagonism "insoluble in principle."³⁵ Yet, it is perhaps in Goethe's virtuosic use of irony that his suspension of belief in the bourgeoisie becomes manifest as a forewarning. In the modernist *Bildungsroman*, we will see that this subtle touch of irony will not be as easily suppressed for the sake of an illusory reconciliation.

Moretti's theory ultimately fails to account for the proliferation of the genre in modernism, from Hardy and Lawrence to Proust, Joyce, Mann, Woolf and all the way up to Gombrowicz, precisely because he approaches the problem from the vantage point of representation. The main thesis of this dissertation is that in modernism, the contradictions that are seemingly resolved on the level of the plot resurface in the form. If the cultivation of interiority and inwardness are one of the few almost universally accepted central organizing themes of the classical genre, they certainly culminate in modernism's unmistakable gesture of suppressing the surplus of self-consciousness, which inevitably returns in the form. This is because in late modernity, it is not simply the concepts themselves (like youth) driving the novel's form, but also the relationship between art and society that is essentially contradictory and infinitely mediated, as Adorno argues: "Art can be understood only by its law of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that

³⁵Lukàcs., 60.

alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art requires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form.”³⁶ Thus, he suggests that it is not the representation of, but the separation from the empirical reality that is the inherent quality of art—indeed, in art, there is always a surplus which escapes representation.

In the case of the modernist *Bildungsroman*, this surplus derives from something the original theorists of *Bildung* did not foresee, but the modernists know only too well; that is, the instrumentalist and utilitarian reconfiguration of *Bildung* at the end of the nineteenth century, when industrial capitalism becomes more and more pronounced. In this later stage of modernity, core values of classical *Bildung* such as autonomy and self-formation are replaced with those of socially pragmatic model of *Bildung*, which advocates instrumentalization of reason, efficiency, individualism, liberalism, social mobility and institutionalized education; in short, values that promote capitalist-friendly subject production. Thus, the dynamism of *Bildung* gives way to the rigidity of institutional mode of knowledge-production that only values the end result of a given developmental process. It is in this sense that in modernity, knowledge attains the status of a commodity; it is only valuable as long as it “yields a return,” to quote the “the habitual thought of more than three fourths of the inhabitants of Verrieres” in Stendhal’s *The Red and The Black*, which is indeed a *Bildungsroman* taking place in this era of socially pragmatic *Bildung*. From Balzac’s

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

Lost Illusions and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, most nineteenth-century variations of the genre reflect a similar dissatisfaction with the industrialization and pragmatization of the world.

Thus, the real question is not why the *Bildungsroman* enjoys such a brief life and dies almost as soon as it is born at the end of the eighteenth century as Moretti suggests, but why it survives well into modernism and beyond. Indeed, the zombie-like nature of the *Bildungsroman* has earned it the title of "the phantom genre", and the next section will take a closer look at this mystery.

The Phantom Genre

Jeffrey Sammons's article "The Mystery of the *Bildungsroman*, or: What Happened to Wilhelm Meister's Legacy" (1981) reveals an interesting fact. According to Sammons, it is nearly impossible to find a nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* that qualifies for the title, if by the term one does not simply understand any novel "recounting the history of a young person entering upon life and the world" but strictly one that communicates the Enlightenment values; especially "a faith that there is world enough and time for self-realization, a confidence in the potential of life and the world for allowing a benign outcome to the growth of the self."³⁷ Strangely enough, there is an abundance of theoretical discussions in which everyone seems to agree that the *Bildungsroman* is the "predominant genre" of the nineteenth century, but those discussions never mention

³⁷ Jeffrey Sammons, "The Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*" (*Genre*, Vol. 14, 1981), 232.

any other novels except *Wilhelm Meister*. Thus, Sammons asserts that, among the many legends in literary history, there is no other one “so lacking in foundation and so misleading as the phantom of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*.” He reaches the same conclusion as Moretti: “There is no nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* genre because no major writer after Goethe could envision a social context for *Bildung*.”³⁸

Sammon’s article inspires a different strain of *Bildungsroman* criticism that focuses on the phantom status of the genre, one of the major contributions being Marc Redfield’s *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (1996). Redfield rightly observes that the *Bildungsroman* constitutes “one of those quagmires of literary study in which increased rigor produces nothing more tangible than increased confusion.”³⁹ On the other hand, a more rigorous approach to the term reveals “such extravagant aesthetic promises that few if any novels can be said to achieve the right to be so defined—possibly not even the five or six German-language novels that, in postwar German studies, have constantly been put forward as this genre’s main representatives.”⁴⁰ Indeed, even *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, which is usually accepted to have propagated the genre, is sometimes denied admission on the grounds that at the end of Goethe’s novel, Wilhelm “is still a long way from Schiller’s theoretically postulated beautiful moral freedom.”⁴¹

³⁸ Sammons, 242.

³⁹ Redfield, 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴¹ Klaus, qtd in Redfield; 41

Redfield argues that the conceptual instability of the term *Bildungsroman* derives from a paradox of the genre's origins in aesthetics. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer pinpoints an inherent paradox of *Bildung*. Explaining the term's victory over its Latin equivalent, *formatio*, Gadamer points out that "in *Bildung* there is *Bild*. The idea of 'form' lacks the mysterious ambiguity of *Bild*, which can mean both *Nachbild* (image, copy) and *Vorbild* (model)."⁴² Redfield argues that *Bildung*, at once signifying prefiguration and model "as the representation of its own striving," "encloses the structure of mimesis itself"⁴³ and this inherently mimetic structure poses a contradiction with the paradigm's emergentist claims. For *Bildung*, as Gadamer suggests, "grows out of the inner processes of formation and "cultivation", and therefore "remains in a constant state of further continued *Bildung*" and yet the paradigm's essential claim to aesthetic pedagogy also requires that *Bildung* must constitute an exemplary model. For instance, The Tower Society in *Wilhelm Meister* does not simply have a narrative value; it is also an ideal model for what Schiller calls "The Aesthetic State." Redfield interprets this complication as *Bildung*'s "ironic understanding of its own impossibility,"⁴⁴ and attributes the phantom status of the

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 12.

⁴³ Redfield, 48.

⁴⁴ "An identity must be formed through identification with an example: a model that on the one hand is the true identity of the identity-to-be-formed, but on the other hand is separated from the ephebe by the temporality or process of *Bildung* itself. *Bildung*'s engine thus runs on the double bind of identification: the subject must identify with the model in order to become what the subject already is; however, this also means that the subject must not identify with anything –particularly not a mater or exemplar –that is not always already the subject itself" (Redfield, 1996: 49).

Bildungsroman to this essential paradox: “*Bildung*, the autoproduction of the self, is strictly speaking impossible, but this impossibility can be sublated into the self-knowledge of the Roman that is *Bildung*, the text that builds itself as self-reflexive structure, a figure (*Bild*) of the fictionality of self-knowledge.”⁴⁵ Redfield’s remarks are undoubtedly persuasive and insightful, but his ultimate reduction of the problem of “the phantom genre” to a “referential difficulty” leaves one wondering if it is Redfield’s own commitment to deconstruction that traps his reading of the genre into a vicious circle of referential difficulties and causes him to disregard the historical reasons that gave rise to this phantom.⁴⁶ For, Redfield concludes that “the persistent return of the problem of the *Bildungsroman*” is the symptom of an instability within criticism, and hypothesizes that “criticism obviously should be able to get along quite well in the absence of this recently invented *Bildungsroman*.”⁴⁷ There may be reasons

⁴⁵ Redfield, 79.

⁴⁶ “At once too referential and not referential enough, the *Bildungsroman* appears ineradicable from literary criticism” (43).

⁴⁷ It must be noted that Redfield argues that the self-reflexive *Bildungsroman* constitutes a manifestation of what Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy call “the literary absolute”, a term that suggests the model of a text that generates its own theory: “theory itself as literature, or, in other words, literature producing itself as it produces its own theory” (Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, 1988: 12). Redfield’s thesis relies heavily upon Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s argument that it is originally the Romantics who inaugurate the thought of literature in its modern sense, beyond the divisions of classical or modern poetics. Redfield thus regards literature as an institution to such a degree that “not only is there no literature without criticism, but the history of the idea of literature is the history of the institutionalization of literary study” (45).

to think that the *Bildungsroman* is a “recently invented” genre, but it is impossible to say the same thing about the paradigm of *Bildung*, and the values of Enlightenment that the paradigm adheres to, which the *Bildungsroman* ultimately communicates.

Instead, the phantom status of the *Bildungsroman* is to be attributed to the contradictions that were already in place at the moment of the genre’s inception; first and foremost the anachronism of conditions in Germany compared with the bourgeois developments in Western Europe. Marx, for instance, observes that

As the ancient peoples went through their pre-history in imagination, in mythology, so we Germans have gone through our post-history in thought, in philosophy. We are philosophical contemporaries of the present without being its historical contemporaries. German philosophy is the idea prolongation of German history... What in advanced nations is a practical break with modern political conditions, is in Germany, where even those conditions do not yet exist, at first a critical break with the philosophical reflection of those conditions.⁴⁸

Thus, the social base of Germany was extremely contradictory with the lofty ideals of humanism.⁴⁹ In fact, in his preface to *German Realists of the Nineteenth Century*, Lukàcs attributes the dominance of humanism in Germany of the eighteenth century precisely to its backward condition and fragmented political landscape: “In the

⁴⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, London, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 176

⁴⁹ For detailed analysis of the German history and culture of the period, see James Sheehan, *German History 1770-1866*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989

absence of a nation as a real political entity, the attempts to overcome such provincialism –the struggles to achieve a national character, a national ethos, etc.— degenerated into abstract cosmopolitanism or general humanism... Nowhere else in world literature do notions such as ‘man’, ‘humankind’ and ‘the human race’ receive such emphatic expression as they do in German Classicism.”⁵⁰

On the other hand, this also means that the ideology of modernity was essentially conceived in Germany. Indeed, the *Bildungsroman* is a phantom genre precisely because it communicates ideals that transcend any particular national situation and as such, it portrays the spirit of modernity: its self-understanding, fantasies, desires and ultimately its grand illusions. Seized by the anxiety of not being quite modern enough, the *Bildungsroman* overcompensates for this perceived failure by idealizing and internalizing the core features of modernity and bourgeois individualism. In so doing, the *Bildungsroman* in fact reinforces the ideology of modernity by universalizing it through aesthetics.

Even after the paradigm of *Bildung* gradually loses its strong ideological hold, its aesthetic values remains in place for a long time. In her book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, for instance, Toril Moi argues that the German idealist aesthetics around 1800 “produced one of the most powerful and inspiring accounts of the nature and purpose of art and literature the world has ever seen,” and a version of this account, “however debased, diluted, vulgarized, and simplified,” still appears “in

⁵⁰ Lukács, 1993:2.

the aesthetic discussions throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century.⁵¹ She thus suggests that modernism arises as a negation of aesthetic idealism. Similarly, this dissertation traces the roots of modernism in the German idealist tradition of the late eighteenth century, aesthetic and philosophical.

***Bildung* and Organicism**

The concept of *Bildung* was first used by medieval mystics and eighteenth-century Pietists as God's transformation of the passive individual who has become deformed (*entbildet*), and who would be redeemed by identifying with God's image, *imago dei*. It thus originally referred to "both the external form or appearance of an individual and to the process of giving form."⁵² By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the religious and preformationist understanding of the term is to a large extent supplanted by a secular account of *Bildung* that emphasizes epigenesis (self-generation) particularly in the works of Herder, Humboldt, Blumenbach, Goethe and Schiller.

There seems to be two main reasons behind this shift. The first one has to do with the growing dissatisfaction with the mechanical account of nature put forward by Newton, which motivates the subsequent return to Aristotle's notion of entelechy.⁵³

⁵¹ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and The Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 70.

⁵² Kontje, 1993: 2.

⁵³ see Timothy Lenoir, *The Strategy of Life: Teleology and Mechanics in Nineteenth-Century German Biology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Helmut Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

Müller-Sievers, for instance, points out that by 1787, “the excitement over the conquests of astronomy had died down,” and the scientific interest shifted towards “the phenomena of life” in the last decades of the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ As Lenoir argues, in this period, the universe increasingly begins to be understood as “fundamentally biological,” as opposed to mechanical: “Not only is each part subservient to the organization of the whole, but there are only biological laws... The laws of mechanics are simply a subset of laws arrived at by placing limitations and constraints upon the biological law driving the universe.”⁵⁵ Particularly after Blumenbach’s emphasis on the formative drive of organisms (*Bildungstrieb*) in his *Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte* (1781), organicism becomes more pronounced in the cultural sphere. Herder, for instance, delineates an organic trajectory behind the rise and fall of cultures in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784-1791), and similarly Humbolt mobilizes organic metaphors to describe the development of human beings in *Limits of State Action* (1792). Around the same time, Goethe publishes his *Botanical Writings* (1790), as Kant puts forward an epigenetic model of rational development in his Critiques.

It must be noted that the dominance of organicism around the end of the eighteenth century is also due to Weimar Classicists’ disapproval of the violence and terror imparted by the French Revolution. Against the aggressive and abrupt change brought about by the Revolution, Goethe and Schiller advocate the slow, steady and harmonious process of plant metamorphosis as the ideal trope for social change.

⁵⁴ Müller-Sievers, 1997, 2.

⁵⁵ Lenoir, 1989, 10.

Schiller, in particular, argues that Freedom can only be gained through the aesthetic, and not by a violent revolution that suppresses man's true nature. Schiller extends the idea of organic causation to the operation of the State, which is "formed by itself and for itself" and thus demands the harmonious attunement of the parts to the whole.⁵⁶

The premise of this dissertation is that by the end of the eighteenth century, organicism becomes one of the central tropes that attends to "the legitimacy of the modern age," to adopt the title of Hans Blumenberg's influential book, and the cult of infinite progress espoused by modernity. This is not the place to delve into the details of Blumenberg's idiosyncratic account of the modern age. Nevertheless, it must be noted that he rejects Löwith's claim that the modern idea of progress is a secularized version of the eschatological pattern of Judeo-Christian progress, and instead argues that the modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism. What is at stake in Gnosticism is a dualism—the transcendent God of salvation cannot be the same as the demiurge, the earthly God. This is an extension, or rather a reoccupation as Blumenberg prefers to call it, of Platonism and then Neoplatonism and their theologizing the idea and demonizing the matter, which in turn will come back in Descartes' famous mind/body dualism and his invention of the radical doubt as a philosophical method: "The destruction of trust in the world made [man] for the first time a creatively active being, freed him from a disastrous lulling of his activity... The Middle Ages came to an end when within their spiritual system creation as

⁵⁶ Schiller, 1967: 33.

‘providence’ ceased to be credible to man and the burden of self-assertion was laid upon him.”⁵⁷

In the course of the eighteenth century, Cartesian mistrust in the world seems to be partly mitigated by *Bildung*’s more optimistic affirmation of life, and organicism becomes (albeit paradoxically) its master narrative, as well as its aesthetic model. It must be noted that organicism is an inherently ideological position, in so far as it “generates ideologies by suggesting that their origin be natural,” as Müller-Sievers notes about epigenesis.⁵⁸ Moreover, he argues that epigenesis is “a purely textual event”. After all, “there is no discovery, no experiment, no microscopic evidence that would demonstrate, beyond doubt and according to the parameters established by the scientific community, the superiority of epigenesis.”⁵⁹ Thus, organicism provides a figurative and dynamic metaphor for modernity; a new means through which its legitimacy is secured, and consequently, the paradigm of *Bildung* provides a new narrative of modernity—or rather, modernity as a narrative—that stands opposed to the rigidity of the Cartesian method. One of the main concerns of this dissertation is modernism’s acknowledgment of organicism as an ideological narrative and its concurrent attack on the notion of aesthetic form as a remnant of organicism.

⁵⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1993), 138-139.

⁵⁸ Müller-Sievers, 1997: 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

The Modernist *Bildungsroman*

In the single volume dedicated in its entirety to the subject of modernism and *The Bildungsroman- Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* - Gregory Castle claims that modernism's failure to conform to the generic demands of the *Bildungsroman* form signals a successful resistance to the institutionalization of self-cultivation (*Bildung*) and the general thesis of his argument is that "the critique of *Bildung* is part of a general modernist project of recuperation and revision of the Enlightenment concept of aesthetic-spiritual *Bildung*, which had been rationalized and bureaucratized in the course of the nineteenth century."⁶⁰ He thus frames his theory around a dialectic of failure wherein the modern *Bildungsheld* (hero of the *Bildung* plot) fails to achieve inner culture or harmonious socialization, yet at the same time this failure reasserts the transformative power of the genre itself in order to effect a rehabilitation of the *Bildungsroman* genre. He writes about the genre in its English and Irish context particularly around the central figures of Joyce, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf, and argues that these novelists reject the nineteenth-century tradition of socialization, or socially pragmatic *Bildung*, and look to the eighteenth century German Enlightenment which had nurtured a tradition of aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* in order to represent self-cultivation. Yet, in doing so, he argues, they also subject the classical tradition of *Bildung* to an "immanent critique" that disrupts the dialectical structure of *Bildung* that Castle

⁶⁰ Castle, 2006: 3.

argues to find its horizon in the ideal of harmonious integration with society. Thus, Castle contends that the modernist *Bildungsroman* is characterized by a double gesture of “recuperation and critique”, and unlike Franco Moretti, who sees in the *Bildungsroman* at the dawn of the twentieth century “the exhaustion of the form”, Castle claims that it is precisely the breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialization that gives the *Bildungsroman* “a new sense of purpose.”⁶¹

Castle rightly observes that throughout the nineteenth century, the practices of *Bildung* that inspired Humboldt and Goethe became rationalized and normalized in keeping with the demands of capitalism. As opposed to Weimar classicists’ ideal of education that promises both self-sufficiency and the potential for a social union “in which each strives to develop himself from his own inmost nature, and for his own sake,” educational institutions now became producers of “docile social subjects and viable citizens of the state.”⁶² It is essentially this specific aspect of late modernity that Castle argues the modernist *Bildungsroman* to be responding to.

Throughout Castle’s book, modernist novelists’ relationship with the genre of *Bildungsroman* is repeatedly represented as one of “recuperation”, “return”, “recapture”, etc. This dissertation argues that modernism’s relationship to the tradition of *Bildung* and the genre of *Bildungsroman* is far more complex and vital than a simple, arbitrary “return.” Castle’s argument that the modern protagonists’

⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶² Castle, 2006: 55.

failure is integral to the success of the modernist critique presupposes the definition of *Bildungsroman* to be strictly a narrative of success, evoking Hegel's sarcastic remarks in his *Aesthetics* about *Wilhelm Meister* as the story about a subject who, after years of apprenticeship, marries the girl and becomes a Philistine like everybody else. Yet, the reception of *Wilhelm Meister* alone complicates the notion that *Bildungsroman* effectuates the smooth integration of the individual into the collective. In a certain sense, the sense of failure is already inscribed in the negotiations between the inner potential of the protagonist and the actuality of practical reality that continues to impinge on him. It is indeed this tension that constitutes the substance of *Wilhelm Meister* and it is precisely on this grounds that Schlegel praises "the irony that hovers over the whole work," "as though in the deepest and most beautiful harmony and oneness the final knotting of thought and feeling were lacking."⁶³ Indeed, some critics note the failure of self-determination in the novel. W.H. Bruford, for instance, claims that Wilhelm's induction into the Society of the Tower functions as a symbolic affirmation of the very bourgeois society from which he tries to escape.⁶⁴ Similarly, in Todd Kontje's reading, Wilhelm "sees an alienated version of attained harmony in the creation of the Society of the Tower and mistakes it for its own."⁶⁵

Thus, it appears that Castle's notion of failure as the source of irony in the modernist *Bildungsroman* requires some revision, as irony is already an integral

⁶³ qtd Swales, 1978: 137.

⁶⁴ Bruford, 1975: 78.

⁶⁵ Kontje, 1993: 32.

element in the classical *Bildungsroman*. Castle's understanding of failure in the novels he looks at (*Jude the Obscure*, *Sons and Lovers*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*) emphasizes the problems of socialization, education and ultimately, gender. In fact, for someone whose theory is so greatly informed by Adorno, Castle says surprisingly little about the problem of the form.

The main argument of this dissertation is that it is not simply by means of characters' failure to attain a harmonious unity with society, but essentially by sublating Romantic irony into a problem of form that the modernist *Bildungsroman* presents a critique of the classical genre. Through close readings of the three modern versions of the genre -*In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, and *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz- this dissertation demonstrates that the tensions buried deep in the unconscious of this great narrative of organic development finally erupt as formal problems in modernism, when the classical *Bildungsroman* meets its demise through a relentless dehumanization of form. That is, if the classical *Bildungsroman* presents us with "the image of man in the process of becoming" as Bakhtin has argued, this dissertation claims that the modernist *Bildungsroman* enacts the dissolution of that process in its very form.

Chapter One traces the strong influence of aesthetic idealism in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust's novel differs from *The Magic Mountain* and *Ferdydurke* in that it was written in an earlier period of modernism (first volume published in 1913) in a country with a decidedly more established experience of

industrial and political modernization, not to mention the powerful influence aristocracy continued to exert on culture. If the novel is “a contradictory work torn between the materialism of the thought-as-pebble and the idealism of the beautiful totality” as Rancière argues, it is essentially because of these historical and social ambiguities, which ultimately result in the novel’s double gesture of retaining the structure of the classical *Bildungsroman* on the one hand, and reacting against its values and ideological underpinnings on the other. Indeed, while *In Search of Lost Time* constitutes an exemplary modern *Bildungsroman* in which the narrator’s chance encounters are retrospectively given an absolute character through art, the very formulation of “involuntary memory” and the narrator’s insistence on multiple selves upset the unified subjectivity of the older genre, revealing a photographic unconscious operating in the work that understands itself to be “a picture that paints itself”, as in Novalis’ metaphor of the *Bildung* paradigm.

Chapter Two argues that Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* traces the dissolution of *Bildung* as the exemplary framework for the formation of bourgeois subjectivity. This it does by entwining the trajectory of its protagonist, Hans Castorp with the tradition of *Bildung* itself. Both meet their end in World War I. In the novel, Thomas Mann presents not only a parody, but more importantly an immanent destruction of the *Bildungsroman* by undoing the conflation of *Bild* and *Bildung* in the classical genre through the mediation of the technological image that evokes “death” as opposed to progressive development, by providing an immanent critique of bourgeois notions of instrumental reason and accumulative knowledge through its

ironic embodiment of one of *Bildung*'s institutions, the encyclopedia, and ultimately by dehumanizing *Bildung*'s "organic form". The chapter observes that the overpowering detachment of time from history in the sanatorium is ironised by the overdetermination of the outbreak of the war, and thus suggest that *The Magic Mountain* is not only already foreclosed, but made possible by history itself; the war constituting the almost logical conclusion to the decaying bourgeois tradition. It is in this sense that Mann also denigrates the high modernist notion of the autonomous work of art, foreshadowing the guiding concern of his later novel, *Doctor Faustus*, which is about a twelve-tone composer preoccupied with the question of how to go on composing in an age when "the historical movement of musical material has turned against the self-contained work."

Chapter Three turns to Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, the story of a thirty year-old man obsessed with the idea of immaturity, who, one morning, is kidnapped by his old teacher named Pimko, dragged back into school and the world of adolescence. The novel's obvious trajectory of regression is intensified by the idea of Form as the accumulation of interpersonal relationships that define human beings. Although Gombrowicz's articulation of Form as a dynamic process evokes Goethe's notion of form "in a ceaseless flux", the former nevertheless imparts a sense of foreclosure and imprisonment, since the process of socialization in the grotesque world of *Ferdydurke* involves manipulation, indoctrination, constant duels and symbolic rapes to such an extent that Form descends on the characters, much like the way history descends on Hans Castorp. It is this emphatic insistence on the impossibility of self-determination,

along with a scathing attack on modernity, autonomy, unified subjectivity, aesthetic totality and progressive rationality that makes *Ferdydurke* an exemplary anti-*Bildungsroman*. The novel, much like its protagonist, consists of parts that mock each other, and it constantly sabotages its own formal maturation through manifestoes, theoretical reflections, narrative digressions, and prefaces to the digressions, and thus subverts the idealist notion of the work of art as a beautiful totality.

CHAPTER 1: PROUST'S PHOTOGRAPHIC UNCONSCIOUS: *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME* AS AN *ENTWICKLUNGSROMAN*

It has often been noted that Marcel Proust's monumental work *In Search of Lost Time* is a failure instead of a success; if it is a modernist classic, it is not because the novel represents a beautiful totality, but because it sustains its own thematic and formal contradictions to the very end, drawing strength and vigor from its inherent asymmetries and imbalances without ever fully resolving them.¹ This chapter examines the contradiction between the novel's claim to self-generation and its concurrent emphasis on the experience of involuntary memory, which involves a regressive identification with the past and a necessary material mediation, thereby undermining *Bildung's* progressive model of subjectivity. Although *In Search of Lost Time* understands itself to be "a picture that paints itself" in Novalis' trope of *Bildung*, involuntary memory entails the development (*Entwicklung*) of the latent images already impressed on the narrator's consciousness, so that the novel essentially follows a photographic model of development, as opposed to the painterly model of *Bildung*.²

In Search of Lost Time is often understood as a *Bildungsroman* that traces the trajectory of the narrator's aesthetic development. Although it is conceded that this progressive development is momentarily suspended by the intervention of the past through involuntary memory, these impressions are supposed to be subsequently incorporated into the work of art, the unmistakable *telos* of the narrator's apprenticeship.

¹ see Antoine Compagnon, *Proust Between Two Centuries*, trans. Richard E. Goodkin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

² see Novalis, *Werke, Tagebuecher, Briefe*, Hans-Joachim Maehl, ed. (Munich: Hanser, 1978), vol. 1, p. 15.

In this scenario, the novel's unity is made possible by its convergence with the narrator at the end, as the book which he has been planning to write turns out to be the one we have been reading. Thus, narrator's "multiple selves" are finally consolidated in a centered subject, as the totalizing power of art reveals the common essence in all the selves. Accordingly, the unity of the self is believed to be achieved in the unity of the book. Roger Shattuck, for instance, suggests that "Marcel and the Narrator move slowly toward one another until they finally meet in the closing pages. That united I...produces a whole which is the book itself."³ Similarly, Paul de Mann talks about "the convergence of the author and the narrator at the end of the novel,"⁴ and Joseph Frank argues that "the novel the narrator undertakes to write has just been finished by the reader."⁵ Joshua Landy suggests that the experience of involuntary memory gives the narrator an access to an essential self that underlies all selves: "If today's madeleine tastes the same as it did thirty years ago, it is because there must be a part of us at least that has not changed in between times, a permanent aspect underlying all of the mutable selves."⁶

Curiously, it is Gilles Deleuze, who otherwise has a keen eye for multiplicities that provides the most immaculately teleological interpretation of the novel in his *Proust and Signs*. Through an oblique reference to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Deleuze regards the novel as a *Bildungsroman*; the story of the narrator's "apprenticeship of signs" at the end of which he learns to go beyond the material signs of involuntary memory to arrive at

³ Roger Shattuck, *Marcel Proust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 38.

⁴ Paul de Mann, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 16.

⁵ Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" in *The Widening Gyre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 3-61.

⁶ Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception and Knowledge in Proust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 112.

their eternal essences in the work of art. As such, involuntary memory is of secondary importance compared to “the truth” towards which Deleuze thinks the search is in fact oriented. Thus, if the novel is about time, it is only to the degree that truth can only unfold in time; and this is why “Proust’s work is not oriented to the past and the discoveries of memory, but to the future and the progress of an apprenticeship”.⁷

Deleuze concedes that his reading gives “a linear character to the development of the Search”; for, although the narrator has partial epiphanies throughout the novel, they are often accompanied by “regressions in other realms” until his final revelation that only art can systematize the whole.⁸

The main thrust of Deleuze’s argument is that the “essence” that is revealed in the work of art is essentially “the absolute and ultimate Difference”. Difference cannot be grasped in the worldly signs, because in them “matter still subsists, refractory to the spirit.” Thus, even through they bring the narrator closer to the truth, sensuous signs always make him “fall back into the trap of the object, into the snare of subjectivity.” The sensuous signs instigate a process of difference precisely because they are material signs, and thus they necessarily have their meaning in something other than themselves. They are not absolute, but essentially contingent; and so their nature is foreign to the work of art, which alone is supposed to give us “true unity: unity of an immaterial sign and of an entirely spiritual meaning.”⁹

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41, 40, 38 and 40.

There are three basic problems with Deleuze's reading, and these problems cut across all Proust scholarship. The first problem has already been noted by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*. Granting "an exclusive privilege to the apprenticeship to signs," as Ricoeur argues Deleuze to be doing, "deprives the final revelation of its role as a hermeneutical key for the entire work." On the other hand, granting the privilege to the final revelation "divests the thousands of pages preceding the revelation of any signification" and eliminates the problem of "the relation between the quest and the discovery." Instead, Ricoeur argues that the originality of the novel "lies in its having concealed both the problem and its solution up to the end of the hero's course, thus keeping for a second reading the intelligibility of the work as a whole."¹⁰

In another sense, granting the privilege to the apprenticeship to signs also detracts from the significance of involuntary memory; not because it brings the narrator's previously forgotten memories to the surface as it is commonly assumed, but more importantly because involuntary memory introduces the key element of contingency to the novel through the mediation of material objects; thereby upsetting the progressive, self-possessed model of modern rationality and its ideal "self of the disengaged reason."¹¹ Deleuze's reading reduces involuntary memory to a secondary status, and adheres to the fantasy of the total work of art as the locus of "eternal essences."

This brings us to the second problem. The novel does not in fact end with the triumphant discovery of extratemporality and the restoration of "eternal essences" in the

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol. 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 132.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2001), 480.

work of art, but with the narrator's sudden realization that time is, in fact, embodied; and his novel must accordingly reflect time as a corporeal entity. This epiphany is immediately coupled with the idea of death "taking up permanent residence" within the narrator, since by extension, embodiment implies death as the ultimate horizon of every living being.¹² This deviation from the progressive model of temporality is one of the most notable ways *In Search of Lost Time* differs from the classical *Bildungsroman*, and the recognition of death as a possible hindrance to the work also throws doubt on the modernist claim to autonomy.

The third problem has to do with the fact that Deleuze ascribes all contingency to the materiality of signs without ever mentioning the narrator's "multiple selves." It must be noted that the Proustian self is essentially configured on the point of convergence between the subject and the outside reality that surrounds it. As such, it is far from the unified subjectivity that Deleuze implicitly attributes to it, but portrays the fragile nature of modern subjectivity. Proustian subjectivity does not entail surpassing materiality, but the incorporation of object world; and thus bringing back together what has been torn asunder by Cartesian apodicticity. In what follows, we will take a broader look at Proust's notion of "multiple selves" and its relation to the materiality of the object world.

Superimposition of Selves

In Proust's world, nothing is immediate; not even the relationship one has with him/herself. The uncertainty about the self constitutes one of the central themes of the

¹² Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor & Terence Kilmartin (Vintage, 1996), 444.

novel to the extent that Marcel recognizes that there is in fact not one, but multiple selves that keep disappearing and resurfacing through a memory that brings back a former self, or a lover who, after long having being forgotten, is resuscitated along with the self that used to love her.

The opening pages of *In Search of Lost Time* read like a philosophical treatise on the difficulty of retaining the sense of selfhood when one loses her grasp of the external world and spatio-temporal coordinates. Recalling the nights when he woke up from a deep sleep, the narrator writes:

...it was enough if, in my own bed, my sleep was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness; for then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke at midnight, not knowing where I was, I could not be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence...but then the memory would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself; in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, would gradually piece together the original components of my ego.¹³

It is worth noting that, at the very beginning of his work, Proust emphasizes the way in which the self is always half inscribed in its external determinations. And yet, this concession regarding the impact of the external world on the self is immediately followed by another proposition: “Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them.”¹⁴ Thus, gradually, Marcel starts to become skeptical of the idea that it is the material world that contains eternal truths and retreats

¹³ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

into his own imagination. He is particularly disappointed after seeing the Balbec church, which he had been so anxious to visit, as the church he had imagined to be “endowed with universal value” turns out to be a church made of stone just as any other and is thus marked by “the tyranny of the Individual.” In fact, the first volume of the novel, *Swann’s Way*, fittingly closes with a denunciation of the world of the senses and the idea of reality, thereby hinting at the idealist Marcel he will become in the following volumes: “How paradoxical it is to seek in reality for the pictures that are stored in one’s memory, which must inevitably lose the charm that comes to them from memory itself and from their not being apprehended by the senses ... The memory of a particular image is but a regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.”¹⁵ Thus, Marcel’s relationship to the outside world shifts from a position that foregrounds the sensuous qualities of physical reality into one that dismisses the idea of an objective reality altogether; in other words, from the difference of the object to a self-identical subject. But this tension is never resolved and instead constitutes the substance of the novel.

The coexistence of idealism and materialism in the novel as two impulses that guide the narrator has already been noted by Descombes and Rancière. Descombes points out the dualistic cosmology in which Proust thinks and lays out the binary opposition between the sets matter/ugliness/positive/limited/commonplaceness/space-time and spirit/beauty/symbolic/general/poetic reverie/eternity: “Matter forms the inferior pole: the positive, the particular, the down-to-earth. Here things are only what they are. The other pole, the pole of the spirit, corresponds to the idealizing ambitions of poetry

¹⁵ *Swann’s Way*, 462.

and philosophy...At one pole of the Universe we find pure Matter and Force; at the opposite pole, Spirit and personality. Between the two stand human desires, tending sometimes toward the brutality of this world, sometimes toward the poetry of other worlds.”¹⁶ In his book *The Flesh of Words*, Rancière calls *In Search of Lost Time* “the contradictory work, torn between the materialism of the thought-as pebble and the idealism of the beautiful animal or of the symmetrical building.”¹⁷

At first, Proust’s dual emphasis on subjectivity and the object world resembles Bergson’s self-avowed dualism in *Matter and Memory*, which “affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter,”¹⁸ but a closer look reveals the difference between Bergson and Proust. Matter, in Bergson’s view, is an aggregate of images. By image Bergson means “a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing—an existence placed halfway between the “thing” and the “representation.”¹⁹ According to Bergson, perception is in continuity with the images of matter, and the succession of time cannot be understood in terms of a transition from one discreet state to another, since temporal movement does not disappear, but belongs to the continuous movement of duration. Past, therefore, is essentially an undivided, perpetual present, which the conscious mind

¹⁶ Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel*, trans. Catherine Chance Macksey, (Stanford University Press, 1992), 18.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, (Stanford University Press, 2004), 157.

¹⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

distorts reality by taking “snapshots” of it, as he puts in *Creative Evolution*.²⁰ Thus, Bergson’s depiction of images and their duration in time is in keeping with the painterly model of development (that is, *Bildung*).

For Proust, on the other hand, the essence of time is not really duration, but negativity; that is, the absolute difference between the past and the present.²¹ The true meaning of “lost time” resides in intermittences, intervals and a succession of isolated instants. If time were a duration, no real remembering would in fact be possible; for what is remembered would be nothing more than a representation. This is why the interruption caused by forgetting is more integral to memory than the Bergsonian duration. The necessity of intervals, for desire and for memory alike, is repeatedly emphasized. For instance, several years that separate the narrator’s first visit to Balbec and Albertine’s imprisonment in his Paris apartment multiply Albertine and reveal a new, “strongly modeled figure with mysterious shadows”: “Its three-dimensional character was due to the superimposition, not only of the successive images that Albertine had been for me, but also of admirable traits of intelligence and feeling, and grave faults of character, all unsuspected by me, which Albertine, in a kind of germination, a multiplication of herself, a somber-hued flowering of flesh, had added to a nature once almost characterless, but

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1944), 306.

²¹ In his recent book *Dying For Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, Martin Hägglund also notes this: “If the past has not ceased to be, it is not past but present, and by the same token, there is no passage of time... Only if something is no longer—that is, only if there is negativity—can there be a difference between before and after, past and present. This negativity must be at work in presence itself for there to be succession. If the moment is not negated in being succeeded by another moment, their relation is not one of temporal succession but of spatial coexistence” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 32.

now difficult to know in depth.”²² Because they are registered on the negative plate of an irretrievable past, and because they require the chemistry of time to reveal their hidden truths, Proustian memory images are essentially photographic rather than painterly;

To enter inside us, people have been obliged to take on the form and to fit into the framework of time; appearing to us only in successive instants, they have never managed to reveal to us more than one aspect, print more than a single photograph of themselves at a time. And then this fragmentation not only makes the dead person live on, it multiplies her forms. In order to console myself, I would have had to forget not one but innumerable Albertines.²³

Let there be no mistakes; Proust does not like the technological image.

Throughout the novel, he often denigrates visual technologies, particularly photography and cinematography, by associating their mechanical mode of operation with that of ordinary memory. As Susan Sontag observes, whenever Proust mentions photographs, “he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to me made by responding to cues given by all the senses—the technique he called ‘involuntary memory’”²⁴. Thus, while seemingly faithful to the reality they convey photography and cinematography, much like “realist literature,”²⁵ in fact merely present abstractions from the true impressions of life, the ideal essences of which evade the

²² Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner and The Fugitive*, trans. Carol Clark and Peter Collier (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 445.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989), 164.

²⁵ “The kind of literature which contends itself with ‘describing things’, with giving of them merely a miserable abstract of lines and surfaces, is in fact, though it calls itself realist, the furthest removed from reality and has more than any other the effect of saddening and impoverishing us, since it abruptly severs all communication of our present self both with the past, the essence of which is preserved in things, and with the future, in which things incite us to enjoy the essence of the past a second time” (*Time Regained*, 241).

crude, excessive model of one-to-one representation. It is highly telling that, while reflecting on the nature of his work he has just decided to take up, Proust contrasts his claim to truthful portrayal of reality with that of the cinematography:

An image presented to us by life brings with it, in a single moment, sensations which are in fact multiple and heterogeneous...and what we call reality is a certain connection between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them—a connection that is suppressed in a simple cinematographic vision, which just because it professes to confine itself to the truth in fact departs widely from it—a unique connection which the writer has to discover in order to link for ever in his phrase the two sets of phenomena which reality joins together.²⁶

And yet, behind this self-avowed resistance, there lurks a photographic unconscious that manages to rise to the surface at certain moments of the novel, bypassing the narrator's self-consciousness and acidic power of analysis. It is interesting that while the organic imagery in the novel tends to emphasize the first aspect of time as *élan vital*, repeating *Bildung's* gesture of associating the progression of time with that of organic beings, it is through the photographic image that the idea of time as finitude is conveyed.

A case in point is the narrator's account of how he sees his grandmother as a photographic image in the face of her impending death. As we will see in the next chapter, the episode evokes Hans Castorp's epiphany regarding his own mortality after he sees his own X-ray image for the first time. After speaking to her grandmother on the phone for the first time, the narrator tries to grapple with this new phantom of the disembodied voice, and thus decides to visit her to send the ghost away. Yet, once estranged from his usual perception of his grandmother, his eyes start to function

²⁶ *Time Regained*, 246.

“mechanically like a photographic film,” showing him” not the beloved figure who has long ceased to exist, and whose death our affection has never wanted to reveal, but the new person it has clothed.”²⁷ So for the first time, the narrator sees her grandmother in her new truth, as “a red-faced, heavy and vulgar crushed old woman” who will soon die:

What my eyes did, automatically, in the moment I caught sight of my grandmother, was to take a photograph. We never see those who are dear to us except in the animated workings, the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them, which, before allowing the images their faces represent to reach us, draws them into its vortex, flings them back onto the idea of them we have always had, makes them adhere to it, coincide with it... But if, instead of our eyes, it should happen to be a purely material lens, a photographic plate, that has been watching things, then what we see—in the courtyard of the Insuit, for example-- instead of an Academician emerging into the street to hail a cab, will be his tottering attempts to avoid falling on his back, the parabola of his fall, as though he were drunk or the ground covered in ice.²⁸

Episodes like this reveal the fact that, despite the narrator’s insistence regarding the organic unity of his work, there is another, more destructive force operative in the unconscious of the novel: death. This suppression mechanism works under the same vitalist principle as the tradition of *Bildung*, disregarding death as the inevitable end of every organism.

“A Picture That Paints Itself”

As we have noted (and will explore further in Chapter 3), *Bildung*’s ideal of aesthetic totality is essentially modeled after the unity of organic forms. Thanks to the

²⁷ Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

predominance of aesthetic idealism in the nineteenth century,²⁹ the idea of the work of art as a beautiful totality carries over from Germany to the rest of Europe and soon becomes a universal law of art. In France, it is particularly by Gabriel Séailles that the ideal of art as an organic totality is set forth.³⁰ Antoine Compagnon notes that Séailles' *Essai sur le génie dans l'art* reformulated and disseminated transcendental idealism in France around the turn of the nineteenth century.³¹ In her book *Proust's Deadline*, Christina Cano reports that Proust had attended Séailles's aesthetics course at the Sorbonne in 1894-95 and thus he was deeply influenced by his nineteenth-century version of organicism, as a result of which he had the dream of publishing all of the novel's volumes simultaneously.³² Given his organicist formation, it is not a surprise that Proust often draws his metaphors from the plant world while describing the ripening of his work.³³

And I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in indolence, in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined or even continued existence any more than a seed does

²⁹ see Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and The Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press), 2006

³⁰ Antoine Compagnon quotes this telling passage: "Each syllable has its own character and personality and exists only through the words of which it is a part; each word has its own value and is nothing by itself, it is inserted into the clause which is then inserted into the sentence. The sentence is a unit, but only to the extent that an organ in an animate body is a unit. Style is a living form in which living beings are enclosed ad infinitum" qtd. in Antoine Compagnon, *Proust Between Two Centuries*, trans. Richard E. Goodkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² Christine Cano, *Proust's Deadline* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 6.

³³ Compagnon notes Proust's correspondance with André Beaunier : "I want to make it seem (a little bit) like a whole, even though it is a part", and with René Blum: "It would be better not to call it the first volume, since I am pretending that all by itself it forms a small unity, like L'Orme du mail in *Histoire contemporaine* or *Les Déracinés* in *Le Roman de l'énergie nationale*." (Compagnon, 1992: 33)

when it forms within itself a reserve of all the nutritious substances from which it will feed a plant. Like the seed, I should be able to die once the plant had developed and I began to perceive that I had lived for the sake of the plant without knowing it.³⁴

The narrator's conception of his work as a plant which is the end result of the seed, that is his past life, evokes Aristotelian teleology that puts forward the predestination of matter to assume a definitive form as its final cause. Since the seed bears the codes of natural generation, it follows that it can have only one eventual form. Thus, in the case of *In Search of Lost Time*, the modernist claim for the absolute follows a strikingly organicist pattern. We will also see how this teleological model will be revealed through the unity of form and content in the novel. By retrospectively conceptualizing his past as the subject matter of the work he is about to undertake, the narrator is not merely accounting for his artistic *Bildung*, but also essentializing this process by positing it as a potentiality which necessarily has to unfold into actuality in the form of the work of art.

Yet, at this point, Proust faces a challenge that ultimately has to be accounted for by any narrative that fashions itself after the immanent causality of organic forms, including Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. For as we will have the occasion to revisit in following chapters, in *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe revises the teleological model of *Bildung* advanced in his own botanical writings by incorporating into the novel the dynamics of contingency through "play" and "the vicissitudes of socialization,"³⁵ since compared to the *Bildung* of organic forms, it is "far more problematic to account for the *Bildung* of the human individual in teleological terms" as Pfau notes, "for doing so would obviously

³⁴ *Time Regained*, 258.

³⁵ Thomas Pfau, "Bildungsspiele: Vicissitudes of Socialization in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*", *European Romantic Review*, 21: 5, 2010

vitiate several of the descriptors widely regarded as indispensable for an operative concept of the human being: its capacity for free-choice; self-awareness; complex reasoning and multilayered symbolic expression; and, perhaps most crucially, its being a unique person above and beyond having these traits in common with other members of the species.”³⁶

Similarly, Proust has to solve a specific problem. If the novel operates on an immanent causality, as suggested by the metaphor of the seed, it has to follow that the motion from potentiality into actuality cannot be contingent. According to the implied teleological framework, the narrator’s past as the substance of his work has no other chance but to be transformed into the specific form it is yet to assume. The book has to be written at all costs, all contingency has to be eliminated to attain the final cause, the work is the *raison d’être* of the narrator, for he “had lived for the sake of the plant,” without ever knowing it:

I began to perceive that I had lived for the sake of the plant without knowing it, without ever realizing that my life needed to come into contact with those books which I had wanted to write and for which, when in the past I had sat down at my table to begin, I had been unable to find a subject. And thus my whole life up to the present day might and yet might not have been summed up under the title: *A Vocation*. In so far as literature had not played no part in my life the title would not have been accurate. And yet it would have been accurate because this life of mine, the memories of its sadness and its joys, formed a reserve which fulfilled the same function as the albumen lodged in the germ-cell of a plant, from which that cell starts to draw the nourishment which will transform it into a seed long before there is any outward sign that the embryo of a plant is developing.³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 568.

³⁷ *Time Regained*, 259.

Yet, how come it takes so long for the narrator to grasp his vocation, if the work is indeed of such a necessary nature? How come does he not instantly realize that the subject matter he has been searching for is his own life story, which, as potentiality, is waiting to unfold into the actuality of form? In response, it must be noted that Proust realizes that his *Bildung*, being that of an individual and not of an organic form, has to account for its singularity, and he can only do so by taking possession of the distinctive shape his life assumes as a result of so many chance occurrences that befall him. Thus, he has to find a method in order to sublimate the irreducible element of contingency into a form that will become, in Hegelian terms, the absolute ground of itself. In other words, he can write his *Bildungsroman* if and only if he can find a way to make contingency the substance of his work, and this he does by inventing the phenomenon of involuntary memory.³⁸ In fact, it could be argued that the most significant function of involuntary memory in the novel is to open up the space for contingency. Thus, whatever the latest trends in Proust criticism may be, it is important not to cast involuntary memory aside as an exhausted or otherwise outdated topic, for it is precisely through this invention that Proust asserts contingency as an essential element of the modernist novel.

³⁸ Note that Proust talks about involuntary memory as a method: “For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which it is possible for us to extract... The task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art?” (*Time Regained*, 232)

Involuntary Memory

Unlike it is for Bergson, for Proust, matter is not simply an aggregate of images. Rather, matter is the very foundation on which the self is constituted. If the modern subject has to go through “the obligatory detour through the object world”³⁹ as Jameson argues, it is essentially because by the end of the nineteenth century, it becomes quite clear that there is no empirical ground to sustain the illusion of a transcendental, self-determined model of subjectivity. The experience of involuntary memory is precisely such a moment in which the putatively progressive unfolding of the subject of *Bildung* is literally arrested; “held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object,” making one’s own past “effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison.”⁴⁰

It is the same with our past. It is a waste of effort to try to summon it, all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it.⁴¹

The quintessential attribute of the experience of involuntary memory is contingency; and this in two senses. The first one has to do with the fact that the formation of subjectivity itself is contingent upon a communion with the external world; and involuntary memory provides such a moment of contact. But more importantly, the narrator does not tire of emphasizing that this encounter is based purely on chance. It is

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 138.

⁴⁰ *Swann's Way*, 39.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

not in the subject's power to arrange such an encounter, and this concession defies *Bildung's* fantasy of autonomy and self-determination. As opposed to *Bildung's* horizon unification, involuntary memory expresses "an awareness of living on a duality or plurality of levels, not totally compatible, but which can't be reduced to unity," and this recognition "has to be won against the presumptions of the unified self, controlling or expressive."⁴²

Through the sensations reawakened by involuntary memory, Marcel grasps the possibility of a pure past. In a sense, this recharacterization of past is simultaneous with Marcel's realization of the distinction between the real and the artificial impressions. In his train of reasoning in Guermantes' reading room, Marcel comes to the conclusion that the reason why we cannot judge the past fairly is that we isolate a certain instant from the impressions such as colors, scents, feelings of hunger, desire, etc. surrounding us at the time and therefore, what we have in the end is not the time "in its pure state" but merely a representation of it drawn from the intellect. If the absolute necessity of the book first has to go through the contingency of "involuntary memory," it is because a work undertaken by pure intelligence can only correspond to a logical truth, which is artificially generated as an abstract possibility. Thus, it is devoid of the necessity which makes the work of art the absolute ground of itself precisely because it might have been different. This is indeed why the absolute essences do not immediately transform themselves into the content of the work, but first have to go through the mediation of the sensations that trigger the involuntary memory. According to Proust, a content designed by the intelligence would convey no truth; lacking any relationality, it would not be absolute. If the narrator makes

⁴² Taylor, 480.

his errors and failures the substance of his work, it is because he is aware that there is no essential truth in the material world, only a temporal unfolding of constantly shifting interpretations. The unique temporality of the narrator's work, precisely because it is mainly the story of a vocation, expresses a *Bildung*; and as such, in its absolute form, it retains the traces of the journey from past to present and back. Thus, the narrator's epiphany near the end of *Time Regained* about the content of the work he has been waiting to write his whole life is immediately coupled with a revelation about its form, which is unmistakably the form of time:

If I still had the strength to accomplish my work, this afternoon—like certain days ago at Combray which had influenced me—which in its brief compass had given me both the idea of my work and the fear of being unable to bring it to fruition, would certainly impress upon it that form of which as a child I had had a presentiment in the church at Combray but which ordinarily, throughout our lives, is invisible to us: the form of Time.⁴³

The tension between the contingency of “involuntary memory” and the claim to absolute necessity which the work of art requires will only be sublated (*aufgehoben*) once this tension is grasped as the ground, that is to say the content of the very work which springs up from this initial conflict. The narrator's past sufferings and all his wasted time will only be articulated as a necessity once the prospect of writing is opened up before him. For instance, it is only in *Time Regained*, when the narrator understands that all the materials for a work of literature were simply his past life, that the time wasted for Albertine will retrospectively be regarded as an “apprenticeship”: “By making me waste my time, by causing me unhappiness, Albertine had perhaps been more useful to me,

⁴³ Ibid., 447.

even from a literary point of view, than a secretary who would have arranged my paperies.”⁴⁴

In this organicist framework, *In Search of Lost Time* becomes one of the most exemplary literary works in which the content necessitates the form; or rather, the content is embodied in the form along with the style. The work of art becomes the absolute form in which the distinction of content and form vanishes, since in its realization the tension between contingency and necessity have been sublated so that they are now the moments of absolute necessity; that is to say, actuality.⁴⁵ Thus, in the book, the long, bifurcating sentences imply a desire to intervene in the unfolding of time in an attempt to make its movement coextensive with the peculiar way in which memory functions; and the division of the narrative into many volumes resonates with the narrator’s cubist formulation according to which the characters reveal different aspects of themselves through the kaleidoscopic mirror of time.

The Photographic Unconscious

At least, this is the fantasy Proust wants us to believe. The reality, however, is that *Time Regained* (the last volume) was already planned and for the most part written by the time *Swann’s Way* (the first volume) was published in 1913. Jameson notes that the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁵ As Hegel formulates in *Science of Logic*, “Form in its realization has penetrated all its differences and made itself transparent and is, as absolute necessity, only this self-identity of being in its negation, or in essence. The distinction of content and form itself has also vanished; for that unity of possibility in actuality, and conversely, is the form which in its determinateness or in positedness is indifferent towards itself, is that fact filled with content, in which the form of necessity ran its external course. (...) But the resolution of this difference is absolute necessity whose content is this difference which in this necessity penetrates itself” (2004, §1227).

original three volume plan is hindered by the shortage of paper brought about by the war, and following the publication of *Swann's Way*, Proust does not use that time to start new projects, but instead adds new details and episodes to the existing volumes, so that, by the time paper becomes available again, "an immense new novel has taken the place of the two-volume original and what we know as Proust will gradually heave into sight as the later sections are published."⁴⁶ Given Proust's original dream of simultaneous publication as a way of safeguarding the work's organic unity, it is ironic that the form of the novel is ultimately determined by the contingencies of war rather than a biological necessity- and as we will see in the following chapter, *The Magic Mountain* will face a similar destiny. Thus, strangely, by the time the novel is published in full, its claim to autonomy has already been compromised.

Yet, even if we disregard the intervention of war, Proust's planned ending still insinuates a foreclosure that contradicts *Bildung's* open-ended, progressive model of development; for *Bildung* involves an immanent emergence of form out of its own content, as suggested by Novalis' trope of "the picture that paints itself," whereas *In Search of Lost Time* is painted by Proust's external agency.⁴⁷ Compared to the painterly aspect of *Bildung*, and contrary to what he wants to believe, the course of Proust's novel's development is decidedly more photographic than organic. It is often said of

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Proust or Joyce?" *The Modernist Papers* (London; New York: Verso: 2007), 195.

⁴⁷ Against this assertion, one might argue that any narrative, due to the very fact that it is a narrative, is written by an external agency. Indeed, this is the paradox of the *Bildungsroman*, for the self-conscious aspect of the narrative implies the existence of a higher agency at all times, namely, that of the narrator, which contradicts with the immanent unfolding of *Bildung*. Yet, it must be noted that even Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* does not lay as strong a claim to its own formal self-grounding as Proust's novel does. To this, we must also add that the open-endedness of the *Bildung* process is ensured by Goethe's use of irony, as we discussed in the Introduction.

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* that it is an *Entwicklungsroman* rather than a *Bildungsroman* in the sense that Hans Castorp's development involves the resurfacing of the latent images imprinted on his psyche. It may also prove illuminating to look at Proust's "impressions" and their return to the surface of his consciousness by involuntary memory as a process of exposure and development, that is, *Entwicklung*.

In his book *After Images: Photography, Archaeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung*, Eric Downing notes the interesting fact that in his writings, Freud often explains his theory of the unconscious in terms of the apparatus of photography, "where an impression can be made on the negative plate of the unconscious as a result of some early exposure and then remain stored there for many years before being developed into a positive, visible print,"⁴⁸ and he quotes the following passage from *Moses and Monotheism*:

The strongest compulsive influence arises from impressions which impinge themselves upon a child at a time when we would have to regard his physical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact itself cannot be doubted, but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture.⁴⁹

Downing rightly asserts that "this model of latency presents a challenge to the sequential unfolding and historical continuity of the subject traditionally assumed by *Bildung*." Thus, it is photography, rather than the painterly *Bild*, that inspires the new model of subject formation. Indeed, Proust's account of the development of latent impressions suggests a model of subjectivity that structurally has more in common with

⁴⁸ Eric Downing, *After Images: Photography, Archaeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung* (Detroit; Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 32

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

photography than with painting. The narrator's insistence on the existence of multiple selves, as opposed to *Bildung's* project of a centered subject, which, after a long period of apprenticeship, finally coincides with him/herself, warrants Downing's assertion that "the notion of the self and its *Entwicklung* is essentially alien to the notion of the self and its *Bildung* supported by the single or simple *Bild* vocabulary of painting"⁵⁰ Proustian subjectivity involves double, triple, quadruple, etc. exposures, and superimpositions further multiplied by memory to such a degree that "our ego is composed of the superimposition of our successive states."⁵¹

It is not only the Proustian self, but also the Proustian form that develops in a photographic fashion. For, as Downing reminds us, Freud argues that subjectivity develops selectively, as "certain scripts, impressions, or images get developed and others do not": "Let us assume that every mental process...exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase, just as a photographic picture beings as a negative and only becomes a picture after beings turned into a positive. Not every image, however, necessarily becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one."⁵² Similarly, Proust's totality effect relies on such uneven developments, omissions and additions in a way that is contradictory to the novel's emphasis on organic development. For, the agglutinative form undermines the putative teleological structure of the novel by implying that the ending could in fact have been different. Jameson, for instance, notes Michel Butor's speculation that if he had lived, "Proust would have gone on writing...and the work might have been concluded

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵¹ *The Fugitive*, 515.

⁵² Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, qtd. in Downing, 2006: 34.

with an unexpected happy ending: the triumphal wedding between the narrator and Mlle de Saint Loup.”⁵³

Every so often, and in a way that contradicts his organicist account of the novel’s process of unfolding, Proust employs photographic metaphors to describe the functioning of desire and memory. A case in point is his first meeting with Albertine, an event that he has been waiting impatiently for a long time. After finally having been introduced to Albertine by Elstir, the narrator experiences the pleasure of this meeting not in that moment, but characteristically after the fact, and comes to the conclusion that “pleasures are like photographs: in the presence of the person we love, we take only negatives, which we develop later, at home, when we have at our disposal once more our inner darkroom, the door of which it is strictly forbidden to open while others are present.”⁵⁴

Proust’s description of pleasure as a negative, which is later developed to expose its hidden shapes and colors, recalls the unfolding of the impressions in the famous madeleine episode. The cake dipped into the tea expresses a gradual development; it slowly absorbs the warm liquid and retains it in its memory to unveil Combray’s picture of the past, “as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character and form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and

⁵³ Jameson, 2007: 198.

⁵⁴ Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of the Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin Books), 2005.

recognizable.”⁵⁵ The madeleine episode foreshadows the specific kind of temporality through which the novel unfolds. We know that the novel will develop in the same manner; the meaning of Gilberte’s gesture or Albertine’s lies will not be fully revealed until the very end when the narrator realizes that men should not be described as occupying “a restricted place which is reserved for them in space,” but “as they touch the distant epochs through which they have lived, between which so many days have come to range themselves—in Time.”⁵⁶

Thus, the narrator decides that he can tell his story only through a form that is essentially temporalized. The narrator insists that the unfolding of this temporality is organic (and thus painterly). Yet, it must be noted that the novel’s unique manner of temporalizing the form is decidedly different than that of a painting, which surreptitiously conceals the temporal gap between its so many brush strokes. Instead, it is a synthetic form wrought with temporal vacillations and narrative discontinuities, further complicated by maneuvers like prolepsis, analepsis, anachrony⁵⁷, as identified by Gérard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse*. These narrative strategies brilliantly mirror the novel’s general sense of temporal confusion marked by “intermittences of the heart,” interruptions and suspensions, long periods of procrastination, after the fact realizations, years wasted with gossip and dead-end love affairs, not to mention the regressive

⁵⁵ *Swann’s Way*, 51.

⁵⁶ *Time Regained*, 451.

⁵⁷ Genette designates “prolepsis” as any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later, “analepsis” as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment, and “anachrony” as all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative in *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1980), 42

identification with an older self made possible by the experience of involuntary memory. Ricoeur suggests that “the apprenticeship to signs, as well as the irruption of memories, represents the form of an interminable wandering, interrupted rather than consummated, by the sudden illumination that retrospectively transforms the entire narrative into the invisible history of a vocation,”⁵⁸ and this process of transforming the invisible into the visible resembles the development of the latent images carved on the negative plate.

Thus, the narrator’s engagement with time is remarkably different from the forward-looking temporality of *Bildung*, which, endowed with a humanist mission, invests its time in more fruitful endeavors like self-cultivation and social unification. To be sure, *Wilhelm Meister* wastes a good share of his time in theatre; but this lost time is later subordinated into the knowledge that he is not a good fit for theatre, and therefore he must turn his energies elsewhere. But Wilhelm lives in a society that, in the wake of the French Revolution, harbors a strong faith in the idea that future is laden with endless possibilities. For Marcel, on the other hand, future can only be grasped through the mediation of lost time, so that future is not a blank page or a fresh start, but essentially a palimpsest, or a negative plate waiting to be developed.

This is not to say that no fresh experience is possible for Marcel, but as Benjamin argues, in the modern world, experience is more likely to be produced “synthetically,” “for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally.”⁵⁹ Fittingly, Benjamin evokes Freud’s assumption that “consciousness comes into being at the site of

⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 132.

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 157.

a memory trace”: “Put in Proustian terms, this means that only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *memoire involontaire*.”⁶⁰ Thus, there is an essential forgetfulness and suppression involved in the impressions of involuntary memory that resembles the latency of images on the negative plate, and this forgetfulness is not so much an individual problem as it is the symptom of a deep cultural and historical discontinuity. “By its overdrawn urgency” and by “its fantastic totalizing exaggeration,” Proustian involuntary memory “transmits the intensity of a personal and cultural need” brought about what Terdiman identifies as a “memory crisis.”⁶¹ In a world which has already made its transition to the photographic regime, involuntary memory is

⁶⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁶¹ In his book *Present Past*, Richard Terdiman historicizes the crisis of memory in Europe, particularly in France in the period after the 1789-1815 Revolution, when the uncertainty of the relation with the past became problematic and people had the sense that “their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis, the very coherence of time and subjectivity seemed disarticulated... To writers in what some have termed the ‘long nineteenth century’—the period running from 1789 to 1920 or so—the experience of such stress seemed singularly traumatic, particularly new and dire... The ‘long nineteenth century’ became a present whose self-conception was framed by a disciplined obsession with the past” (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 205.

an experience that registers the process of what Jameson calls “the transfiguration of subjectivity”⁶²:

The narrator’s fascination with aristocracy also reflects a desire to gain a sense of historical unity, *In Search of Lost Time* takes place in the France of the Dreyfus Affair and World War I, and the narrator spends a good amount of his time among the aristocratic society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, into which he is able to enter precisely thanks to the surprisingly fluid and unstable structure it has assumed as a result of rapid social change. David L. Jones points out that after the Dreyfus era, “the violence of the war gives the social kaleidoscope another shake and a new wave of patriotic nationalism allows Mme Verdurin and others to climb a bit farther up the social ladder”; and so the war becomes a visible and accelerated symbol of time’s destructiveness.⁶³

The narrator is fascinated by this world from his childhood days, and he continues to be interested in it even after it has become familiar to him. Part of this fascination lies in the fantasy that the aristocracy possesses a poetic connection to the past, and for him,

⁶² In *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson argues that what has been diagnosed as “the inward turn” and “increasing subjectivization of reality” by the former ideologues of modernism is in fact the expression of a search for an actuality beyond the reach of the self that is unable to register a world that is radically transformed: “What has so often been described as a new and deeper, richer subjectivity, is in fact this call to change which always resonates through it: not subjectivity as such, but its transfiguration. This is the sense in which I propose to consider modernist subjectivity as allegorical of the transformation of the world itself, and therefore what is called revolution. The forms of this allegory are multiple; yet all the anecdotal psychologies in which it finds itself dressed—in their stylistic, cultural and characterological differences—have in common that they evoke a momentum that cannot find resolution within the self, but that must be completed by a Utopian and revolutionary transmutation of the world of actuality itself” (135).

⁶³ ⁶³ David L. Jones, “Proust and Doderer as Historical Novelists”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Mar, 1973), pp. 9-24

the name Guermantes encompasses an amalgam of art and history. The narrator's attraction to the syllable *antes* in the following passage immediately reminds one of the young Hans Castorp's fascination with the series of prefixes Ur-Ur-Ur..., carved on the baptismal bowl, which gives him the sense of a mythic continuity of time:

Never could we go all the way to the end point that I would so much have liked to reach, all the way to Guermantes. I knew this was where the castellans, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, lived, I knew they were real and presently existing figures, but when I thought about them, I pictured them to myself sometimes made of tapestry, like the Comtesse de Guermantes in our church's Coronation of Esther, sometimes in changing colors, like Gilbert the Bad in the stained-glass window where he turned from cabbage green to plum blue..., sometimes completely impalpable like the image of Geneviève de Brabant, ancestor of the Guermantes family...- but always wrapped in the mystery of Merovingian times and bathing as though in a sunset in the orange light emanating from that syllable *antes*.⁶⁴

Bersani points out that since his childhood at Combray, the narrator has had the anguished feeling of possessing no past, except in the unsatisfactory form of an intellectual memory: "Lacking a sense of his own continuity in time, he seeks, in various ways, to fix a permanent image of himself in the external world. If Duchesse de Guermantes does not incarnate Marcel's dreams about the medieval past, he does find in her a living image of his own past at Combray."⁶⁵ Thus, his fascination with the presence of the past in the aristocracy's names expresses a yearning for a unity he cannot find in his own past, since he can only think of himself as a succession of disconnected personalities, as "a multiplicity of selves." It is indeed this experience of historical time, which stands in stark contrast with his predispositional attentiveness to phenomenological

⁶⁴ *Swann's Way*, 175.

⁶⁵ Leo Bersani, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 147.

time, that awakens the narrator's interest in the aristocracy, as their names make it possible for them to feel in possession of not only of their families' past, but also of the national past of France.

It does not come as a shock to the reader of Proust that the fantasy ultimately fails to deliver. The narrator is disappointed when he sees that the real Madame de Guermantes does not live up to all the meaning he has attached to the name Guermantes. It is interesting to note that his dream of aristocracy receives a final blow towards the very end of *Time Regained* at Princesse de Guermantes' reception. The spectacle he describes reflects not only the destruction of the people he used to know, but also the objective breakdown of society and "his own inability to project any glamour at all into the social world."⁶⁶ It is also at this event that the narrator has his final series of recollections, which inspires him to find the subject matter of his book; the moment the fantasy of a historical past beyond his access completely withers away, the present of the narrator assumes a new shape.

It is interesting that at this very instant, the narrator refers to time in chemical terms; as if time is a chemical liquid used in photographic processing; a catalyst that reveals the previously unnoticed potential truth of aging and death: "in this drawing-room, as well as upon the individuals the chemistry of Time had been at work upon society."⁶⁷ Time, in Proust, is a double-edged sword. In its "pure state", time is a vital,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁷ *Time Regained*, 331.

creative force.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the ultimate horizon of this vital force is anchored in death, because it is not an ideal, but a corporeal entity. As a result, the narrator's final revelation that inspires him to discover that his future work will have the form of "Time embodied" is not occasioned by an evocation to extratemporality as the locus of ideal essences. Quite the contrary, the narrator reaches the epiphany about the form of his work only after he understands time to be corporeally attached to himself:

I felt a sensation of weariness and almost a terror at the thought that all this length of Time had not only, without interruption, been lived, experienced, secreted by me, that it was my life, was in fact me, but also that I was compelled so long as I was alive to keep it attached to me, that it supported me and that, perched on its giddy summit, I could not make a movement without displacing it. A feeling of vertigo seized me as I looked down beneath me, yet within me, as though from a height, which was my own height, of many leagues, at the long series of years.⁶⁹

It will be recalled that at the end of Goethe's novel, when Wilhelm Meister receives his *Bild*, he thinks of his depiction as "a different self, one outside of him, as in a painting"⁷⁰; thus, essentially as an ideal self "that will survive longer" than him.

Wilhelm's sense of selfhood is therefore articulated through a fantasy of ecstasy; a

⁶⁸ "So often, in the course of my life, reality had disappointed me because at the instant when my senses perceived it my imagination, which was the only organ that I possessed for the enjoyment of beauty, could not apply itself to it, in virtue of that ineluctable law which ordains that *we can only imagine what is absent*. And now, suddenly, the effect of this harsh law had been neutralized, temporarily annulled, by a marvelous expedient of nature which had caused a sensation- the noise made both by the spoon and the hammer, for instance—to be mirrored at one and the same time in the past, so that my imagination was permitted to savour it, and in the present, where the actual shock to my senses of the noise, the touch of the linen napkin, or whatever it might be, had added to the dreams of the imagination the concept of 'existence' which they usually lack, and through this subterfuge had made it possible for my being to secure, to isolate, to immobilize—for a moment brief as a flash of lightning—what normally it never apprehends: a fragment of time in the pure state."

Time Regained, 224

⁶⁹ *Time Regained*, 451.

⁷⁰ *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 309.

standing outside of time and himself. Although Marcel fosters a similar fantasy for a very long time, by the end of the novel, his self-image is registered in a manner that has more in common with the corporeal nature of photography, to such a degree that he now sees the world through a different lens, as if through a camera. One thinks of Benjamin's account of Dauthendey's picture from around the time of their wedding in "A Short History of Photography." Benjamin notes that in the picture, Dauthendey stands next to his wife who would later slash her arteries and then points out "the unhealthy distance" in her glance, arguing that "if one concentrated long enough on this picture, one would recognize how sharply the opposites touch."⁷¹:

This most exact technique can give the presentation a magical value that a painted picture can never again possess for us...It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously...Photography, with its time lapses, enlargements, etc makes such knowledge possible. Through these methods one first learns of this optical unconscious, just as one learns of the drives of the unconscious through psychoanalysis. Concern with structure, cells forms, the improvement of medicine through these techniques: the camera is ultimately more related to these than to the moody landscape or the soulful portrait.⁷²

In a similar way, the narrator's new pair of camera eyes reveals the truth of aging and death hidden in time. Indeed, it is only this new vision that can depict men and their multidimensional, fragmented existence, "even if the effect were to make them resemble monsters." This new picture makes people resemble monsters, because it strips them off of the imaginary unity conferred by the painter's eyes.

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography." *Screen* 13.1 (1972): 5-26.

⁷² Benjamin, 203.

The discovery of extratemporality has often been interpreted as the narrator's victory over death. According to Beckett, for instance, "the Proustian solution" consists in "the negation of Time and Death." For Georges Poulet, Marcel's aesthetic experience reveals "an essential self, liberated from time and contingency."⁷³ Gerard Genette points out that "the difference caused by the final revelation, the decisive experience of involuntary memory and aesthetic vocation" has a structural similarity to "certain forms of religious literature, like Saint Augustine's Confessions: the narrator does not simply know more, empirically, than the hero: he knows in the absolute sense, he understands the Truth."⁷⁴ René Girard claims that Proust's novel "espouses the Christian structure of redemption more perfectly than the carefully planned efforts of many conscientious Christian artists"⁷⁵ and holds that the revelation of involuntary memory fulfills the same function as a religious revelation: "Marcel knows that his body is going to die, but this does not trouble him, for his spirit has just been resurrected in memory. And this new resurrection, unlike the first one, is permanent and truthful: it will be the foundation of the great work of art which Marcel despaired of writing."⁷⁶

Yet, *In Search of Lost Time* hardly permits such an unequivocal reading. The pendulum of the narrative swings from one side to the other until the very end, when it finally stops not with a triumphant recovery of time, but on a note of uncertainty. It is interesting that whenever the final sentence of the novel is quoted (and it has been quoted

⁷³ Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, trans. E Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 320

⁷⁴ Genette, 283.

⁷⁵ René Girard, Introduction", *Proust: A Collection of Classical Essays* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 11

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

innumerable times), it is often the last word- Time- that is emphasized, while the completion of the narrator's project is contingent on a big "if": "If I were given long enough to accomplish my work..."⁷⁷ It is certainly true that the narrator's anxiety on the subject of death is momentarily suspended following his discovery that the impressions provided by involuntary memory are extratemporal.⁷⁸ Yet, it is important to note that the idea of death takes up "permanent residence" within the narrator as soon as he decides to write his book: "It was precisely when the thought of death had become a matter of indifference to me that I was beginning once more to fear death, under another form, it is true, as a threat not to myself but to my book."⁷⁹

It is only very recently that a critic has emphasized this point strongly. Hägglund argues that "instead of exempting him from death, Marcel's sense of literary vocation increases his fear of death" so that "rather than coming to terms with death, he seeks to keep alive what will die, to remember what will be forgotten."⁸⁰ Hägglund thus contends that the desire that drives Marcel to write is not a desire for immortality, but a desire for

⁷⁷ "So, if I were given long enough to accomplish my work, I should not fail, even if the effect were to make them resemble monsters, to describe men as occupying so considerable a place, compared with the restricted place which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary prolonged past measure, for simultaneously, like giants plunged into the years, they touch the distant epochs through which they have lived, between so many days have come to range themselves –in Time" (*Time Regained*, 451).

⁷⁸ The being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time. This explained why it was that my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognized the taste of the little Madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra-temporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future. 223.

⁷⁹ *Time Regained*, 438.

⁸⁰ Hägglund, 30.

survival and he reaches the conclusion that the experience of involuntary memory leads Marcel to pursue a “chronolibidinal aesthetics”, the point of which is “not to redeem the condition of temporality” but “to mobilize it as the source of pathos.”⁸¹

Yet, the novel’s final emphasis on death is more revealing when it is understood as the work’s acknowledgment of the frailty of its own claims to autonomy, for the allusion to death affirms contingency as the novel’s own law of form.⁸² It is precisely this formal irony that reveals the contradiction between the novel’s organicism and its concurrent recognition of the impossibility of such an organic form. For, *Bildung*’s ideal of the unified work rests on the assumption of a unified subjectivity, which then seamlessly transitions into a unified, harmonious society—a model which finds its strongest expression in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*. In stark opposition to this ideal, Proust’s novel does not have its horizon in its ultimate incorporation with society. Quite the contrary, the narrator’s idea for this modern *Bildungsroman* comes into existence at the Guermantes reception, precisely the moment he becomes fully aware of the extent of social disintegration and “the scum of universal fatuousness which the war left in its wake.”⁸³ Moreover, he becomes convinced that the accomplishment of his project depends on his total withdrawal from society. This point cannot be emphasized enough, for it reveals that *Bildung*’s ideal of the aesthetic and social totality that reaches out into the future is just not tenable in a world in which, in the aftermath of the war, it has become impossible to suppress the deep conflicts so as to sustain the illusion of harmony. In the absence of such a horizon, the modernist work hits the walls of its own form and

⁸¹ Ibid., 45.

⁸³ *Time Regained*, 200.

shatters the idea of the centered, unified subject into a myriad of selves and their fleeting impressions.

CHAPTER 2: THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN

In the chapter “Research,” Hans Castorp, sits on his balcony in his “splendid lounge chair” next to his pile of books, obsessively pondering the age-old question, “What is life?”. The same question was asked before him by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century thinkers and theorists of *Bildung* from his native land (Blumenbach, Goethe, Kant, Schiller and Hegel to name a few) who, “turned all their energy inward and surpassed all other lands” by “the depth, subtlety, and the power” of their interiority.¹ While their answer to the mystery was that life was an endless, vigorous “force,” Castorp entertains the thought that perhaps life is nothing but “an infectious disease of matter”, an “interwoven process of decay and repair.”²

Attuned as they were to the force of life, there was “still something unhealthy” about Castorp’s ancestors, as Lukàcs thought, since the powerful interiority achieved in the “thinness of the Alpine air” made the gap between them and the “real life” resounding with battles and revolutions even greater, to such a degree that “the descent had already become impossible.”³ To bring those below “in the plains” to “the mountain top” was equally impossible, so that “the only path led still higher, toward a deadly solitude.”⁴ The Lukàcs of the essays collected in *Soul and Form* (1910), is of course not referring to *The Magic Mountain* by this Alpine imagery, but his analysis also rings true about the novel,

¹ Georg Lukàcs, *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 60.

² Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1995), 271.

³ Lukàcs, 2010: 60.

⁴ Ibid.

with one significant difference⁵. In the novel, the gap between the mountain tops and the flatlands is finally closed as the tides of history invade the sanatorium on the mountain top with the outbreak of World War I, forcing Hans Castorp, who, like fruit preserves, has been “hermetically blocked off from time” to finally get out and join the trenches.

This chapter argues that the form of *The Magic Mountain* is informed by Castorp’s notion of organic form as “an interwoven process of decay and repair.”⁶ The late eighteenth century formulation of life as a vital force ultimately gave rise to an understanding of aesthetic form that was likewise organic, the defining principle of which was harmony of the parts that makes up the whole. *The Bildungsroman*, at once inherently modern and idealist, is the greatest formal achievement of this aesthetic ideology which favors harmony between the individual and society. *The Magic Mountain*, on the other hand, takes place in a moment of history where it is simply not possible to suppress and ignore what is, after all, the eventual end of every organic being: death. If the paradigm of *Bildung* and *the Bildungsroman* relied on the idea of life as a vital force, *The Magic Mountain*, then, carries the paradigm to its historical conclusion by bringing out into the open the subtle implication of decomposition that was in fact always present, but never acknowledged in the paradigm.

Thus, *The Magic Mountain* embodies the decay of the form of the classical *Bildungsroman*, but it also stands as a corrective to the outdated bourgeois ideology of *Bildung* by showing that, in the twentieth century, one cannot resort to fantasies of

⁵ *The Magic Mountain* was not completed until 1924, but considering that Leo Naphta was modeled after Lukács himself, it would not be entirely wrong to think of the novel as a collaborative effort between Mann and Lukacs (as *Doctor Faustus* is one between Mann and Adorno).

⁶ *The Magic Mountain*, 271.

reconciliation and harmony, and instead has to come to terms with the idea of unresolved tension. Indeed, this modernist gesture of the novel culminates in Mann's confession at the end that he "is not bothered about leaving the question open" about Hans Castorp's destiny.⁷ And so, in another sense, *The Magic Mountain* also embodies a process of "repair" of the classical *Bildungsroman* form precisely by dissolving the conceptual pillars of the *Bildung* paradigm. The novel achieves this by (a) thwarting the progressive model of rationality via Castorp's plays and thought experiments, (b) breaking down the conflation of *Bild* and *Bildung* by way of the implied foreclosure of the technological image, and through the Heideggerian idea that it is the world itself that has now been reduced to a picture (*Weltbild*) (c) by recasting the notion of life not as a vital force but as a magnificent destruction (which the novel then sublates in its own form), (d) ironically employing the form of the encyclopedia, one of the core institutions of *Bildung*, and (e), modeling its structure on Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, as opposed to the Beethovenian sonata.

Castorp's Play

For all of its preoccupation with death and its portrayal of "the great stupor" that slowly but surely builds up to the outbreak of World War I, it would not be entirely preposterous to call *The Magic Mountain* a playful novel. For one thing, "the cleverly and pleasantly regimented life of the Berghof"⁸ is nothing other than a game with its own strict rules and rituals the observance of which literally become a matter of life and death;

⁷ *The Magic Mountain*, 706.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

and as in every game, the manner in which the passing of time is experienced is relative to the formal rules involved. Ironically, the self-contained atmosphere of the sanatorium, where all pre-existing ideas of selfhood are suspended, is also where young Hans Castorp from Hamburg, who “had been an engineer” in the flatlands, gets his first glimpse of the notion of freedom. Thus, the sanatorium at once becomes the ideal playground for Hans Castorp’s perfunctory experimentations with his own past, his bourgeois identity, love, death and organic life.

But *The Magic Mountain* is playful in other ways, too. In fact, the whole novel unfolds as a formal play with the classical genre of the *Bildungsroman*. There have been many debates as to whether the novel is a modern day version of the classical genre, or a total demolishing of it, a kind of *Anti-Bildungsroman*, as it were. Those who classify the novel as a *Bildungsroman* proper usually allude to nationality of the genre as intrinsically German, and argue that *The Magic Mountain* is a product of the same tradition. In his 1928 review, Wolfgang von Einsiedel suggests that in the form of the novel resides its German character, declaring the *Bildungsroman* as a quintessentially German genre. Similarly, Hermann J. Weigand characterizes Hans Castorp as the “representative of things German” who struggles to establish his own identity coinciding with those of Germany. In a letter to Karl Bohm dated 1924, Thomas Mann himself declares that the novel is “a work so problematic and so German, and of such monstrous dimensions, that I am certain it will not do well for the rest of Europe”⁹. In his Lubeck speech, he alludes to the parodistic aspect of the novel and talks about the “hanseatic nature” of his hero—pun certainly intended—which,

⁹ Thomas Mann. *Letters of Thomas Mann 1889- 1955*. trans. Richard and Clara Winston. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1971), 127.

proves itself not after the manner of his forefathers in superior piracy, but in a quieter and more intellectual way: in his enjoyment of adventures of the heart and mind, which carry this ordinary young man off to the realm of the cosmic and the metaphysical, and make him truly the hero of a story which undertakes, in a strange and almost parodistic manner, to renew the old German Wilhelm Meister-type *Bildungsroman*, this product of our great middle class epoch.¹⁰

In his book *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: Bildung from Humboldt to Thomas Mann*, Bruford subscribes to this parodistic reading and sees it fitting that “Mann should break away from the old pattern, and leave his hero facing with fortitude the hideous results of Europe’s return to the ultimate, the primeval state of nature.”¹¹ Martin Swales agrees that the relationship of the novel to the *Bildungsroman* is parodistic, yet suggests that it involves “not simply an exploration of the *Bildung* tradition and a critique of it, but also a precarious reinstatement of it” to the degree that it fulfills the genre¹². Swales’ argument is certainly suggestive, yet it is important to note that this fulfillment does not imply “a precarious reinstatement”. In this particular case, fulfillment is to be understood as a matter of immanent destruction of the *Bildungsroman* rather than its restoration. In fact, to use a de Manian language, the whole novel is to be read as an allegory of the life of tradition of *Bildung*, which meets its demise when it ultimately faces the actualization of its own catastrophic potential through World War I. But it is not only *Bildung* as a theme that comes to be abolished. If *The Magic Mountain* constitutes

¹⁰ W.H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: Bildung from Humboldt to Thomas Mann*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹² Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 125.

the immanent destruction of the *the Bildungsroman*, it is essentially because this destruction takes place in the body of the novel, that is to say, in its form.

The Magic Mountain subverts the classical *Bildungsroman* by undoing *Bildung*'s intrinsic relation with form. At this point, it is important to keep in mind that the concept of *Bildung* largely derives from the meaning of *Bild* in German as the picture, or the image. As such, *Bild-ung* denotes the process of form-ation with reference to an *Urbild*, whose imprint the organism is biologically coded to bear and bring out. The intimate link between *Bildung* and form is particularly emphasized in Goethe's 1790 essay, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, in which he argues that *Bildung*'s dynamic process is structurally opposed to fixed, preconceived theories of life:

The German language has the word "Gestalt" to designate the complex of life in an actual organism...However, when we study forms, organic ones in particular, nowhere do we find permanence, repose, or termination. We find rather that everything is in ceaseless flux. This is why our language makes such frequent use of the term "Bildung" to designate what has been brought forth and likewise what is in the process of being brought forth...What has been formed is instantly transformed, and if we would arrive, to some degree, at a vital intuition of Nature, we must strive to keep ourselves as flexible and pliable as the example she herself provides.¹³

Goethe suggests that studying an organic form in order to arrive at its representation-- in other words, to fashion its image, *Bild*-- involves the simultaneous reflexive heightening of the observer, since in the process of observation neither the organic form nor the observer remains unchanged. Thus, what is at stake in *Bildung* is essentially the dialectic of the observer and the observed, since while exploring the form,

¹³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Botanical Writings* (Oxford: Oxbow Publishing, 1989), 24.

the observer herself becomes in-formed and expands her capacity for further exploration, which in turn will lead to further knowledge about the observed, and so on. Thus, the image (*Bild*) of an organic form, as Pfau suggests, “serves as the objective point of reference for a discursive intelligence that is analogously self-transforming. Goethe’s concept of *Bildung* furthermore posits that the development of the image necessarily entails a second reflection. In it the observer recognizes his/her own intelligence as structurally cognate with the developmental trajectory of the object (e.g./ the plant) itself.”¹⁴ This basic theoretical move would later be perfected by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the structure of which has indeed often been compared to the *Bildungsroman*, and by now, it should come as no surprise that it was actually inspired by one; namely Marivaux’s *La Vie de Marianne*.¹⁵

It is in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* that we find the narrativization of the speculative capacity inherent in the image. In a scene that recalls Hans Castorp’s vision of the Sun People following his blackout during the skiing trip in the mountains, Wilhelm Meister encounters the *Urbild* of the Amazon as he wakes up from a brief loss of consciousness after the robbery:

Time and again he recalled the incident which had left such an indelible impression on his mind. He saw the lovely Amazon riding out of the bushes, saw her come towards him, get off her horse, walk up and down, and occupy herself with his needs. He saw the coat falling from her shoulders, her face and figure disappearing in a blaze of light. All his youthful visions returned to his mind and associated themselves with this image. He now thought he had seen the heroic Clorinda with his own eyes;

¹⁴ Thomas Pfau, “From Mediation To Medium: Aesthetic and Anthropological Dimensions of the Image (*Bild*) and the Crisis of *Bildung* in German Modernism” *Modernist Cultures*, 1, no. 2 (2005): 142.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 80.

and he also remembered the sick prince with the beautiful loving princess approaching his bed. “Do not images of our future destiny appear before our unclouded eyes in the dreams of our youth as premonitions?” he kept saying to himself. “Is it not possible that Fate sows the seeds of what later is to befall us, a foretaste of the fruits we are later to enjoy?”¹⁶

It is striking that Wilhelm immediately associates the inherent future potentiality of the image with that of the seed in a way that conveys “fate” as a complex notion; a hybrid articulation of chance and predetermination. Notwithstanding the crude teleological foreclosure implied by the notion of fate, it is important to realize that for Goethe, and for many other late eighteenth century theorists of *Bildung*, teleology is not so much an inert formulation of causation as it is a dynamic, temporal process that very much relies on the idea of differentiation. As such, fate in this context does not amount to an inevitable course of events that the protagonist will have to encounter, but precisely to a hermeneutic horizon against which all future contingencies will be interpreted. In a sense, fate is the narrative correlative of “the leaf” in Goethe’s botanical writings, which serves as a blueprint that makes it possible to observe the internal differentiation of a complex biological entity insofar as “all plant life unfolds as the continual metamorphosis of a single archetypal Gestalt for which the leaf furnishes the most compelling phenomenal template.”¹⁷ Thus, the notion of fate in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* should be taken as an analogous interpretive framework, which nevertheless has great bearing on the protagonist’s life. It is indeed because Wilhelm interprets the image of the Amazon as a seal of fate that he unwittingly fashions himself a self-made destiny that will ultimately fulfill the intimation of the image, however meandering the course may prove to be.

¹⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. trans. Eric A. Blackall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 139.

¹⁷ Thomas Pfau, “All is Leaf”: Differentiation, Metamorphosis, and the Phenomenology of Life” (*Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 49, 3-41), 23.

It is important to note that the Goethean image is not a manifestation of the Hegelian “picture-thinking”; that is, a token of non-discursive, representational mode of rationality. Quite the contrary, even before Hegel, it is Goethe that hints at the temporal convergence of the subject and the object within the act of observation and thus challenges the Cartesian gesture of securing the knowledge of the thing through its identity with its representation, which ultimately reveals the whole world as a picture, to borrow Heidegger’s trope in his “The Age of the World Picture” (*Die Zeit des Weltbildes*). Unlike Descartes’ methodological reduction of the world into representations concocted by the mind, Goethe’s method of observation not only provides an epistemological model that operates on the mutual development of the subject and object and thus appoints “life” itself as the source of all possible knowledge, but more importantly, in doing so, it reveals the ontological belonging-together of the mind and the world.

Thus, the Goethean image is not a representation (*Vorstellung*), but precisely a presentation (*Darstellung*) to the extent that it intimates the temporal progression of the past into the present and the future at a single stroke. As such, the image is indeed “dialectics at a standstill”, as Benjamin argues: “It’s not that what is past cast its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.”¹⁸ In fact, it is not a coincidence that in *The Arcades Project* in which he arrives at the concept of “the dialectical image” as he

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. trans. Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, 2002), N2a, 3.

attempts to find a materialist, non-reductive way of presenting history¹⁹, Walter Benjamin makes frequent references to Goethe's botanical writings along with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.²⁰ For Benjamin, as it is for Goethe, the image emerges "in a flash" to lay out the blueprint for observation; in other words, "to form a constellation".

We have to note that this last point constitutes an oft-neglected aspect of the *Bildungsroman*; that is, in the *Bildungsroman*, the reader is always implicated. It is not only the development of the protagonist that is at stake, but also the reader's, since the reader is expected to simulate the *Bildung* process through her own reading experience. The most striking ideological implication of this view is found in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), in which he claims that *Bildung* through art renders political revolution unnecessary, since the contemplation of a great work of art in which form and content stand in perfect harmony reconciles conflicting drives in human beings, and thus helps to establish the utopian community of the aesthetic state. In fact, we can see the micro-level realization of this desired aesthetic education in the exemplary works

¹⁹ "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image" (N10a, 3).

²⁰ "In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiele* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history... To be specific, I pursue the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however, these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development — "unfolding" might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants" (N2a, 4). "Goethe saw it coming: the crisis in bourgeois education. He confronts it in *Wilhelm Meister*" (N8a, 5).

of the genre itself. For instance, it is the moment that Wilhelm Meister receives the script of his own story—which is appropriately called his “*Bild*”—that Goethe’s novel reaches its narrative closure, since the scroll marks his *Bildung*, and signals his initiation into the Tower Society, and it is also during this initiation scene that he receives the confirmation of his paternity, that little Felix is indeed his son. This narrative portrait constitutes “a picture of himself, not like a second self in a mirror, but a different self, one outside of him, as in a painting,”²¹ and through such a conflation of *Bild* and *Bildung*, transforms all that precedes into a necessity, a self-made destiny.

Do we find such a narrative closure achieved by means of the image, *Bild*, in *The Magic Mountain*? In his book *After Images: Photography, Archeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung*, Eric Downing suggests that a similar thing is going on in the chapter “Highly Questionable”, in which the image of Hans Castorp’s dead cousin Joachim appears “not in his familiar military dress, but still in the unfamiliar uniform of a World War I German soldier, the uniform in which we last see Hans as he fades away into the battlefield, the final culminating *Bild* of his *Entwicklung*.”²² Downing argues that this foreshadowing of the first fully mechanized war is posed as almost “the logical consequence of the convergence of the German soul and its technological development, or in other words, of *Bildung*.”²³ We will shortly come to the problem of technology, but first it must be noted that in *The Magic Mountain*, there is no narrative closure as such, and that this is precisely the novel’s achievement, since the idea of closure through which the whole narrative is absolutized is still in keeping with the

²¹ *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 309.

²² Eric Downing, *After Images: Photography, Archeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 187.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

tradition of *Bildungsroman*, which *The Magic Mountain* repudiates. Through a negation of the *Bildungsroman*, the narrative closure is subsumed by a formal one, and it is along these lines that we should understand the discontinuities between chapters, which are spread before us almost like encyclopedia articles about different subjects, the one on humanism Settembrini already commissioned to write.

If the *Bildungsroman* pursues ideal of education through aesthetics, and form the dissolution of the form itself parallels the decomposition of the subject of *Bildung*. In *The Magic Mountain*, the historical subjectivity of *Bildung* is personified by Hans Castorp. At the beginning of the novel, with his bourgeois lineage, his respect for the “baptismal bowl” and the only book he cares to read during his travel to the sanatorium, *Ocean Steamships*, Castorp is introduced as the representative figure of bourgeois liberalism, the slow but steady dissolution of which we will come to witness. Ziolkowski suggests that Hans’ development “can be regarded not as the acquisition of new ideas, but rather as a series of liberations”²⁴ and notes that this sense of freedom also marks the reader’s experience of freedom. Similarly, Jameson argues that “in this particular *Bildungsroman*, at least from the standpoint of the hero’s developing subjectivity, it will be a question not so much of developing a strongly centered subjectivity or personality but rather getting rid of that, à la Schopenhauer: so that at his beginning Hans is in a certain way at his end already.”²⁵ Indeed, in the beginning of the novel, unlike Wilhelm Meister, Hans is a fully-formed subject; being an engineer, he has a definite position in the social hierarchy; we also know that he is quite marked by his past, which manifests itself as a certain respect

²⁴ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Dimensions of the Modern Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 76.

²⁵ Jameson, 76.

for the tradition. As Settembrini says, he is in fact “no unwritten page but rather one on which everything has been inscribed, so to speak, with invisible ink, the good with the bad.”²⁶

Much has been made about Hans Castorp’s development in the novel.²⁷ The critical discussions often emphasize that Castorp’s development should be understood in different terms from those of the protagonists of the classical genre; yet they still remain adhered to the dynamics of progressively attained self-knowledge through the resolution of interior and exterior contradictions.²⁸ For instance, Bruford reads Hans’s development as a process of coming to terms with death, instead of life, as it would be in the classical *Bildungsroman*.²⁹ We have to note that in the chapter “Snow”, which is usually read as the plot summary of the whole novel, Hans does experience a moment of coming to terms with death. Still heady from Settembrini and Naphta’s conversation in the previous chapter, Hans decides to go on a skiing trip, which leads to the edge of an abyss. The abyss is not only physical, but also metaphorical: through his dream about the perfect humanity of the Sun People who live a life of sensuous beauty, he experiences an epiphany regarding the totality of life that transcends the dualisms of the intellect, as

²⁶ *The Magic Mountain*, 29.

²⁷ For a critical survey and the reception of *The Magic Mountain*’s status as a *Bildungsroman*, see Hugh Ridley, *The Problematic Bourgeois: Twentieth-Century Criticism on Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrooks and The Magic Mountain* (Rochester: Camden House, 1994).

²⁸ It is through the same progressive understanding of development that Jorgen Hörisch argues in his influential essay “The German Soul up to date” that Castorp fails to become an exemplary *Bildungsheld*: “The hopes of Settembrini and humanist Thomas Mann interpreters in regard to Hans Castorp are dashed. He does not become a worthy and fully developed personality, a descendant of that imaginary being, the hero of the *Bildungsroman*, which literary criticism projects into the novels of that genre”, *Thomas Mann*, ed. Michael Minden, 1995

²⁹ Bruford, 225.

characterized by the rationalist Settembrini and the religious Naphta:

My two pedagogues! Their arguments and contradictions are nothing but a guazzabuglio, the hubbub and alarum of battle, and no one whose head is a little clear and heart a little devout will let himself be dazed by that. With their question of ‘true aristocracy’! With their nobility! Death or life—illness or health—spirit or nature. Are those really contradictions? I ask you: Are those problems? No, they are not problems, and the question of their nobility is not a problem, either. Death kicks over its traces in the midst of life, and this would not be life if it did not, and in the middle is where the homo Dei’s state is found...For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts.³⁰

This is Hans Castorp at his wisest, and it is ironic that he has this vision not in a state of sobriety, with the serenity of a person “whose head is a little clear”, but precisely in a dream-like episode. Had the novel ended here, the reader would have been left with the impression that after all those *placet experiri*, Hans is finally offered his ultimate glimpse into the human condition, that he has, at long last, attained his *Bildung*, and that he now has reached a certain level of maturity to be able to distill knowledge from his time at Berghof, albeit a knowledge of death, rather than life; or more precisely, their inseparable nature. Then, *The Magic Mountain* would have been an exemplary modern day *Bildungsroman*. However, we must note that the chapter “Snow” is structurally far from constituting the final verdict on Castorp’s development---it is in fact a good two hundred pages far from the end of the novel in which the hero will slowly walk out of our sight, and a great deal happens in the meantime. For instance, it is in the final chapters of the novel that one of the most crucial characters makes his entrance, namely, Mynheer Peeperkorn, and as Swales argues, “the appearance of Peeperkorn at this late stage of the

³⁰ *The Magic Mountain*, 487.

novel serves to relativize much of what precedes his arrival at the Berghof sanatorium.”³¹

If these moments of epiphany do not add up to a step towards a fulfilled *Bildung* in the traditional sense, then why are they really there? Why is it that the story, which is self-avowedly told “for its own sake”, pays minute attention to the fluctuations of Castorp’s mind when in the very end we will bid him farewell as he disappears from our sight in the battlefield? Swales suggests that this “process of alchemistic enhancing” has a certain value in that “it intensifies and crystallizes certain aspects of Hans Castorp’s being, but the awareness is always questioned by what goes before and what goes after.”

³² Yet, mediocre as he is, Hans Castorp is more than a mere catalyst, and his trademark mediocrity is not trivial, but crucial. It is indeed this quality that provides him with a representative value. As such, the occurrence of epiphany in the novel should not be taken as a step towards *Bildung*, but precisely as a moment of un-formation, of shedding that marked subjectivity. Hans forgets; in fact he has to forget, since he is in a constant state of transformation, which does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory. Instead, Castorp’s course of development follows a wavering pattern that goes one step forward and two steps back, as it is not marked by progress but a strange articulation of destiny which operates on contingency and play. A closer look at his sessions of “playing king” will help us clarify the issue:

That sublime image of organic life, the human body, hovered before him just as it had on that frosty, starlit night when he had pursued his learned studies...Hans Castorp had begun to feel a responsibility, even though down in the flatlands he had never noticed such questions, probably never would have noticed them, but certainly did here, where one looked down

³¹ Swales, 108.

³² Ibid, 119.

on the world and its creatures from the contemplative retreat of five thousand feet and thought one's thoughts, even of they were probably the result of enhanced activity of the body...He had a special term for this responsible preoccupation with his thoughts as he sat at his picturesque, secluded spot: he called it "playing king" – a childish term taken from the games of his boyhood, and by it he meant that this was a kind of entertainment he loved, although with it came fear, dizziness, and all sorts of heart palpitations that made his face flush even hotter. And he found it not unfitting that the strain of all this required him to prop his chin—and the old method seemed perfectly appropriate to the dignity he felt when "playing king" and gazing at that hovering sublime image.³³

Hans' secluded spot in the meadows is a place where he is twice removed from his flatlands identity. If the sanatorium as a socially weightless site constitutes a sort of "playground" for Castorp's placet experiri, then the spot in the meadows, completely isolated from society, is his ultimate realm of freedom-- precisely the kind of physical and metaphorical "closed space" that any ritualistic act requires. At this point, it is worth remembering Huizinga's assertion that there is no formal difference between play and ritual in that they both call for the suspension of ordinary daily life and marking of an isolated sacred spot. Moreover, they are both "acts" in which the order of existence is recreated and events assume a different meaning: "The rite is a dromenon, which means 'something acted', an act, action. That which is enacted, or the stuff of the action, is a drama, which again means act, action represented on a stage. The rite, or 'ritual act' represents a cosmic happening, an event in the natural process."³⁴ It is in this sense that the dominant medium of play is "the image" rather than the concept, for play involves a radically new "image of thought", to adopt Deleuze's term. It is first and foremost in play that the player discovers the glimpse of potentialities not yet fully realized and the

³³ *The Magic Mountain*, 383.

³⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge: 2008), 15.

intimation of a utopian future as the world reveals itself in a radically new image. Indeed, Gadamer refers to play as a process of “transformation” (*Verwandlung*) which involves a sudden unveiling of truth,³⁵ drawing attention to the fact that play does not create a world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Rather, it constitutes a revolutionary force that radically changes the existing order of the everyday by a shift in orientation that inspires a new way of relating to the world presented in a new image.

Thus, as Thomas Pfau points out in his article “The Appearance of *Stimmung*: Play (Spiel) as Virtual Rationality,” intimately related to the concept of play is the idea of “emergence”, be it of a new world-image, or the subject’s new mode of attunement to the world. In fact, it is only through play that the subject emerges in the first place in so far as play is not just another “experience” (*Erfahrung*) among others, but precisely an “event” (*Ereignis*).³⁶ As such, “play is not experienced by a subject already constituted but defines the affective and cognitive parameters within which subjectivity itself becomes possible.”³⁷ One only needs to remember Kant’s emphasis on the function of “the free play of faculties” in the formation of aesthetic judgment as a case in point. It is precisely as a result of the dynamism introduced by play that the otherwise static blocks of cognition interact and constitute “the very matrix of rationality.”³⁸ Thus, much like Goethe’s botanical writings, Kant’s *Critique of the Power of the Judgment*—also

³⁵ Gadamer, 1975: 111.

³⁶ Thomas Pfau, “The Appearance of *Stimmung*: Play (Spiel) as Virtual Rationality”, *Stimmung: zur Wiederkehr einer ästhetischen Kategorie?* ed. Anna-Katharina Gisbertz (Munich: Fink, 2011), 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Pfau points out the most significant implication of the role “play” has in the Kantian matrix by suggesting that “Kant clearly means to signal that the subject’s proportionate and purposive attunement (*Stimmung*), its sheer capacity for knowledge is not something passively received from a metaphysical source. Rather, this Basisphänomen of play at once generates and sustains our rational attunement to the world” (2011: 210).

published in 1790-- deals with knowledge as something the mind generates simultaneously as it responds to the possibility of that knowledge through a coordinating “acclimatization” with the external world, to use a word that appears ever so often in *The Magic Mountain* as Hans Castorp slowly tunes into the unique environment of the sanatorium. Shortly put, the power of judgment hints at the concurrent givenness of the self and the world at a single stroke, and attunement (*Stimmung*) amounts to the pre-rational intuition that constitutes the source of all possible knowledge. This is certainly not the place to delve further into the intricacies of the third Critique. Nevertheless it is worth mentioning in passing that it is there that Kant inaugurates the philosophical *Bildung*, true to form, as he essentially points to a tension between the understanding and a pre-rational intuition, and by doing so, he enacts a formal self-generation of Reason through the contradictions inherent in its own faculties, namely the judgment versus the understanding.

It is through such an intensified attunement to the world that Hans Castorp begins to feel the responsibility for thinking about matters to which he would never have lent an ear in the flatlands, to use an idiom that suits his musical sensibility. It is worth remembering that the spot in the meadows, the playground of his imaginative kingdom, is where he first encounters the primitive images engrained in the buried realms of his psyche. It is certainly not a coincidence that Castorp discovers the spot on the first Monday of his visit to Berghof, a few hours before he attends his first installment of Krokowski’s psychoanalytical lecture series, “Love as a Force Conducive to Illness”. Castorp, not yet acclimatized to “horizontal living”, decides to go for an extended walk which turns out to be much more exhausting than he has imagined, as the woods leads

into serpentine paths, until he suddenly encounters “the splendid view opening up before him-an intimate, closed space, like some magnificent, peaceful painting.”³⁹ The spot is almost the physical manifestation of the Heideggerian concept of “clearing”, hovering between concealment and unconcealment, and it is here indeed that Castorp finally uncovers the source of resemblance he has been trying to discern in Claudia Chauchat: the image of Pribislav Hippe.

This scene is one of the many instances in the novel in which the Goethean notion of the image as generative and teleological--inherently coded with the ultimate form into which it is destined to transform-- is challenged by the process of regressive identification with the past and with “the mythic force that impresses on Hans Castorp the continuity of generations as something far more powerful (even sheltering) than the faltering, rational fictions of bourgeois morality, humanist pedagogy, and possessive individualism.”⁴⁰ Thus, Castorp’s images are marked by foreclosure rather than latent progressive development. The image of Claudia sitting in front him during Krokowski’s lecture, her arms showing through the thin fabric of her blouse, is inevitably superimposed by the *Urbild* of Pribislav Hippe as a testimony to the mythic forces at work in his psyche. For Castorp, the image is the seal of love. As Krokowski goes on talking about “the corrective bourgeois forces that counteracted love”, Hans immediately dismisses his discursive reasoning for the sheer force of the image imposed on him by Claudia’s arm: “But this arm was more beautiful, this arm bent gently behind the

³⁹ *The Magic Mountain*, 116.

⁴⁰ Thomas Pfau, “From Mediation To Medium: Aesthetic and Anthropological Dimensions of the Image (*Bild*) and the Crisis of *Bildung* in German Modernism” (*Modernist Cultures*. 1. no. 2; 2005), 166.

head...It was both tender and full at the same time—and cool, one could only presume. There could be no question whatever of any counteracting bourgeois forces.”⁴¹ It is ironic that the very same corrective bourgeois forces are at work as Hans, in his usual carelessness, unwittingly suppresses his homoerotic interest in Pribislav Hippe within the image of Claudia’s arm.

It is an image of a different sort that appears before him this time, as he is “playing king” in the same secluded spot: the sublime image of organic life. But, Hans is not a good player—since he lacks the resolve and seriousness that the internal laws of play-world demand, it could be argued that he is only playing around. Stifled by fatigue and inactivity –save for the climbing he has to do to reach the secluded spot—his playing king is purely mental rather than physical, and therefore it lacks the transformative character of “action”. If Hamlet is the ultimate literary figure associated with paralysis and inaction, we could suggest that Hans Castorp is his distant cousin who does not even have the option to act or not to act, as he is blindly swept along by the tides of history and *Zeitgeist*. In a sense, his intermittent sessions of playing king impact on his process of anti-*Bildung* as they confront him with the suppressed realms of his psyche that the bourgeois forces have counteracted, and the extent to which Hans is taking these cues seriously is manifest in the way in which with play “came fear, dizziness, and all sorts of heart palpitations that made his face flush even hotter”. Thus, he is certainly attuned to the elements of risk and danger always involved in play, intimating the shaky, uncertain nature of existence. It does not come as a surprise when Castorp’s playground, precisely thanks to the qualities such as isolation and seclusion that made it Hans’ favorite spot in

⁴¹ *The Magic Mountain*, 126.

the first place, ultimately becomes the locale of a play with death, which, after its heydays in bourgeois culture, has already started to fade into history by the time of its occurrence in the novel; namely the duel between Naphta and Settembrini that results in the former's suicide.

Form and Play

We have already noted that *The Magic Mountain*, which its author admits to be “a book that is possible only in Germany, and that could not be conceivably more German” (135) unfolds as a sort of formal play on its predecessor, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Indeed, by now it is common practice to refer to the novel as a parody of the *Bildungsroman*. Yet, it is seldom acknowledged that Thomas Mann did not embark on the project with that specific purpose in mind; rather, the form gradually imposed itself on the novel so that *The Magic Mountain* ultimately emerged as a *Bildungsroman*. In a letter he writes:

The narrative proved as absorbent as a sponge...and in the work of many years the grotesque novella I had planned became the two-volume portrait of the epoch with all its philosophical, even mystical, aspects. It was curious enough to witness how a plan so modest in conception developed, how even the image that the author himself had of his work gradually changed. Quite unintentionally I had joined the succession of “Wilhelm Meister”, to whom I had scarcely given a thought.

T.J. Reed charts the events that took place in the intervening twelve years between the novel's conception and its completion: “a world war, deeply painful personal conflict, a revolution, and the turbulent beginnings of the Weimar Republic.”⁴² Thomas

⁴² Terence James Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 227.

Mann was not even initially sure for a long time as to how the novel would end, leaving the question aside by saying that something would surely turn up. It was ultimately the war that gave the novel an ending, but it also interrupted the process of its completion. In many ways, history descended on *The Magic Mountain* like destiny, with the same sense of inevitability as it descended on its characters, to such a degree that one could argue history to be woven into the very fabric of the work.⁴³ It is ironic that *The Magic Mountain* has ultimately emerged in a way that suggests a regressive identification with its roots in literary history, with the ghost of Wilhelm Meister haunting the novel as persistently as the images buried deep in Hans Castorp's psyche, as if sealed with destiny.

One of the most significant differences between the two novels is the problem of structural unity. It could be argued that, unlike in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in *The Magic Mountain*, it is not the progressive centralization of the subject that constitutes the structural backbone of the story and holds the narrative together; in fact, it is only the narrator that leaves us with some semblance of unity. At this point, we have to note that this fleeting sense of unity is simultaneously undermined by the narrator's sharp sense of

⁴³ In his letter to Josef Ponten on February 5, 1925, Thomas Mann writes: "We must take this nature, the alliance with death that you scent, the melancholy that depressed you (although betweenwhiles you had to laugh aloud—a strange complication and confusion!), the skepticism and nihilism with which is (or so I think) the final effect of the dispute—we must take all this as something imposed by destiny, I suppose, a personal fatality which evidently emerges from my work. Hardly likely that anything can be done about it." *Letters of Thomas Mann 1889- 1955*. trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1971), 136.

irony, which we have to note Lukàcs diagnoses as the mark of self-consciousness regarding the absence of an immanent totality in the modern novel.⁴⁴

But who is the narrator? The question remains as one of the most intriguing mysteries of the whole novel. We know that he refers to Hans Castorp as “one of us up here”, so one is tempted to think he is one of the characters we already know. The fact that he confesses the pedagogical liking he has developed for Castorp singles out Settembrini as a suspect. Martin Swales also notes that the narrative voice towards the end sounds like Settembrini’s, and he “even repeats the latter’s gesture of touching the corner of his eye with his finger tip.”⁴⁵ Be that as it may, the claim is not substantiated and thus remains “highly questionable”. Yet, it is also this intended ambiguity that makes it possible to think about the narrator as the voice of history, or the instantiation of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit. The novel certainly invites such a reading, given its occasional references to “the superconscious”, “since there are occasions when the knowledge that rises up from those regions far exceeds an individual’s conscious knowledge, suggesting that there may be connections and associations between the bottommost unlighted tracts of the individual soul and an omniscient universal soul.”⁴⁶

In any case, it is safe to say that in *The Magic Mountain*, the relationship between irony and absence of totality is forced to its limits. In fact, both Jameson and Ziolkowski argue that after all the ideological positions cancel each other out, it is only the form, the

⁴⁴ Of course, we need to keep in mind that Lukàcs makes this argument while talking about the differences between epic and the modern novel, so one should be hasty before applying it to the differences between *The Magic Mountain* and *Wilhelm Meister*, which is itself a modern novel famous for its author’s virtuosic use of irony.

⁴⁵ Swales, 1978: 121.

⁴⁶ *The Magic Mountain*, 644.

autonomous work of art that remains: “Though the world represented within the novel turns out to be ultimately meaningless, *The Magic Mountain* gives meaning to this world by ordering it according to the novel’s own principles of organization. In an ideologically meaningless world, only aesthetic order is capable of producing meaning.”⁴⁷

Given Thomas Mann’s formal sensibility, this is hardly a surprise. In a letter to his friend Paul Amann, he writes: “Nothing which is merely thought and said is true and that only form is unassailable.”⁴⁸ This sensibility particularly shines forth in the chapter “Snow”, revealing form as deeply connected with the idea of humanity, as Hans has his epiphany: “Form too consists only of love and goodness”. Minden notes that in 1925, Mann offered the following definition: “Form is a mediation blessed by life between death and death: between death as formlessness (Unform) and death as an excess of form (Uberform), between dissolution and petrification; it is measure and value, it is man, it is love.”⁴⁹

It is this constant tension between form and formlessness that constitutes the most striking formal feature of *The Magic Mountain*, which runs parallel to Hans’ dissolving *Bildung*, that is, his own form: “Coming to the magic mountain from a background excessively dependent upon external form and formality (Uberform), Hans Castorp discovers the delights of transgression (Unform), of which he had earlier only had fleeting anticipations. Despite the instruction of Settembrini, Hans Castorp explores the possibilities of formlessness to the point where the arbitrariness of all forms threatens to dissolve an educative process into a sense that the very boundary between organic and

⁴⁷ Ziolkowski, 98.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁹ Minden, 234.

inorganic has no compelling moral implication.”⁵⁰ The argument to be made here is that it is precisely this organic framework of *Bildung* that is being reconfigured in the novel. Since *Bildung* always implies the fulfillment of an image, the *Urbild* as we have shown, its dissolution also takes place through a new mode of image; namely, the technological image.

Death, Technology, *Bildung*

In his *After Images*, Eric Downing argues that *The Magic Mountain* is an *Entwicklungsroman* rather than a *Bildungsroman*, and claims that the insinuation of photography into the thematic space traditionally occupied by painting fundamentally alters the project of *Bildung*, including the characteristic engagement of *Bild* in its program. As we have seen in Chapter 1, Downing asserts that *Entwicklung*, or development, is always a matter of repression: “not the simple additive or expressive procedure of *Bild*-ung but rather necessarily subtractive and censorious.”⁵¹ We have already noted the close association between *Bild* and *Bildung* in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*. Downing makes the persuasive point that in *The Magic Mountain*, the role of *Bild* in the sense of painterly image is replaced by that of the photographic image, which follows a radically different process of development, and which must also be taken as the dominant metaphorical regime in the novel.

Downing concludes that the emphasis on photography and technology in *The*

⁵⁰ Ibid, 225.

⁵¹ Downing, 35.

Magic Mountain reveals World War I, the first fully mechanized war, as “almost the logical consequence of the convergence of the German soul and its technological development, or in other words, of *Bildung*”.⁵² Yet, he also asserts that, by leaving the end ambiguous—since we don’t actually know whether Hans will die in the battle, or not—Thomas Mann lays bare both the negative and positive aspects of technology: “The devastation of the war is not other than the breakdown and reconfiguration of tradition by modernism in response to the emerging cultural technologies...And Mann is perhaps most Mann in leaving us with this final truth, this final image: of the process and project of *Entwicklung* as essentially situated in both its negative and positive states, or rather, in the “neutral” oscillation between them: as homoerotic, as photographic.”⁵³

In fact, it is possible to read Mann’s ambiguous treatment of technology not so much “a neutral oscillation” in Downing’s words, but as a state of suspension between epiphany and catastrophe that stems from the peculiar character of technology itself, as Heidegger points out in “The Question Concerning Technology”. Indeed, by constantly associating it with death, the novel presents technology in way that affirms Heidegger’s articulation of the ambiguous essence of technology as suspended between *aletheia*, the power of revelation, and *Ge-stell*, potential cause for catastrophe.⁵⁴ Heidegger explains

⁵² Downing, 74.

⁵³ Ibid, 88.

⁵⁴ In “The Question Concerning Technology”, Heidegger diagnoses the essence of modern technology as “enframing” (*Ge-stell*), which reduces the world to an aggregate of raw materials and thus redefines our orientation to the world according to an instrumentalist, means-end rationality. The world as such reveals itself as a “standing reserve” (*Bestand*), such as a coal mining district or a mineral deposit, and intimates future in which man himself will be considered “a standing reserve”, eerily recalling Castorp’s conscription to the army, as the wartime perspective on man as a potential soldier replaces humanism’s ideals of what it means to be a human being.

that the word technology stems from *techne*, which belongs to “bringing-forth”, revealing in the manner of *poiesis*; thus signifying not only the activities of skills of the craftsman but also the arts of the mind and the fine arts: “What has the essence of technology to do with revealing...Within its domain belong ends and means as well as instrumentality...Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing.”⁵⁵ Technology in the Greek sense, then, designates knowledge and vocation as opposed to information and profession. The instrumentalist conception of technology is epochal rather than essential and as such, it is a symptom of modernity. The essence of modern technology is enframing, (*Ge-stell*), which denotes a precise, scientific and mathematical orientation to the world. The withdrawal of the metaphysical ground from the modern world replaces knowledge with information, since scientific outlook demands accumulation of facts rather than contemplation about truth in its totality. Yet, in a manner that resembles Mann’s hopeful note at the end of the novel as he bids Hans farewell,⁵⁶ Heidegger also points out that it is also in enframing that lies the potential for an alternative orientation to the world, provided we pay heed to its revealing potential: “Enframing propriates for its part in the granting that lets man endure—as yet inexperienced, but perhaps more experienced in the future—that he may be the one who

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, *Basic Writings*. ed. David Farrell Krell (Harper Collins, 1993), 318.

⁵⁶ “Farewell, Hans—whether you live or stay where you are! Your chances are not good. The wicked dance in which you are caught up will last many a sinful year yet, and we would not wager much that you will come out whole...There were moments when, as you ‘played king’, you saw the intimation of a dream of love rising up out of death and this carnal body. And out of this worldwide festival of death, this ugly rutting fever that inflames the rainy evening sky all round—will love someday rise up out of this, too?” (*The Magic Mountain*, 706).

is needed and used for the safekeeping of the essence of truth. Thus the rising of the saving power appears.”⁵⁷

In *The Magic Mountain*, the revelatory character of technology is most evident in the role it plays in cultivating Castorp’s interiority, since his encounters with devices such as the X-Ray machine and new aesthetic media such as film and gramophone repeatedly trigger moments of epiphany. For instance, it is during the X-Ray session which Behrens likens to an “exorcism” that Hans understands, “for the first time in his life”, that he would die:

And Hans Castorp saw exactly what he should have expected to see, but which no man was ever intended to see and which he himself had never presumed he would be able to see: he saw his own grave. Under that light, he saw the process of corruption anticipated, saw the flesh in which he moved decomposed, expunged, dissolved into airy nothingness—and inside was the delicately turned skeleton of his right hand and around the last joint of the ring finger, dangling black and loose, the signet ring his grandfather had bequeathed him: a hard thing, this ore with which man adorns a body predestined to melt away beneath it, so that it can be free again and move on to yet another flesh that may bear it for a while. With the eyes of his Tienappel forebear—penetrating, clairvoyant eyes—he beheld a familiar part of his body, and for the first time in his life he understood that he would die⁵⁸.

In a diary entry dated March 1927, Thomas Mann remarks that in *The Magic Mountain*, “everything depends upon maintaining a hold upon the guiding ideas, sustaining the fine threads and motifs, in a word, upon not forgetting anything once it has been introduced.”⁵⁹ The convergence of death and technology is undoubtedly one such leitmotif that is sustained throughout the narrative, and tellingly it is often by means of

⁵⁷ Heidegger, 339.

⁵⁸ *The Magic Mountain*, 216.

⁵⁹ Mann, *Diary I*, 487; qtd Horisch 179.

the image that the two themes are threaded together. It is in the fourth episode titled “The Baptismal Bowl” that we first hear of the signet ring that once belonged to his grandfather, the image of whom is imprinted in the then seven-year-old Hans Castorp’s memory as the definitive *Urbild*. Mesmerized by his grandfather’s “picturesque personality” and acute sense of decorum, Hans watches him eat “sitting very erect between the high mahogany back of his chair and the table, barely bending forward to his plate”, as he observes his hands; “beautiful, white, gaunt, aged hands, with rounded, sharply tapered fingernails and a green signet ring on the right forefinger”: “Hans Castorp looked down at his own still awkward hands and sensed stored within them the possibility that one day he would hold and use his knife and fork as adeptly as his grandfather...When considering it later, as a young man, he realized that the image of his grandfather was imprinted much more deeply, clearly, and significantly in his memory than that of his parents.”⁶⁰

Given the novel’s persistent thematic interfusion of death in the image, it does not come as a surprise that the next time we see Hans Castorp observing his grandfather’s fingers will be when a fly comes to rest on his hands on the ivory cross as he lies in his coffin, and the possibility he sensed stored in his own hands will be arrested by a realization of death revealed by their X-Ray image. Thus, the Goethean spirit of the episode insinuated through the twin notions of observation and the image --“Children and grandchildren observe in order to admire, and they admire in order to learn and develop what heredity has stored within them” --is later challenged by the mediation of

⁶⁰ *The Magic Mountain*, 22.

technology and its revelation of being-towards-death, a phenomenon never explicitly acknowledged by the *Bildung* tradition.

We will later hear the echoes of young Hans Castorp's fascination with his grandfather's sharp sense of propriety in his initial irritation by Clavdia Chauchat's relaxed posture and her signature door-slamming; symptoms of a characteristic nonchalance which Settembrini classifies under the category of "the Asian". Yet, it is also worth noting that the grandfather, and the rest of his family members will be mentioned less and less (save for the repulsed attack of his uncle's brief visit), as Hans gradually awakens to the reality of his past identity as a liberal, bourgeois individual; a realization made possible by the weightlessness of the sanatorium where any sense of kinship, of family relationships "dwindled imperceptibly until such people were almost strangers."⁶¹ One manifestation of his awakening to having been imprinted by the bourgeois codes of behavior is to be found in his attempt to resist his natural inclination to use "forms of address appropriate to the educated West", as a result of which he addresses Settembrini by his first name –giving the latter horrors-- taking advantage of the liberties provided by Mardi Gras in the episode "Walpurgis Night": "I'm not saying I find it all that natural and easy to use familiar pronouns. On the contrary, I have to overcome my own resistance, give myself a poke just to be able to do it. But now that I've given myself a poke, I'll go on using them quite happily, with all my heart."⁶² It is precisely this privilege offered by Mardi Gras that motivates him at long last to talk to

⁶¹ *The Magic Mountain*, 490.

⁶² *Ibid*, 323.

Clavdia Chauchat without having to address her with her last name; thus retaining the uncivilized quality of “the relationship”.

The grandfather, “a most Christian gentleman, a member of a Reformed parish, with strict traditional opinions”, and “with a character and convictions obsolete long before his passing”, is the major representative figure of the glorious days of bourgeoisie, now reduced to a blind adherence to its own institutions and the empty formalism of a regime of behavior, to the extent that “he had held the customs of his forefathers and their old institutions in far higher regard than any expansion of the harbor at breakneck speed...And had it been up to him, the city administration nowadays would look just as old-fashioned and idyllic as his office had looked when he was in his prime.”⁶³

The gradual calcification of a once dynamic *Bildung* into the rigidity of its own institutions as represented by the grandfather reminds one not only of Mann’s own distinction he draws in his *Reflections* between “Kultur” (symbolized by German poetry and music) as a natural force, the expression of a creative energy and “Civilization” (symbolized by the French and English literary and critical traditions) as its diluted, rationalist, anti-demonic opposite, but also Oswald Spengler’s historicization of these two notions “to express a strict and necessary organic succession” in the unfolding of world-history in his controversial *The Decline of the West*. It must be noted that for Spengler, the steps of the self-avowedly Goethean, organicist course which history takes following the rhythm of ebb-and-flow of culture and civilization is not necessarily personified by distinct nations as it is for Mann; rather, he emphatically claims that the ultimate transformation into civilization is the inevitable destiny of every culture insofar as

⁶³*Ibid.*, 23.

civilizations are “a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth...”⁶⁴. In the developmental trajectory systematized by Spengler, civilization is thus the inevitable closure of each and every great epoch, reached “again and again by inward necessity”: “In a word, Greek soul—Roman intellect; and this antithesis is the differentia between Culture and Civilization...Again and again there appears this type of strong-minded, completely non-metaphysical man, and in the hands of this type lies the intellectual and material destiny of each and every “late” period. Pure Civilization, as a historical process, consists in a progressive exhaustion of forms that have become inorganic or dead.”⁶⁵

Spengler’s application of the Goethean method of “living into (*erfühlen*) the object, as opposed to dissecting it”⁶⁶ to “all the formations of man’s history” reveals the latter’s implicated repression of the material reality of death as the inevitable end of every living organism. Indeed, from then on, a long history of repression will pervade the cultural discourse, the return of which we will ultimately find in the crisis of the bourgeoisie in the form of neurosis and what Weber calls a “disenchantment with the world”. Hence, the important role psychoanalysis, and in a broader way, the theme of regression into the mythical plays in *The Magic Mountain*. Indeed, Spengler’s quite

⁶⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁶⁶ “The deep, and scarcely appreciated idea of Goethe, which he discovered in his “living nature”, we shall here apply to all the formations of man’s history, whether fully matured, cut off in the prime, half opened or stifled in the seed. It is the method of living into (*erfühlen*) the object, as opposed to dissecting it.” (1991: 72)

graphic description of the demise of cultures,⁶⁷ along with his emphasis on the cyclical rhythm of life and death reminds one of young Castorp's fascination with the mythic continuity suggested by the names of seven generations of Castorp family carved on the baptismal bowl.

His father's name was there, as was in fact his grandfather's, and his great-grandfather's; and now that syllable came doubled, tripled, and quadrupled from the storyteller's mouth; and the boy would lay his head to one side, his eyes fixed and full of thought, yet somehow dreamily thoughtless, his lips parted in drowsy devotion, and he would listen to the great-great-great-great—that somber sound of the crypt and buried time, which nevertheless both expressed a reverently preserved connection of his own life in the present to things now sunk deep beneath the earth and simultaneously had a curious effect on him... At the sound of those somber syllables, religious feelings got mixed up with a sense of death and history, and all of it together somehow left the boy with a pleasant sensation.⁶⁸

It must be noted that Spengler's vision does not utterly dismiss the practical merits of civilization, since he argues that rather than lamenting the loss of culture, one must embrace the *Zeitgeist*, which in his view gestured towards a new global imperialism driven by economic competition as well as science and technology.⁶⁹ It is in this sense that *The Decline of the West* essentially delineates a similar articulation of technology to that of *The Magic Mountain*; although technology is repeatedly coupled with death, its

⁶⁷ Every culture stands in a symbolical, almost in a mystical, relation to the Extended, the space, in which and through which it strives to actualize itself. The aim once attained—the idea, the entire content of inner possibilities, fulfilled and made externally actual—the Culture suddenly hardens, it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes Civilization” (74).

⁶⁸ *The Magic Mountain*, 21.

⁶⁹ It was mostly in this respect that his theory proved conducive to be usurped by the Nazi regime, despite Spengler's pronounced rejection of Hitler “as a plebeian figure”. see John Farrenkopf, “Nietzsche, Spengler, and the politics of cultural despair” *Interpretation* 20 (1992): 165-185

liberating potential for a new beginning is equally underlined, albeit in a Nietzschean “amor fati” fashion.

Such a new beginning is heralded for Hans Castorp’s life in the sanatorium with the advent of the gramophone, and he is quick to recognize what this new technology might mean for him: “Somewhere inside him a voice said: ‘Wait! Look out! An epoch begins! For me!’”⁷⁰ The gramophone is instantly acknowledged as a superior technology to the previous ones; “an ingenious toy on the line of the stereoscopic viewer, the tubelike kaleidoscope, and the cinematographic drum”, yet somehow “not at all like them”: “There was no comparison to those little mechanisms in value, status, and rank. This was no childish, monotonous peep show, of which they were all tired and with which no one bothered after his first three weeks here. It was an overflowing cornucopia of artistic pleasure, of delights for the soul from merry to somber.”⁷¹

The chapter the gramophone is introduced into the novel is titled, “Fullness of Harmony”, evoking the same sense of wholeness Leopold Bloom feels in the “Sirens” chapter of *Ulysses*. Forever allured by the notion of organic life, Castorp is captivated by the idea that although the singers are in faraway places, he still has the most vital part of them; their voices: “he valued this purified form, this abstraction that still remained physical enough to allow him real human control.”⁷² The absence of the singers, then, is perceived as something decidedly different than the absence of the actors in the film as it was portrayed in the episode “Danse Macabre”:

⁷⁰ *The Magic Mountain*, 630.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 627.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 633.

When the last flickering frame of one reel had twitched out of sight and the lights went up in the hall and the audience's field of dreams stood before them like an empty blackboard, there was not even the possibility of applause. There was no one to clap for, to thank, no artistic achievement to reward with a curtain call. The actors who had been cast in the play they had just seen had long since been scattered to the winds, they had watched only phantoms, whose deeds had been reduced to a million photographs brought into focus for the briefest of moments so that, as often as one liked, they could then be given back to the element of time as a series of blinking flashes.⁷³

The audience finds the absence of performers almost repulsive; the very medium of film seems to lack artistic ambition because of its depersonalized mode of production. The time that has lapsed between the time of the original performance and the "new time" turns the actors into phantoms, who are already dead but who can be recalled into life. In fact, in this episode we see the re-enactment of the problem of temporality as an enigma that runs throughout the novel, since in the novel, time is to a large extent detached from its essential spatial correlation through the stasis of the sanatorium. If the gramophone provides an escape from this "dead time" for Hans Castorp, it is essentially because the gramophone is free from the snares imposed by the fragmentary nature of visual representation. Music adds movement to time that is growing ever more stale in the sanatorium as the war draws nearer, so that time is now experienced as "evanescence", to adopt the expression Adorno uses in his essay "The Form of the Phonograph Record".⁷⁴

⁷³ *The Magic Mountain*, 311.

⁷⁴ In the article, Adorno writes: "Through the phonograph record, time gains a new approach to music. It is not the time in which music happens, nor is it the time which music monumentalizes by means of its "style". It is time as evanescence, enduring in mute music...If the modernity of all mechanical instruments gives music an age-old appearance, then the evanescence and recollection that is associated with the barrel organ as a mere sound in a compelling yet indeterminate way has become tangible and manifest through the gramophone records." "The Form of the Phonograph Record". trans. Thomas Levin. *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), pp. 56-61

Be that as it may, it is crucial to keep in mind the ultimate destination of this movement. In her article “Arno Holz vs. Thomas Mann: Modernist Media Fantasies”, Janelle Blankenship argues that what is at stake in *The Magic Mountain* is Mann’s ceaseless attempt to create “media hierarchies;” “playing technologies off one another in order to align them with larger discourse networks.”⁷⁵ She points out that in the novel, it is music rather than visual technologies that shatters the empty rhetoric of death, and thus “it is not the photographic, but the gramophonic ‘Platte’ with its cryptic script that is most important for Hans’s subject formation”. It is on this premise that Blankenship rejects the critical evaluations of Castorp’s formation as “photographic development or *Entwicklung*”, for “*Entwicklung* implies that Hans already contains the innate blueprint for his own bourgeois *Bildung*.”⁷⁶ Arguing against the intimation of such a sense of foreclosure, she suggests that the auditory plate has a different relationship with the future, since in its own form there is “a spiraling forward, an onward circular motion that anticipates eternity.” Thus, Blankenship also takes issue with Sara Danius’s claim in *The Senses of Modernism* that “vision is the privileged sense in the novel.”⁷⁷

Yet, it must be noted that rather than eternity, the gramophone in fact whispers the message of death to Castorp’s ears. As he listens to Schubert’s *Lindenbaum*, he asks himself about “the world” that stands behind “this enchanting song”, this “pure

⁷⁵ Janelle Blankenship, "Arno Holz vs. Thomas Mann: Media Fantasies of Modernism" (*Modernist Cultures*, Vol. 1, No. 2: 2005), 86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 101

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 94. Danius argues that the sanatorium is a place where one mainly “engages in visual activities”, since “one looks at people, into optical toys, at paintings, at photographs”, while also being “looked at by other people, by the physicians, by the X-ray machine”. Thus, she claims that “*The Magic Mountain* is marked by an obsession with eyes, vision, and visuality” in her *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002)

masterpiece, born out of the profoundest, most sacred depths of a whole nation's emotions", "the very soul of human kindness", only to realize that "it was death."⁷⁸ What is really at stake in the novel's treatment of science and technology as its practical manifestation is neither the predominance of a certain technological medium nor the creation of a new media hierarchy, but the potential threat the scientific outlook poses against the metaphysical unity of the mind (or being) and the world. Heidegger argues that the methodology of modern science is "circumscribed by its own results," and research as the essence of science demands "constant activity" in order for science as an institution to legitimate itself⁷⁹. This results in what Hegel calls "the inverted world" in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the infinite process of abstraction science advances on the physical world in order to certify its own findings. Heidegger argues that this "unlimited process of calculation, planning and breeding" reduces the world into a representation; more precisely, into a "picture". If "the fundamental event of modernity" is "the conquest of the world as picture," it is essentially because modernity, for the first time in history,

⁷⁸ *The Magic Mountain*, 642.

⁷⁹ Heidegger depicts a grim yet accurate picture of the disciplinary status of science, which can be extended into humanities departments today, given the pressure they face to make their methodology more scientific in order to attract funding: "The decisive unfolding of the character of modern science as constant activity produces, therefore, a human being of another stamp. The scholar disappears and is replaced by the researcher engaged in research programs. These, and not the cultivation of scholarship, are what places his work at the cutting edge. The researcher no longer needs a library at home. He is, moreover, constantly on the move. He negotiates at conferences and collects information at congresses. He commits himself to publishers' commissions. It is publishers who now determine which books need to be written," in Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture", *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64.

places the subject at the center of the world, and the world at his/her disposal (thereby transforming it into a *Bestand*, as he discusses in *The Question Concerning Technology*)⁸⁰

Heidegger's world-picture (*Weltbild*) is decisively different from the painterly *Bild*, because the potentiality of the world-picture is already delineated by the results science sets out to obtain. If Hans Castorp's images are always already marked by foreclosure, it is essentially because the world itself has been divested of its fullness and reduced to "a picture", the frame (*Gestell*) of which stands "over-and-against" the fullness of life, or being, as Heidegger would put it. Hans Castorp's mode of research, on the other hand, lacks a sense of purpose, save his ambition to understand life; a highly anti-scientific pursuit to begin with. Heidegger argues that modern research does *not* become "dispersed into random investigations so as to lose itself in them," but in fact, Hans' research does just that: it becomes dispersed into random investigations and loses itself in them.⁸¹ Thus, in spite of the chapter's title, Hans's intellectual pursuit has more in common with play than "research", marked as it is by interruptions rather than "constant activity". But this is precisely why Hans Castorp can think about life in all its complexity in his balcony to which he withdraws in order to escape from Settembrini's humanistic bombardment that extols technology as "the most useful vehicle" for humanity to travel its long road towards "a final state of understanding, inner illumination, goodness and happiness."⁸² Settembrini's enthusiastic affirmation of technology is a testimony to Heidegger's claim that humanism, as the "philosophical interpretation of man which explains and evaluates beings from the standpoint of, and in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁸¹ Ibid., 63.

⁸² *The Magic Mountain*, 153.

relation to, man” first arises when “the world becomes picture.”⁸³ By bringing technology’s implication of foreclosure out into the open, *The Magic Mountain* portrays the dissolution of what Naphta calls “the dead ideals” of the age of humanism.⁸⁴

It is interesting that the novel closes with a cinematic image, as the narrator’s account assumes the movement of a camera that starts up with a wide-angle shot of the battlefield and slowly narrows its focus on Hans. Thus, the ambiguity regarding Hans’s destiny, the sense of suspension and catastrophe is once again conveyed through the technological image as opposed to the painterly image, *Bild*. Hans’ *Bildung* has a complex relationship with technology. In a certain sense, it does make him much more curious and attentive to the world, yet that this is only partly true is evident in the way in which Hans Castorp carries around his X-ray plate as “a kind of identification, like a passport or membership card”⁸⁵ as Settembrini puts it. He treats his X-ray plate as a work of art because of its uniqueness (and no doubt Benjamin would have a lot to say about this) without achieving any real *poiesis*, nor *Bildung*, for that matter. Yet, Hans’ failure hints at the novel’s achievement, since in its form, tensions without resolutions are transformed into the very substance of the work of art.

Form of Humanism

Settembrini’s characterization of death as “a most depraved force directed against morals, progress, labor and life” (404) is based on the eighteenth century understanding

⁸³ Heidegger, 70.

⁸⁴ *The Magic Mountain*, 370.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 238.

of life as “a vital power”, which informed humanism and Romanticism⁸⁶. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s notion of “formative drive” (*Bildungstrieb*) that could shape unformed but organizable substance into organic form, in particular, deeply influenced Kant’s conception of teleological judgment and by extension, Schiller’s politicization of aesthetics through the idea of the State as an organic form.⁸⁷ Aesthetic form was also understood with reference to biological form the unique properties of which are “unity, vegetation (or growth), assimilation, internal design (or self-generation), and the interdependence of parts.”⁸⁸ Thus, beauty in the Romantic period essentially “hinges on the idea of vital power.”⁸⁹

In stark contrast, Hans Castorp does not understand life as a vital power, but as “an intervoven process of decay and repair.”⁹⁰ In fact, for Castorp, life is very possibly an epiphenomenon of matter, a malformation, and “a disease”: “And for its part, what was life? Was it perhaps only an infectious disease of matter –just as the so-called spontaneous generation of matter was perhaps only an illness, a cancerous stimulation of the immaterial?”⁹¹ Thus, as opposed to Settembrini, who denigrates the body as an impediment to the mind and scientific progress, Hans Castorp repeatedly associates the

⁸⁶ For more on the relationship between the conception of life in Romanticism and literature, see Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*, Helmut Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and Timothy Lenoir, *The Strategy of Life: Teleology and Mechanics in Nineteenth-Century German Biology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989)

⁸⁷ See the next chapter of this dissertation for a broader discussion of organicism in Kant and Schiller.

⁸⁸ Gigante, 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁰ *The Magic Mountain*, 270.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

notion of “life” with human body and its progressive decomposition. It is highly telling that the chapter in which Hans Castorp first starts to dabble in the mysteries of the human body as a result of his conversation with Director Behrens is called “Humaniora”, ironizing the unmistakably Settembrinian understanding of the term “humanities”. If for Settembrini’s ideal of humanity rests on harmony, Hans Castorp’s understanding of humanity is informed by decomposition and decay.

A staunch humanist, Settembrini identifies form with the vital power of life. For Settembrini, humanism cultivates “beautiful form purely for the sake of dignity of man—in brilliant antithesis to the Middle Ages, which had sunk not only into misanthropy and suspicion, but also into ignominious formlessness.”⁹² Castorp’s understanding of form, on the other hand, is that it is “namby-pamby nonsense.”⁹³ Life, more than anything, amounts to decomposition—“une destruction organique” in Behren’s words: “Life is primarily the oxidation of cell protein, that’s where our pretty animal warmth comes from, of which some people have a bit too much. Ah yes, life is dying—there’s no sense in trying to sugarcoat it.” Behren’s statement comes as music to Hans’s ears, who self-avowedly “feels in his element” whenever death is involved: “And so if someone is interested in life, it’s death he’s particularly interested in. Isn’t that so?” The coexistence of life and death will indeed be the main theme of the dream scene in the chapter “Snow”,

⁹² *The Magic Mountain*, 155.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

leaving Hans with the lesson that death should not have dominion on one's thoughts—a lesson which, need we even point out, he is soon going to forget.⁹⁴

The link between humanism and form is further explored in the novel within the context of one of the core institutions of the *Bildung* paradigm: the encyclopedia.⁹⁵ Settembrini, the “*homo humanus*”⁹⁶ as he calls himself, is symptomatic of the defunct ideology of *Bildung* in its quest for infinite progress and pure knowledge, and an essentially Eurocentric version of humanism that has become historically irrelevant (as it

⁹⁴ Mann's letter in which he replies to Joseph Ponten's complaints about the melancholy nature of the book is worth quoting at length: “But let's be just in the matter of hostility toward life. Is not my book, despite its own inner fatality, a book of goodwill? (...) But where in all the history of art and literature have you ever before encountered the attempt to make death a comical figure? This is literally done in *The Magic Mountain*, and our good Hans, though by nature inclined to consider as the most noble and superior principle, is systematically disillusioned on that score, however piously he fights against it. Is that hostility to life? I feel that it at least testifies to the intention of denying such hostility. Nor is it accurate to say that Hans Castorp learns nothing at all, arrives at no resolution and no decision in his sorry place. In his dream in the snow he sees this: Man is, to be sure, too superior for life; let him therefore be good and attached to death in his heart. This insight into the human incompatibility of aristocratic alliance with death (history, romanticism) and of democratic amity toward life is not something that Hans bears ‘triumphly home on the point of his hunting spear’, as Wandrey writes. On the contrary, Hans promptly forgets it again; in general he is not personally able to cope with his higher thoughts. But how does he come to be concerned about “man” and man's “standing status” at all? Primarily not through Naphta and Settembrini, but rather in a far more sensual way which is suggested in the lyrical and enamored treatise on the organic in nature. You found the section too long, but it is not an arbitrary digression. Rather, it shows how there grows in the young man, out of the experience of sickness, death, and decay, the idea of man, the “sublime structure” of organic life, whose destiny then becomes a real and urgent concern of his simple heart. He is sensuously and intellectually infatuated with death (mysticism, romanticism); but his dire love is purified, at least in moments of illumination, into an inkling of a new humanity whose germ he bears in his heart as the bayonet attack carries him along.” (1925, 137-138)

⁹⁵ For more on *bildung* and institutions, see Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For the encyclopedia in particular, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990).

⁹⁶ *The Magic Mountain*, 57.

is evident in the cosmopolitan inhabitants of the sanatorium). It is indeed his lack of self-awareness, his unshakable belief in the values he not only blindly accepts but also publicizes that renders Settembrini a comical figure. But he is not entirely wasting his time. In one of their encounters, Settembrini tells Hans Castorp that he has been asked by the international The League for the Organization of Progress to write an article for the encyclopedic *The Sociology of Suffering*, the aim of which is to explore the causes of all kinds of human suffering in order to eradicate it:

Order and classification are the beginning of mastery, whereas the truly dreadful enemy is the unknown. The human race must be led out of the primitive stage of fear and long-suffering vacuity and into a phase of purposeful activity. Humankind must be informed that certain effects can be diminished only when one first recognizes their causes and negates them, and that almost all sufferings of the individual are illnesses of the social organism. Fine! This is the purpose of our Sociological Pathology, an encyclopedia of some twenty or so volumes that will list and discuss all conceivable instances of human suffering.⁹⁷

It must be noted that the encyclopedia is essentially an Enlightenment project. Schlegel criticizes Diderot and D'Alembert's encyclopedia precisely on the grounds regarding the abstract relationship to knowledge that we have been talking about, suggesting that the encyclopedia is "an aggregate" (an epistemological *Bestand*) instead of a living organization of knowledge since it reduces the complexity of the world through a system that collects, and thus makes manageable.⁹⁸ Thus, it comes as no surprise that the League for the Organization of Progress harbors a firm belief that the classification of causes will be part of solving the problem of human suffering.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 242.

⁹⁸ Chad Wellmon, "Touching Books: Diderot, Novalis, and the Encyclopedia of the Future," *Representations*, 114, no. 1 (2011): 65-102.

And yet, *The Magic Mountain* is itself an encyclopedia of sorts. In fact, Heinz Saueressig reports that Thomas Mann was proud of the fact that “even though the novel contained vast proportions of medical discourse, specialists had found nothing to object to.”⁹⁹ The form of the novel mirrors Hans Castorp’s intellectual trajectory that consists of endless accumulation of potentially significant experiences, none of which ever transforms into a definitive form. This is not to say, of course, that the novel lacks a unity, but the form itself portrays the dissolution of *Bildung* by ironically employing one of its institutions. Like Castorp’s images that reveal the latent contradictions lying at the precarious foundation of the *Bildung* paradigm, *The Magic Mountain* at once embodies and negates the encyclopedia by sustaining its conceptual framework, attesting to *Bildung*’s having been reduced into a blank scaffolding.

History versus Autonomy

Of all the tensions we have talked about, it is the tension between what Ziolkowski calls the “temporality and timelessness” that forces itself so powerfully, so inevitably on the novel. However, what is really at stake is not timelessness as such, but rather the overpowering detachment of time from history as it gives way to the purely subjective experience of temporality in the sanatorium, where time only becomes visible when you attend to it, almost in the form of a phenomenological investigation.

Time crept by—seven minutes seemed endless. Only two and a half had passed when he looked at his watch again, worried that he might have missed the precise moment. He did a thousand things, picked up objects, put them back down, walked out onto the balcony, but not so that his cousin could not notice, looked at the landscape of this Alpine valley, his eyes now more familiar with its shapes and forms...With much trouble

⁹⁹ qtd in Danius, p. 90.

and effort—as if he were shoving, pushing, kicking them—he had got rid of six minutes. But now, standing there in the middle of the room, he fell to daydreaming and let his thoughts wander, and the one remaining minute scurried away on little cat’s feet, until another motion of his arm told him that the minute had secretly escaped and that it was a little late now.¹⁰⁰

This is Hans Castorp waiting for the seven minutes to pass to read his thermometer. It is ironic that seven years will pass by without Castorp hardly even noticing in the numbing atmosphere of the sanatorium. The decisive difference between the two modes of temporality in the novel, that is of the sanatorium and of the “flatlands,” resides in the fact that in the former, time is only marked by rituals, whereas down in the flatlands, the history is approaching a war. Indeed, it is not until the very final chapter with the outbreak of the war that history imposes itself so powerfully on the narrative.

Ultimately, it is also history that imposes itself on the form. In 1915, Thomas Mann was already talking about the structural necessity of ending the projected novel with the outbreak of the war. In a letter written to a friend he points out that the hero of his story resembles a figure from a fairy tale “for whom seven years pass like days, and at the end, the resolution—I see no other possibility than the outbreak of the war. This is a reality that the storyteller cannot ignore.”¹⁰¹ In the final analysis, it is ironic that *The Magic Mountain*, which is unmistakably ruled by the present tense, turns out to have been determined by history.

The determination of war is in contradiction with the stylistic autonomy and the general claim to aestheticism in the novel. After all, if it is ultimately history that provides the structural closure rather than the autonomous temporality of the novel with

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 166.

¹⁰¹ Minden, 236.

its own internal laws, how are we supposed to understand Thomas Mann's insistence on the unassailability of form? Minden points out the same formal ambiguity: "The protagonist is subtracted from history for seven years, and the problem is itself thus prominently ironised—another aspect of the high level of self-consciousness upon which this novel works. But the return of history, in the implacable reality of the war, re-integrates the entire problematic into history by the formally pre-eminent moment of its ending. The structured openness thus extends to uncertainty whether history or aesthetic form has the final word."¹⁰²

In reality, it is precisely this uncertainty that makes *The Magic Mountain* an exemplary modernist work, since the paradox of history versus autonomy never fully gets resolved, laying bare the illusory harmony that was present in the classical *Bildungsroman* form. In fact, it is this paradox, rather than a projected ultimate harmony, that provides the modern novel with substance and form. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno asserts that the modern work of art is irreducibly paradoxical and claims that "the dissolution of the illusory features in the work of art is demanded by its very consistency."¹⁰³ It can be argued that the formal problem of *The Magic Mountain* foreshadows the content of *Doctor Faustus*, which is about a twelve-tone composer preoccupied with the question of how to go on composing in an age when "the historical movement of musical material has turned against the self-contained work."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Minden, 236.

¹⁰³ Adorno, 71.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn As Told by a Friend* (New York: Vintage, 1999). p.256.

The Music of Magic Mountain

In his notes on *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann points out the musical structure of his work and draws attention to the fact that his use of the leitmotiv is indeed borrowed from Wagner.¹⁰⁵ Evaluating the historical relationship between music and *Bildung* would exceed the scope of this chapter, but suffice it to note that for a novel that presents itself as a parody of the *Bildungsroman*, it comes hardly as a surprise that music plays such a central role. Indeed, musicology as a discipline (A. B. Marx, H. Riemann, H. Schenker) was greatly influenced by Goethe's organic theory and it incorporated organicism to such a degree that organicism in music was "not simply a matter of content, but a structural process as well."¹⁰⁶

If the structure of the classical *Bildungsroman* corresponds to the Beethovenian

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Mann suggests the reader to read the novel twice in order to grasp its musical structure: "If you have read *The Magic Mountain* once, I recommend that you read it twice. The way in which the book is composed results in the reader's getting a deeper enjoyment from the second reading. Just as in music one needs to know a piece to enjoy it properly, I intentionally used the word 'composed' in referring to the writing of a book. For music has always had a strong formative influence upon the style of my writing... People have pointed out the influence of Wagner's music on my work. Certainly, I do not disclaim this influence... My first attempts were in *Tonio Kroger*. But the technique I there employed is in *The Magic Mountain* greatly expanded; it is used in a very much more complicated and pervasive way." *The Magic Mountain*, "Author's Note", p. 725.

¹⁰⁶ David L. Montgomery observes that "in identifying a phenomenon often called 'organic form', many musicologists imply that a given structure actually arises from and derives its logic from the original motivic material instead of from a larger formal plan. Examples span the century, from Schubert's *Wanderer Fantesie* (1822), Liszt's *Les Préludes* (1848) and the *Sonata in B Minor* (1853), to Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (1899). The idea of a form-generating motive—almost as if it actually had a will of its own, like Robinet's little prototype—was and is so attractive that it has survived into the present day as a commonplace doctrine of theoretical musicology." see David Montgomery, "The Myth of Organicism: From Bad Science to Great Art," *The Musical Quarterly*, 76, no. 1 (1992).

sonata, in which the contrasting parts are organically united in the larger unity, then what kind of a composition is *The Magic Mountain*? We have just noted above that Mann himself declares it to be inspired by Wagner, but in fact, the formal paradox that grounds the work, namely, the question of artistic freedom versus the sheer force of the socio-political reality exerted on the work, resembles the theoretical underpinnings of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method.

The name Schoenberg surely comes up a lot in critical discussions of *Doctor Faustus*, since its protagonist Leverkühn, a twelve-tone composer from Munich, is clearly modeled after him, but he is rarely, if ever, mentioned with reference to *The Magic Mountain*. However, a closer attention to the formal dynamics of the novel reveals the same preoccupation with reconstructing a new style out of the mixture of “the strict” and “the free style”, as Leverkühn aims to do: “...to establish something like a ‘strict style’...we could use a master of system, a schoolmaster of objectivity and organization, with enough genius to combine the elements of restoration, with enough genius to combine the laments of restoration, indeed of the archaic, with revolution...”¹⁰⁷ We have to note that in the history of counterpoint, the term “strict style” refers to composing within an established historical framework as opposed to “the free style”, which accommodates the room for more experimental forms of expression¹⁰⁸. Leverkühn's ultimate goal is to dynamize the conventional framework of the past through revolutionary elements in order to revitalize the old.

This is also what Thomas Mann does in his own composition, *The Magic*

¹⁰⁷ *Doctor Faustus*, 202.

¹⁰⁸ See *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th ed., s.v. “Counterpoint, 12, 13, 14” by Carl Dahlhaus

Mountain, by taking the established framework of the classical *Bildungsroman* and playing it off against the irreducible force of historico-cultural reality. He thereby ironizes not only *Bildung*'s fantasy of an infinitely progressive history but also the modernist obsession with formal autonomy, to such an extent that in *The Magic Mountain*, the organicism of the *Bildungsroman*-- the literary counterpart of the Beethovenian sonata—hits the material limits of history.

There is, however, another reason why the form of *The Magic Mountain* is ultimately determined by history. We have already suggested that the modernist *Bildungsroman* is in fact more pronouncedly “teleological” than its classical counterpart: although the twelve-tone composition is internally independent from historical forces and thus arrested in a perpetual present not unlike that of the sanatorium, it is ultimately too aware of the history that it attempts to destroy. As Jameson explains in *Marxism and Form*, “Atonality, however much it may testify to the loss of rational control in modern society, at the same time carries within itself the elements of a new kind of control, the requirements of a new order as yet still only latent in the historical moment. For whatever the will toward total freedom, the atonal composer still works in a world of stale tonality and must take his precautions with regard to the past.”¹⁰⁹

It is ultimately a similar surplus deriving from a historical self-consciousness that resurfaces in *The Magic Mountain* and drives the narrative into the ultimate crisis of war, as opposed to the peaceful state of harmony in *Wilhelm Meister*. *The Magic Mountain* is not only already foreclosed by, but made possible by history itself; the war constituting the logical conclusion to the decaying bourgeois tradition. Thus, the success of the

¹⁰⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974)

narrative essentially derives from the failure of history, or to put it in other words, “it is not the composer who fails in the work; history, rather, denies the work in itself.”¹¹⁰ *The Magic Mountain* replaces the notion of individualistic, subjective “fate” in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* with a historical and formal one; it enacts the death of the tradition *Bildung* of in its very form, thereby sealing its fate, in much the same way as the twelve-tone technique seals music’s fate.¹¹¹ Through such an articulation of history in form, *The Magic Mountain* not only enacts the dissolution of *Bildung*, but also portrays the temporal crisis of the twentieth century, when fantasies of the past were still around in crippled forms and history crumbled into moments of the present.

¹¹⁰ Theodore Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 99.

¹¹¹ “Twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music. It enchains music by liberating it.” (Adorno, 68).

CHAPTER 3: APPRENTICESHIP IN IMMATURITY: FERDYDURKE AS AN ANTI-BILDUNGSROMAN

Ferdydurke (1937) tells a story of regression in an age obsessed with progress. The protagonist Johnnie Kowalski, a thirty-year-old writer preoccupied with his own immaturity, wakes up one morning from a nightmare in which he goes back to adolescence. The same morning he is kidnapped by his old schoolteacher and sent back to school. The novel proceeds in the same almost surrealist fashion, as he is forced to live with an ultramodern family, eventually manages to escape only to become trapped in a feudal manor, and ultimately becomes imprisoned in a pseudo-romantic relationship.

Ferdydurke's form mirrors its protagonist's obsession with immaturity. The novel consists of parts that mock each other, and it continuously self-sabotages the process of its formal maturation through manifestos, theoretical reflections, narrative digressions, and prefaces to the digressions. A case in point is the unjustified inclusion of two stories from Gombrowicz's earlier work, *Memoirs of Time of Imaturity*, that bear no thematic relation to the plot, but serve the purpose of the narrator's decision to compose a work of art that consists of parts unassimilable into any organic whole.

The regressive plot of the novel has often been contrasted to the progressive narrative of the classical *Bildungsroman*. For instance, in *Gombrowicz, Polish*

Modernism, and the Subversion of Form, Michael Goddard points out that “*Ferdydurke* consists of a reverse initiation from adulthood into the world of adolescence and immaturity” and hence “constitutes a profound complication of the linear narrative of *the Bildungsroman*.”¹ While Goddard’s diagnosis of *Ferdydurke* as a subversion of the *Bildungsroman* is accurate, there are problems with reaffirming the commonplace and often hasty assumptions regarding the genre’s linear and teleological narrative trajectory. Instead, one must understand the *Bildungsroman* as the master narrative of the project of modernity, core values and founding concepts of which it communicates. Thus, Gombrowicz’s intervention will not be fully comprehended unless one acknowledges the stakes involved in his repudiation of modernity.

Gombrowicz’s subversion of the *Bildungsroman* by and large involves the displacement of aesthetic idealism’s understanding of form as a self-determining notion. Schiller, in particular, emphasizes “the inner necessity of form”, claiming that “the form must, in the true sense of the word, be self-determining and self-determined.”² Schiller’s stress on self-determination is not restricted to the aesthetic realm, but carries over to social relations in the form of freedom, which can only be attained through aesthetic appreciation: “it is through Beauty that we arrive at

¹ Michael Goddard. *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010), 32.

² Friedrich Schiller, “Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner”, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 166.

Freedom.”³ Thus, for Schiller, a harmonious society is only possible as long as the individual re-enacts the harmonious relationship between the parts of an aesthetic whole, and aesthetic education is key to the progress of humanity.

In stark contrast, Gombrowicz’s idea of Form derives from his fierce repudiation of the possibility of self-determination, be it that of an aesthetic form, of an individual, or of society as a whole. Gombrowicz’s concept of “Form” does not simply refer to aesthetic form, since in his view, art is only one of the spheres on which the network of relationships taking place in the inter-human realm leaves its indelible and often antagonistic mark. Thus, Form for Gombrowicz denotes the totality of oppressive and infantilizing relations that also dictates the rules of art; for Form demands that the artist compose the parts of his/her work with a view of the whole, whereas the reader assimilates only the parts, “between a telephone call and a hamburger”.⁴ Similarly, the individual is not of his/her own making, but essentially defined by the opinions society holds about him/her.

It is *Ferdydurke*’s emphasis on the essential impossibility of self-determination, along with its scathing attack on modernity, autonomy, unified subjectivity, aesthetic totality and progressive rationality that makes it such an exemplary *anti-Bildungsroman*. Gombrowicz displaces aesthetic idealism’s notion of beautiful form in which parts harmoniously unfold into the whole with a grotesque

³ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 27.

⁴ Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 72

aesthetics of parts that alludes to the collapse of all harmonious social relations in the aftermath of the first world war, and on the treshold of the second. In fact, Arthur Sandauer calls *Ferdydurke* “a prophetic book” which foretells the regression of European culture and the dehumanization of “the progressive intelligentsia”.⁵ In order to understand Gombrowicz’s attack on the idealist notion of form as the supreme vessel of humanism and the purveyor of Polish nationalism, a few words on Polish literary history are in order.

Polish Form

To the eyes of a Western literary critic, Polish literary history would seem to have followed a somewhat anachronistic course, with a nationalist variant of Romanticism bypassing realism, holding sway well until a modernism which actually has more in common with what we would now call post-modernism (case in point: Gombrowicz). Although the Polish literary tradition emerged from the Latin Middle Ages, invented the vernacular as a literary vehicle later on, and was steeped in Greek-Latin-Italian models and genres like its counterparts,⁶ Poland’s loss of sovereignty toward the end of eighteenth century and its partitioning between Prussia, Russia and the Hapsburg Empire made such a

⁵ qtd in George Gomori, “The Antinomies of Gombrowicz,” *The Modern Language Review* Vol. 73, No. 1 (1978): 122

⁶ Adam Zagajewski, ed. *Polish Writers on Writing* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007), x

decisive impact that Poland was left with no other unifying institutions except literature and art. The occupation lasted a very long time, up until 1918, and it “had the effect of both delaying and intensifying the experience of modernity and modernism,”⁷ while also ensuring that aesthetic and literary aspirations were inseparable from revolutionary dreams of emancipation. Consequently, the realist novel as it was developed in France or Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to Poland much later. In fact, Zagajewski claims that “Gustave Flaubert, had he been a Polish writer, wouldn’t have written about Madame Bovary; rather, he might have composed a book about Ms. Poland. The same for Baudelaire: no cats, no spleen, no balcony, just the Great Cause.”⁸

As for Polish Romanticism, it was not so much about the affirmation of individual imagination and rebellion as “a call for nationalist insurrection” in order to bring the Poland of the nationalist imaginary into existence.⁹ In fact, this romanticism was coupled with a Messianism, which was based on the views of Herder.¹⁰ Polish writers, Mickiewicz and Slowacki among them, were largely inspired by Herder’s proclamation that “the old European culture had been built by the Romantic nations, whose strength had been completely exhausted by this work”, so “their role was to fall to the Germanic nations building the present”,

⁷ Michael Goddard. *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010), 6

⁸ *Ibid.*, xi

⁹ Goddard, 7

¹⁰ Julian Krzyzanowski, *History of Polish Literature* (Warszawa: Polish Scientific Publishers: 1978)

and ultimately it would be the Slavic people that would be the builders of the future.¹¹ Thus, they had great faith in the idea that Poland would be resurrected after the great powers wasted each other, and these ideas were encoded in biblical terms so that Poland represented the Messiah of the nations; the Christ or Mary Magdalena, etc.

Krzyzanowski argues that this overblown Messianism “bordering on degeneracy” resulted from the fact that Polish Romanticism developed in the *émigré* milieu, so that it was “doomed to draw its life-blood from alien soil,”¹² and sank into various kinds of abstraction that could not be compared with the reality. This “merciless process” as Krzyzanowski calls it, did not only make victims of the minor poets, but “also such men of genius as Mickiewicz, who stopped writing, and Slowacki, who got lost in a maze of mystic dreams.”¹³ The situation was not very different for the writers who stayed in Poland, for although they were influenced by exceptional individualism and free expression heralded by Romanticism, they were compelled to negotiate it with nationalism, which led to “an unavoidable antinomy,” in Krzyzanowski’s words: “The solution to the difficulties emerging here was found in titanic heroism, in Titanism or Prometheus-like heroes, assuming that the exceptional individual is an

¹¹ Ibid, 224

¹² Ibid., 224

¹³ Ibid., 225

outstanding man, of great social virtue, a man living not for himself alone but for his class, his nation, for all mankind.”¹⁴

Despite Poland’s continued occupation towards the end of the nineteenth century, however backward it was compared to the rest of the Europe, a type of modernity developed which involved industrialization, the development of a capitalist economy and the dominance of scientific positivism in both social and aesthetic practices. Goddard notes that one of the most important effects of the long period of occupation by three different nations was the fact that Poland was a major crossroads through which German philosophy, French poetry and Russian literature all passed, which resulted in the movement called “Młoda Polska,” or Young Poland; “a melting pot of the currents of decadence, symbolism and vitality”, which rejected the influence of positivism, but also brought about “a spectacular revival of romantic interpretations of Polish national character and history.”¹⁵ Thus, Polish modernism was conceived in such circumstances that while some of its adherents adopted the imported notion of artistic autonomy and art for art’s sake, others such as Stanislaw Wyspianski emphasized the urgency of returning to Polish romanticism, since there was still work to be done in the name of independence and revolution.

Following the independence in 1918, a period of artistic experimentation and innovation ensued, cut short by Marshal Pilsudski’s military coup in 1926

¹⁴ Ibid., 222

¹⁵ Goddard, 8.

and a steady decline into totalitarianism during the 1930s. Thus, the familiar problem of aesthetic autonomy versus literature as politics resurfaced with full intensity. It is worth noting that the Polish national situation bears a certain degree of resemblance to Gregory Jusdanis' account of the Greek national literature as an epiphenomenon of "belated modernity". Comparing the Greek modernization with that of the bourgeoisie of Western Europe, Jusdanis argues that the autonomization of aesthetics in the west resulted from a concerted effort to compensate for the social fragmentation, whereas in Greece, the concept of autonomy was by and large was imported in order to mitigate the anxiety of not being modern enough. Although Poland had a similar experience with modernity, the idea of aesthetic autonomy never took root, as national literature was the glue that held an already precarious Polish identity together. The divergence between similar yet different Greek and Polish encounters with modernity attests to the fact that there are as many "belated modernisms," as there are modernisms.

The frustration with the everlasting theme of Polishness was already in circulation before Gombrowicz. Jan Blonski notes that "Poland was not born yet when Lechon wanted to see in the spring 'the spring, not Poland' and Slonimski 'throws Konrad's cloak off his shoulders' (or to say it in prose-- patriotic duty.)"¹⁶ But it would be up to Stanislaw Witkacy, Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz to express and critique the situation of Polish modernity by subverting the form infused by national mythology.

¹⁶ Blonski, 1989: 210.

It is important to note that Gombrowicz separates himself from Witkacy and Schulz, whom he blames for being devoid of intellectual courage, lacking in individuality, reacting in a herd, “tied together by something impersonal, superior, common.”¹⁷ For Gombrowicz, such a position still implies slavery to the nation, history, art, or collective culture in general: “To a Pole, culture is not a part of his creation, it approaches him from the outside, as something superior, superhuman, something overpowering.”¹⁸ *Ferdydurke* is born directly out of such a resentment and a yearning for individuality. The following passage from his *Polish Memories* is worth quoting at length, since it portrays the main concerns of *Ferdydurke* as they relate to the Polish situation:

The Poland that was born out of the First World War was a land of paralyzed people. The most vital elements were condemned to provisionality and vegetativeness. Everything was put off from one day to the next, everyone was temporizing till the world settled down, the state was consolidated, and there appeared some room for maneuver. The atmosphere of wait-and-see also dominated in literature; it seemed as if Polish writers preferred not to speak more emphatically until they were certain of their national fate. I rebelled. I refused to accept a waiting role and, seeing that such a role was imposed by the collectivity, I refused to link my fate to that of the collectivity. “Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth”: I applied those words of Galileo to relations in Poland, and it occurred to me that in order to move something in Poland one needed a place to stand outside Poland. Outside of Poland? But where? Where could I stand?...I began working on a novel; I had no inkling that it would end up being titled *Ferdydurke*. I started this project in a strange, divided set of mind. Within me there swirled ambitions and painful grudges; I was sore and vengeful and wanted to prove myself...And so I began to sketch the thing out as a regular satire, nothing more,

¹⁷ Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary Volume I*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203

which would permit me to make a show of my humor... Such were my horizons as I wrote the first thirty or forty pages. But a few scenes came out more powerfully, or more strangely. In them, the satire turned into a grotesquery that was utterly unrestrained, preposterous, nightmarish... I decided to maintain the whole in this spirit; I went back, started again from the beginning, and thus, slowly, there emerged a certain style that was to absorb my more essential sufferings and rebellions. I mention this because it's usually in such a way –during the process of 'improving' the text to match certain more successful passages—that form is created in literature.¹⁹

It is interesting that Gombrowicz's insistence on individuality resulted in a novel like *Ferdydurke*, one of the most brilliant instantiations of what Jameson calls a "national allegory" and his observation that "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation" of the public culture and society".²⁰ Thus, the metanarrative of the novel curiously echoes one of its main themes: the more you escape from form, the more you are shaped by it. This paradox also expresses Gombrowicz's attitude against "authenticity",

¹⁹ Witold Gombrowicz, *Polish Memories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 123

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text*, No 15. (Autumn, 1986): 69. As the title of the article suggests, Jameson's article is predominantly about the experience of the third-world countries, but third-world in this particular context refers to "the fundamental breaks between the capitalist first world, the socialist bloc of the second world, and a range of other countries which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (67). Since Poland as of 1937 belonged neither to the first nor the second world (yet), it had more in common with the belated modernity of the third-world.

which he strives for, but cannot really attain, as he is inevitably defined by Form.²¹

Poland's uneasy experience with modernity described above has a direct bearing on Gombrowicz's aesthetics, particularly on his preoccupation with immaturity. "In that Proustian epoch at the beginning of the century," he explains, Gombrowicz's family was a displaced one, "whose social status was far from clear, living between Lithuania and the former Congress Kingdom of Poland, between land and industry, between what is known as 'good society' and another, middle-class society", the first between, which "multiplied until they almost constituted [Gombrowicz's] country of residence."²² As a consequence of its belated transition to modernity, Poland was characterized by uneven development of its urban and rural parts; a split allegorized in *Ferdydurke* by the theme of an everlasting adolescence, and by the grotesque body imagery, some parts of which "were still those of a boy", and others "vividly raping each other in an all-encompassing and piercing state of

²¹ Arent van Nieuwerkerken argues that the dialectics of literary form thus "reveal the real nature of form as the ontological absence of human being", for although Gombrowicz denies the possibility of immediacy and authenticity of existence, it is only through the affirmation of this impossibility that allows him to grasp his identity as a human: "It is only possible to obtain a deeper insight into the mechanics of human being, when the individual becomes conscious of his alienation. The price we pay for authenticity is to be a stranger to our normal, culturally determined existence, which means—from the perspective of the Poles—to be an émigré. The very experience of alienation, being a stranger, turns out to be one of the central experiences of the Polish idea of affirming nationality" (2007: 517).

²² Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1973), 28

pan-mockery”.²³ Johnnie certainly feels that his impulse towards immaturity has something to do with his country or his era, characterized as a “transitory” one:

How did I become imprisoned in my own underdevelopment, I wondered, where did my infatuation with all the greenness have its origins—is it because I come from a country rife with uncouth, mediocre, transitory individuals who feel awkward in a starched collar, where it is not Melancholy and Destiny but rather Duffer and Fumbler who moon about the fields in lamentation? Or is it because I’ve lived in an era that, every five minutes, emits new fads and slogans, and, at the slightest opportunity, grimaces convulsively—a transitory era?²⁴

By the time Gombrowicz was writing *Ferdydurke*, Poland had long gained its independence, but it would turn out to be a transitory era because its democratic ideals were brought down by Marshall Pilsudski’s coup in 1926. Thus, the sense of in-betweenness Gombrowicz had as a child would intensify in the period of Independence, a “paradoxical one of freedom and anxiety, experimentation and conformity, cosmopolitanism, and increasing nationalism of a fascist and anti-Semitic nature,” in a Poland stuck “between the powerful nations of Germany and the Soviet Union, between its brutal past and the increasing likelihood of an even more brutal future, as well as between a history of survival, resistance, and dreams of insurrection and a future in which strategies of survival and resistance would become even more essential.”²⁵ In a diary entry, Gombrowicz expresses his frustration with the illusory sense of freedom the period of Independence evoked in many Poles:

²³ *Ferdydurke*, 2

²⁴ *Ferdydurke*, 11

²⁵ Goddard, 10

It would be lethal if I, taking after many Poles, delighted in the period of independence (1918-1939); if I did not dare to look it straight in the eyes with the coldest lack of ceremony. The air of freedom was given to us so that we could begin to come to terms with an enemy more tormenting than the taskmasters we have had up to now: ourselves. After our struggles with Russia, with Germany, a struggle with Poland awaited us. It is not surprising, therefore, that independence turned out to be more burdensome and humiliating than bondage... Along with the restoration of freedom arose the problem of existence. Because in order to really exist, we would have to make ourselves over. But such a make-over was beyond our power, our freedom was superficial, in the very structure of the nation were duplicity and violence which inhibited our undertakings.²⁶

Gombrowicz's characterization of Poland as a nation deeply troubled by its own freedom curiously recalls the views of Herder (one of the most influential thinkers of *Bildung*) on Slavic nations, whom he describes as "liberal, hospitable to excess, lovers of pastoral freedom, but submissive and obedient," "never ambitious of sovereignty", and consequently oppressed by "many nations, chiefly of German origin."²⁷ Yet, in his account of the historical development of man, Herder reserves a favorable place for "these now deeply sunk, but once industrious and happy people", who will eventually "awake from their long and heavy slumber, shake off the chains of slavery, enjoy possession of their delightful lands from the Adriatic sea to the Carpathian mountains, from the Don to the Muldow, and celebrate on them their ancient festivals of peaceful trade and industry."²⁸ As noted before, Herder's optimistic view about the future of Slavic

²⁶ *Diary Volume I*, 36

²⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. trans. T. Churchill (London: 1800), 483

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 484

people were one of the most significant sources of Polish messianism advocating the rebirth of a free Poland. Gombrowicz's characterization, on the other hand, testifies that the end result of the teleological unfolding of history reveal more a Spenglerian²⁹ picture of Poland than a Herderian one. Gombrowicz's disparagement of Poland's superficial freedom ultimately carries over to his conviction about the impossibility of self-determination: one of the core features of *Bildung*,

Johnnie Kowalski's Apprenticeship

Ferdydurke tells the story of the thirty-year-old Johnnie Kowalski, whose metaphorical suspension in adolescence is projected into the concrete situation of age reversal as he is abducted by his old school-teacher and forced back to school. This apprenticeship in regress begins in a moment of in-betweenness, at a "pale and lifeless hour when night is almost gone but dawn has not yet come into being,"³⁰ that sets the twilight mood of uncertainty which will prevail in the rest of the novel. As the protagonist awakes, he is gripped by a desire to take a train and leave, but instead he continues to lay down in fear, as he realizes that no train was waiting for him in the station; in fact, "nothing would ever happen, nothing ever change, that nothing would ever come to pass". Thus, as opposed to our first encounter with Wilhelm Meister and his distant cousin Hans Castorp, we do not meet Johnnie as he is about to embark, if not already on a journey that will transform him in one way or another. In

²⁹ As we have seen in the previous chapter, Spengler's account of historical progress is more about the decay of cultures rather than their rebirth.

³⁰ *Ferdydurke*, 1

fact, the conviction that he is forever entrapped in a stasis rather reminds one of Kafka's Gregor Samsa, who likewise wakes up to find himself unable to move freely, having become a giant insect overnight – and one that lies on its back at that. Granted, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* also starts in bed with a sense of limitation, that of being unable to fall asleep, but little Marcel's dreamy bedtime reading hours are projected into the narrator's decision to write his own book, so that the book starts and ends with literature, fulfilling a sense of arrival. Johnnie, however, lacks both "mobility" and "youth", two of the three principal features which Moretti argues to define the protagonists of the classical *Bildungsroman*, although he is quite steeped in the third one, namely, "interiority."³¹

As existential darkness dispels the light that is the source of biological life, Johnnie feels the trepidation of nothingness: "It was the dread of nonexistence, the terror of extinction, it was the angst of nonlife, the fear of unreality, a biological scream of all my cells in the face of an inner disintegration when all would be blown to pieces and scattered to the winds."³² Johnnie's fear has in fact been generated by an eerily prophetic dream that foreshadows the grotesque turn of events in the novel. The prophecy is unsettling in that it actually involves regression, for in his dream, Johnnie is taken back to his youth, "a reversal in time that should be forbidden to nature", and he sees himself as he was fifteen or sixteen: "I heard my long-buried, roosterlike squeaky little voice, I

³¹ Franco Moretti. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. (London: Verso, 1987), 4-5

³² *Ferdydurke*, 1

saw my features that were not yet fully formed, my nose that was too small, my hands that were too large—I felt the unpleasant texture of that intermediate, passing phase of development.”³³ The dream scene recalls Freud’s theory of dreams to the extent that Johnnie’s dream sets in motion an underlying impulse, immaturity, that is ultimately threatening for the ego that strives for Form. Freud considers dreaming to be “on the whole an example of regression to the dreamer’s earliest condition, a revival of childhood, of the instinctual impulses which dominated it and of the methods of expression which were then available to him” and states that “it is only dreams that can tell us about the regression of our emotional life to one of the earliest stages of development.”³⁴ Yet, it is equally important to note that Johnnie does not regress to childhood, but precisely to adolescence; for childhood still involves well-defined forms, little noses, chubby cheeks and bright eyes. Johnnie, on the other hand, feels that his body assumes a monstrous amorphousness as his parts were “vividly raping each other in an all-encompassing and piercing state of pan-mockery.”³⁵

As opposed to Goethe’s harmonious metamorphosis through which the plant transforms itself, passing from the cotyledon to the seed, leaf, calyx,

³³ *Ibid.*, 2

³⁴ Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. trans by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955-1974). Vol. 14, 268.

³⁵ *Ferdydurke*, 2

corolla, stamen, petal and all the way into the fruit,³⁶ Gombrowicz's body parts are at war with each other. If, in Goethe's delicate morphology we discover "the laws of metamorphosis by which nature produces one part through another, creating a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ,"³⁷ in Gombrowicz we find a "biological scream of inner disintegration when all would be blown to pieces and scattered to the winds."³⁸ Indeed, while "differentiation" is the key concept that lies "at the very root of Goethe's life-long commitment to morphology as the only justifiable method for the study of life, be it in the domain of biology, psychology, or aesthetics,"³⁹ a more radical articulation of difference in the sense of utter heterogeneity of parts foregrounds Gombrowicz's aesthetics built on what he calls the "part-concept," as we will shortly see. For now, suffice it to note that *Ferdydurke*'s cosmos is a far cry from the self-originating, self-organizing one of the 18th century – rather, it is a post-Darwinian world, in which "endless forms most beautiful" were being, and would continue to be, deformed.

³⁶ "We have seen that the calyx is produced by refined juices created gradually in the plant itself. Now it is destined to serve as the organ of a further refinement. Even a simple mechanical explanation of its effect will convince us of this. For how delicate and suited for the finest filtration must be those tightly contracted and crowded vessels we have seen!" From Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 30.

³⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. (Cambridge: MIT Press,

³⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 1

³⁹ Thomas Pfau. "All is Leaf: Differentiation, Metamorphosis, and the Phenomenology of Life." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 49 (2010): 18

It comes as no surprise that in such a world, Johnnie's dream evokes "the dread of nonexistence," "the terror of extinction," and "the angst of nonlife," as opposed to Wilhelm Meister's reverie of the Amazon that inspires him to think about his future destiny. Johnnie's dream expresses regression, rather than progress, and it is in this sense that it bears more resemblance to Hans Castorp's vision in the Snow chapter, in which he has the epiphany --"for the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts."⁴⁰ Castorp's dream is notable not because it affirms life in a Goethean fashion, but because it ironically brings out into the open the notion of death that was so persistently evaded and repressed by the *Bildung* paradigm. But if Hans Castorp's regression was from the rational into the mythic, Johnnie's regression is in turn a flight from the mythic, as so many sarcastic references to Polish Romantic literature (Slowacki, Norwid) attest.

Maturity/Immaturity

Johnnie's fear does not lessen, but intensifies as he wakes up and realizes that he is "as unsettled and torn apart" in his waking life:

I had recently crossed the unavoidable Rubicon of thirty, I had passed that milestone and, according to my birth certificate and to all appearances, I was a mature human being, and yet I wasn't— what was I then?...I frequented bars and cafes where I exchanged a few words, occasionally even ideas, with people I ran into, but my status was not at all clear, and I myself did not know whether I was a mature man or a green youth; at this turning point of my life

⁴⁰ Thomas Mann. *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 487.

I was neither this or that—I was nothing... The hands on nature’s clock move relentlessly, inexorably. When I cut my last teeth, my wisdom teeth, my development was supposed to be complete, and it was time for the inevitable kill, for the man to kill the inconsolable little boy, to emerge like a butterfly and leave behind the remains of the chrysalis that had spent itself. I was supposed to lift myself out of mists and chaos, out of murky swamps, out of swirls and roars, out of reeds and rushes, out of the croaking of frogs, and emerge among clear and crystallized forms: run a comb through my hair, tidy up my affairs, enter the social life of adults and deliberate with them.⁴¹

Johnnie’s frustration with his own immaturity is coupled with an equally forceful conviction in the illusory nature of maturity, since he does not believe in the idea of a fixed, well-defined identity, or an essence that will determine one’s life. “Mankind is accursed because our existence on this earth does not tolerate any well-defined and stable hierarchy” he writes, since everything continually “flows, spills over, moves on, everyone must be aware of and be judged by everyone else, and the opinions that the ignorant, dull, and slow-witted hold about us are no less important than the opinions of the bright, the enlightened, the refined.”⁴²

It is by now commonplace to note the striking similarities between *Ferdydurke*’s main concerns and Sartre’s existentialism, but it is worth noting that the interpersonal sphere is certainly the principal locus of the kinship. In fact, Gombrowicz himself explains in his *Diary*, why *Ferdydurke* is “existential to the marrow”: “Critics, I will help you in determining why *Ferdydurke* is existential: because man is created by people and because people mutually form themselves.

⁴¹ *Ferdydurke*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6

This is precisely existence and not essence. *Ferdydurke* is existence in a vacuum, that is, nothing except existence.”⁴³

For Gombrowicz, one’s facticity is constituted by “a whole ocean of opinions, each one defining you within someone else, and creating you in another man’s soul,”⁴⁴ because the self is not only split, but also fundamentally incomplete and thus yearns for Form to fill that essential gap, however stifling it may be. In that sense, Gombrowicz’s Form has unmistakable affinities with Sartre’s formulation of Being-For-Others as a fundamental component of the structure of the for-itself. One only needs to remember the scene in which Johnnie peeps at the modern schoolgirl from the next room, one of the many instances of gaze in *Ferdydurke*, to see how the mechanism of psychological violence imposed by the Other is illustrated in the novel’s universe in which “rape is the order of the day”:

In the world of the spirit, rape is the order of the day, we are forced to be as others see us, and to manifest ourselves through them, we are not autonomous, and what’s more—my personal calamity came from an unhealthy delight in actually making myself dependent on green youths, juveniles, teenage girls, and cultural aunts. To have that

⁴³ *Diary Volume I, 181*. He continues by stating his differences from existentialism: “This sphere or category is the contribution of my private existence to existentialism. Let us say it right off: this is what separates me the most from classical existentialism. For Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre, the more profound the awareness, the more authentic the existence. They measure honesty and the essence of experience by the degree of awareness. But is out humanity really built on awareness? Doesn’t awareness—that forced, extreme awareness—arise among us, not from us, as something created by effort, the mutual perfecting of ourselves in it, the confirming of something that one philosopher forces onto another?” (181)

⁴⁴ *Ferdydurke, 7*

cultural aunt forever on your back—to be naïve because someone who is naïve thinks you are naïve—to be silly because some silly person thinks you are silly—to be green because someone who is immature dunks and bathes you in greenness of his own—indeed, that could drive you crazy, were it not for the little word “indeed”, which somehow lets you go on living!⁴⁵

The unceasing duel between maturity and immaturity within the narrator’s own split self is the first in a long series of battles between the opposites in the novel. Berressem explains in psychoanalytical terms that Johnnie’s nightmare is “indicative of the fact that, rather than being integrated, these two selves will stay in confrontation throughout the story, with the immature, regressed ego forever watched over by a mature subject, especially in the subject’s function as the representative of the superego.”⁴⁶ As Gombrowicz himself later writes in his *Diary*, in *Ferdydurke*, two loves fight with each other, “the striving for maturity and the striving for eternally rejuvenating immaturity. This book is the image of the battle for the maturity of someone who is in love with his own immaturity.”⁴⁷

The second self soon manifests itself in person as an apparition to Johnnie, as psychic events are almost always mirrored by physical ones in the surreal space of the novel. Johnnie is not immediately sure if it is indeed his own self, as he does not recognize his own form like “someone who unexpectedly looks into a mirror and for a split second does not recognize himself.”⁴⁸ Yet, as its features become more visible

⁴⁵ *Ferdydurke*, 9

⁴⁶ Hanjo Berressem. *Lines of Desire: Reading Gombrowicz’s Fiction with Lacan* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 44

⁴⁷ *Diary Volume 1*, 49

⁴⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 12

in the light of the day “to the limits of their disgraceful clarity”⁴⁹ Johnnie cannot stand the sight of this ghost which is himself and not himself at the same time.

The ghost stands as the expression of Johnnie in public, vulnerable to the Other’s objectification and formal imprinting. In an effort to reclaim his own, authentic form, he seeks solace in the aesthetic realm and sits down to write the first pages of his oeuvre,⁵⁰ when suddenly, out of nowhere, there appears T. Pimko, “a doctor of philosophy and a professor, in reality just a school teacher, a cultured philologue from Krakow, short and slight, skinny, bald, wearing spectacles, pin-striped trousers, a jacket, yellow buckskin shoes, his fingernails large and yellow.”⁵¹ This pedagogue, whose sense of fashion reminds one of his counterpart in *The Magic Mountain*, Settembrini, with his checkered pastel yellow trousers and a shabby coat, looks at the pages and starts mocking Johnnie upon seeing that Johnnie has started working on a new book: “I see we’re trying our wings, are we? Chirp, chirp, chirp, author! Let me look it over, and encourage you.”⁵²

Why had he come here? Why was he sitting? Why was I sitting?...I strained to get up, but just at that moment he looked at me indulgently from under his spectacles, and suddenly—I became small, my leg became a little leg, my hand a little hand, my persona a little persona,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13

⁵⁰ “No, this is not me at all! This is something randomly thrust upon me, something alien, an intrusion, a compromise between the inner and the outer world, it’s not my body at all! ...because in reality I was quite different! And this upset me terribly. Oh, to create my own form! To turn outward! To express myself! Let me conceive my own shape, let no one do it for me! ...to write the first pages of my very own oeuvre, which will be just like me, identical with me, the sum total of me, an oeuvre in which I will be free to expound my own views against everything and everyone” (Ibid., 14)

⁵¹ Ibid., 14

⁵² Ibid., 15

my being a little being, my oeuvre a little oeuvre, my body a little body, while he grew larger and larger, sitting and glancing at me, and reading my manuscript forever and ever amen—he sat.⁵³

Pimko's position of sitting down is not an arbitrary one, as it will be emphatically stated in later episodes at school, in which he is described to be standing "as absolutely as if he were seated."⁵⁴ Rather, it represents, as Hanjo Berressem argues, "the cultural values of seriousness, stasis, and pompousness", which had now become "immutable, permanent and absolute."⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Pimko's sitting attests to the contingency of power dynamics organized according to seemingly casual, but inherently decisive details such as a twitch in the facial muscles, a feigned indifference, a grimace. In the freakish universe of *Ferdydurke*, it is ultimately such details that determine who wins or loses a particular battle of an everlasting war, and who will have to walk around with a horrid expression stuck in his face for the rest of the novel.

At School

After asking him to conjugate verbs in Latin and testing his literature knowledge, Pimko decides that Johnnie should go back to school, to the sixth grade, where they will "make a student of [him] yet."⁵⁶ The situation, for Johnnie, is "too

⁵³ Ibid., 16

⁵⁴ Ibid., 67

⁵⁵ Berressem, 50

⁵⁶ *Ferdydurke*, 19

ridiculous to fight back,” and with his paralyzed, infantile pupa,⁵⁷ back to school he goes with Pimko: “Farewell, O Spirit, farewell my oeuvre only just begun, farewell genuine form, my very own, and hail, hail, oh terrible and infantile form, so callow and green!”⁵⁸ The school, where “everyone is a prisoner of his own ghastly face,” is yet another grotesque universe in which manipulation is the order of the day, as the students are tricked and trapped by Pimko and the schoolmaster in a dialectic of naiveté:

I’ll start by watching the students, and I’ll show them in the most naïve manner possible that I think they are naïve and innocent. This will infuriate them of course, they’ll want to show me that they are not naïve, and you’ll see how this will plunge them into genuine naivete and innocence, so sweet to us pedagogues! There is nothing better than a truly antiquated pedagogical trick! The little cuties, educated by us in this perfectly unreal atmosphere, yearn for life and real experience, and therefore nothing bothers them more than their innocence.⁵⁹

In spite of his protests, no one at school seems to realize that Johnnie is a thirty-year-old adult, since “against the background of the general freakishness,” the case of his particular freakishness is lost.⁶⁰ The degree of indoctrination at school is brilliantly portrayed in the famous scene in the classroom, in which the teacher tries to explain to the students that the poet Slowacki should inspire their love and admiration with the tautological claim that it was because he was a great poet: “A

⁵⁷ Danuta Borchardt, the translator of *Ferdydurke* explains that the Polish word pupa means “the buttocks, behind, bum, tush, rump,” but she suggests that none of these convey the sense in which Gombrowicz uses the word: “While the mug is Gombrowicz’s metaphor for the destructive elements in human relationships, the pupa is his metaphor for the gentle, insidious, but definite infantilizing and humiliation that we inflict on one another.” (xix)

⁵⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 19

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 47

great poet! Remember that, it's important! And why do we love him? Because he was a great poet. A great poet he was indeed!"⁶¹

It is in the episodes at school that the novel makes its most forceful attack on educational institutions that have become the sites of subject production, factories of Form, as it were, since the ideals aimed at a well-rounded development of one's faculties were ultimately reduced to an insurance plan securing one's place in society: "To live vicariously through thousand-year-old cultural institutions as securely as if one were setting aside a little sum in a savings account—this could be one's own, as well as other people's, fulfillment. But I was, alas, a juvenile and juvenility was my only cultural institution".⁶² The empty subjectivity produced at school, that "smithy" in which maturity is forged,⁶³ is represented by the absurd power struggle between Syphon, the conformist student, and Kneadus, the idealist revolutionary:

And, in the thick and stifling air, cheeks flushed again and controversy grew—various theories and the names of doctrinaires were catapulted and sped into battle—here world views grappled with each other high above hot-heads, there a troop of liberated and liberating damsels charged at the obscurantism of the conservative press with the vehemence of sexual neophytes. "Our nationalism! Bolshevism! Fascism! Catholic Youth! Falcons! Boy Scouts! Be prepared! Knights of the Sword! Ancient tribes of Poland!" —and ever more fanciful words were falling... Their pathos was artificial, their lyricism was odious, they were dreadful in their sentimentalism, inept in their irony,

⁶¹ Ibid. 42

⁶² Ibid., 10

⁶³ "It is in the prime of youth that man sinks into empty phrases and grimaces. It's in this smithy that our maturity is forged." (*Ferdydurke*, 68).

jest, and wit, pretentious in their flights of fancy, repulsive in their failures. And so their world turned. Turned and proliferated.⁶⁴

The tension between Syphon and Kneadus finally erupts in a duel in which the word “face-off” assumes a perfectly Gombrowiczian content. The terms of the duel require that “to each and every one of Syphon’s inspiring and beatific faces, Kneadus shall respond with an ugly and demolishing counterface.” The duel, which reminds one of that between Naphta and Settembrini, turns into a grotesque show of monstrosity, and ends with Syphon’s victory because he ultimately fights for his “principles” that evoke Kant’s notion of “the categorical imperative”: “his finger uplifted not for Kneadus, as such, nor for himself, as such, but for his principles, as such! Oh, what horror!”⁶⁵

Although Syphon wins the duel, Kneadus does not let go of him, and gets “inside him,” “by force...through the ears” by whispering something. Raped through the ear and not being able to “rid himself of those hostile elements”, Syphon eventually hangs himself and dies, feeling “nothing but disgust for his tainted self.”⁶⁶ It is striking how often rape comes up throughout the novel as an allegory of the inherently antagonistic form of social relationships. Although there are some moments rape assumes the implication of sexual violence (such as Kneadus raping the servant girl in the modern household), in *Ferdydurke* rape is for the most part treated as the ultimate form of violence that involves the objectification of the other, which does not necessarily have to occur in a sexual context. In fact, the most

⁶⁴ Ibid., 49

⁶⁵ Ibid., 62, 65

⁶⁶ Ibid., 133

dramatic instances of rape in the novel, one of them being the duel between Syphon and Kneadus, do not involve any kind of physical contact, and in such instances, rape is carried out merely by imposing words, gestures, grimaces or even ideologies on the other in an effort to gain ultimate recognition. In that sense, Gombrowicz's portrayal of rape is an extreme restaging of Hegel's master and slave dialectic, in which two consciousnesses try to annihilate each other's freedom in an endless struggle of life and death so as to declare themselves as the subject, and their opponent as the object.⁶⁷ The novel's unmistakable tone of misogyny, too, is to be read as an expression of Gombrowicz's strong resentment of the inherently hostile nature of interpersonal dynamics that operate silently and surreptitiously, but not less concretely experienced because of that, safeguarded by the ironclad Form.

Gombrowicz's Idea of Form

The episode at school is followed by the "Preface to the Child Runs Deep in Filidor," in which Gombrowicz presents his theory of Form and his manifesto on the part-concept, in reality "an entire philosophy" presented "in the frivolous and frothy

⁶⁷ Hegel describes the scene of the battle in the following way: "One individual is confronted by another individual. Appearing thus immediately on the scene, they are for one another like ordinary objects, independent shapes, individuals submerged in the being of Life—for the object in its immediacy is here determined as Life. They are, for each other, shapes of consciousness which have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction, of rooting-out all immediate being, and of being merely the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness: in other words, they have not as yet exposed themselves to each other in the form of pure being-for-self, or as self-consciousness" From *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1977: 113.

form of a carefree magazine article.”⁶⁸ The problem of Form constitutes the axis of Gombrowicz’s lifelong artistic preoccupation with which themes such as immaturity, chaos, authenticity and the dynamics of intersubjectivity are inextricably bound. Although Gombrowicz’s adventures with Form never cease to play a big part in his later novels, *Trans-Atlantic*, *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*, along with innumerable pages of journal entries, memoirs and critical writings on his own works that have earned him the title “the best critic of Gombrowicz,”⁶⁹ it is in *Ferdydurke* that we find its most intense and forceful articulation. In many ways, this is not surprising; for the treatment of form in *Ferdydurke* is to a large extent inspired by the scathing attacks his first collection of stories, aptly titled *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity*, received from literary critics – and that burning need to retaliate clearly shows in the novel:

Instead of spinning lofty themes from the heart, from the soul, I spun my themes from more lowly quarters and filled my narrative with legs, frogs, with material that was immature and fermenting, and, having set it all apart on the page by style, by voice, by a tone that was cold and self-possessed, I indicated that I wished, herewith, to part ways with those ferments. Why did I, as if thwarting my own purpose, entitle my book *Memoirs from the Time of Immaturity*? In vain my friends advised me against using

⁶⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 71

⁶⁹ Zdzislaw Lapinski reports that one of the few early favorable reviews on Gombrowicz came from a critic that called himself G.K. from *Kurier Poranny*, who later turned out to be no one but Gombrowicz himself. Here is how the review of *Memoirs from the Time of Immaturity* read: “This brilliant book has been written with acute intelligence and great imagination. It shows an original and outstanding talent. It is both very profound and very shallow. Strange that the author should descend so deep down into the human soul just to amuse himself” (Lapinski, 1983: 118). Lapinski also notes Slawinski’s comments: “Gombrowicz has turned out to be the Chief Authority on Gombrowicz; not only has he initiated a sub-discipline in Polish literary studies, but he has also become an unsurpassable expert on himself” (qtd in Zdzislaw Lapinski, “Gombrowicz and His Critics”, Gombrowicz, [Wroclaw: Zaklad Narodowyim Ossolin’skich, 1983]: 119).

such a title, saying that I should avoid even the slightest allusion to immaturity. “Don’t do it,” they said, “the concept of immaturity is too drastic, if you think of yourself as immature, who will think you as mature?” Yet it just didn’t seem appropriate to dismiss, easily and glibly, the sniveling brat within me, I thought that the truly Adult were sufficiently sharp and clear-sighted to see through this, and that anyone incessantly pursued by the brat within had no business appearing in public without the brat. But perhaps I took the serious-minded too seriously and overestimated the maturity of the mature.⁷⁰

In Gombrowicz, Form is almost always articulated as the foil for “immaturity,” as the irreducible force that gives the amorphous immaturity a well-defined shape, making it mature. Broadly, Form stands for the totality of interpersonal relations that determines the individual, and artistic form is only one of the areas which this higher Form molds after its own shape. Form, as an “inauthentic shell in which life becomes trapped,”⁷¹ is thus the reified shape of social relations. Even from such a perfunctory explanation, it becomes clear that aesthetics is not the principle sphere in which Gombrowicz articulates the problem of Form; if by aesthetics one simply understands contemplation of artistic beauty⁷². On the contrary, by acknowledging society’s impact on art, Gombrowicz unsettles high-modernism’s

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4

⁷¹ Goddard, 28

⁷² In his book *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics*, Rodolphe Gasché points out that the current conflation of aesthetics with the fine arts is in fact a post-Hegelian phenomenon. Hegel’s unfavorable views regarding nature and natural beauty in his influential work on aesthetics came to establish the subject of aesthetics as “a philosophy of the fine arts”, replacing Kant’s broader inquiry into the possibility of the subject’s appreciation of natural beauty, for which he/she does not have a concept provided by the understanding. Thus, even though Kant makes references to art in the Third Critique, Gasché asserts that his guiding question remains as one concerning “the formal conditions of possibility of aesthetic judgment in general” (Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetic* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 3).

quasi-religious belief in aesthetic autonomy. It is precisely by restating form as an inherently social construct that Gombrowicz presents a critique of the formalist impulse of modernism.⁷³ If, as Adorno argues, the autonomy of art was sustained by the idea of humanity following the dissolution of its cultic function,⁷⁴ in *Ferdydurke* the idea of humanity is itself abolished, abolishing art's autonomy in turn.

For all their differences, Gombrowicz's notion of Form has a lot in common with that of the *Bildung* paradigm insofar as it is intimately related with the idea of self-determination (or lack thereof). In "The Critique of The Teleological Judgment", Kant identifies self-organization as the unique purposive trait of organic forms, which defy the model of mechanical causation. As opposed to a watch, for instance, parts of a natural being "reciprocally produce each other", and thus "produce a whole out of their own causality."⁷⁵ Schiller extends Kant's idea of organic causation to the operation of the State, which is "formed by itself and for itself", and thus demands the harmonious attunement of the parts to the whole; that is of the individual to the

⁷³ In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz also criticizes nouveau roman with the charge of formalism: "It seems to me typical of over-refined cultures, like the Parisian culture, to tend to reduce the gigantic problem of Form to the elaboration of ever new models of the nouveau roman, to literature, and worse still, to literature about literature. I know that it's their way of searching for a writer's reality, but I don't think it gets us very far" (*A Kind of Testament*. [Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1973], 72).

⁷⁴ "The autonomy [art] achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human once, this autonomy was shattered" (Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004], 1).

⁷⁵ Kant, CTJ, § 65.

State.⁷⁶ Aesthetic form is likewise governed by the principle of self-causation, since a form is only beautiful “if it explains itself without a concept,” if it is “self-determining and self-determined.”⁷⁷ In *Kallias*, by means of a synthesis of Kant’s understanding of freedom as morality and his model of organic causation, Schiller arrives at the idea that freedom comes about because each part of a composition “restricts its inner freedom such as to allow every other to express its freedom”:

It is necessary for every great composition that the particular restrict itself to let the whole reach its effect. If this restriction by the particular is at once the effect of its freedom, that is, if it posits the whole itself, the composition is beautiful...Everything in a landscape must refer to the whole and yet the particular should only be constrained by its own rule, should only seem to follow its own will. But it is impossible that the process of cohering to a whole should not require some sacrifices on the part of the particular, since a collision of freedoms is unavoidable...Freedom comes about because each restricts its inner freedom such as to allow every other to express its freedom.⁷⁸

The pressing desire for harmony expressed both in Kant and Schiller is in fact a symptom of the deep terror caused by The French Revolution. Schiller, in particular, radicalizes Kant’s notion of “beauty as the symbol of morality,” and asserts the precedence of beauty over freedom in his *Aesthetic Education of Man*, which was written against the background of the revolution and in a climate of cultural degeneracy in which society was “relapsing into its original elements” instead of “hastening upwards into organic life.”⁷⁹ It is striking that Schiller opposes

⁷⁶ *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 33

⁷⁷ “Kallias,” 155

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 172

⁷⁹ *Aesthetic Education*, 35

organic life with the “the intricate machinery of the State,”⁸⁰ which destroys the harmony between the individual’s diverse powers. Schiller argues that the totality of man’s powers can only be brought together by the aesthetic; “the middle disposition between sensuousness and reason,”⁸¹ and as long as the State does not pay heed to the variety present in the individual’s nature, its political interventions will end up in violence and oppression. Freedom can only be gained through the aesthetic, and as such, beauty has precedence over freedom: “It is through beauty that we arrive at freedom”.⁸²

Under the oppression of Form, *Ferdydurke*’s universe is neither free nor beautiful, but grotesque and tyrannical. A fierce negation of aesthetic idealism’s understanding of form as the gateway into beauty and freedom, Gombrowicz’s Form is unmistakably detached from its eighteenth century humanist mission. In Gombrowicz, Form, as the calcification of social relations, does not emerge organically and in harmony with the individual; rather it is “thrust from outside,”⁸³ denying one the possibility of self-determination: “The son of earth will henceforth understand that he is not expressing himself in harmony with his deepest being but always in accordance with some artificial form painfully thrust upon him from without, either by people or by circumstances.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., 39

⁸¹ Ibid., 99

⁸² Ibid., 27

⁸³ *Ferdydurke*, 80

⁸⁴ *Ferdydurke*, 85

Unlike Schiller's, Gombrowicz's Form is not a mediation through which one passes in order to arrive at freedom, beauty and harmony. Quite the contrary, the grotesque element in *Ferdydurke* results from the novel's attempt to destroy the idea of the wholeness by dissecting it into parts that refuse to unite. Gombrowicz's main target here is the idealist aesthetics of totality, which models art after the unity of parts of organic beings. Mocking the idea of a sublime aesthetic unity, Gombrowicz claims that no matter how meticulously structured, the work is destined to fall into its parts, because life itself denies the reader the possibility to assimilate the work's wholeness all at once.⁸⁵ Whatever human beings do, they do it only in parts, but Form demands wholeness and the surrender of autonomous parts to its absolute mastery. In an effort to escape from Form, he comes up with a new aesthetics built on the "part-concept." The following passage reads almost like the exact negation of Schiller's idea of parts achieving their true freedom in the whole:

Do we create form or does form create us? We think we are the ones who create it, but that's an illusion, because we are, in equal measure, constructed by the construction. Whatever you put down on the paper dictates what comes next, because the work is not born of you—you want to write one thing, yet something entirely different comes out. Parts tend to wholeness, every part surreptitiously makes its way toward the whole, strives for roundness, and seeks fulfillment, it implores the rest to be created in its own image and likeness... We wrap ourselves around that part like ivy round an oak tree, the

⁸⁵ "Quiet, shush, something mysterious is happening, here before us is a fifty-year-old author, on his knees at the altar of art, creating, thinking about his masterpiece, about its harmony and precision, and beauty, about its spirit and how to overcome its difficulties, and there is the expert thoroughly studying the author's material, whereupon the masterpiece goes out into the world and to the reader, and what was conceived in utter and absolute agony is now received piecemeal, between a telephone call and a hamburger" (72).

beginning sets up the end, and the end—the beginning, while the middle evolves between the beginning and the end. A total inability to encompass wholeness marks the human soul.⁸⁶

Although Gombrowicz's claim that we are constructed by the construction and formed by the form at first resembles Goethe's claim that studying an organism which is "in ceaseless flux" involves the simultaneous reflexive heightening of the observer in that in imprints her with a sense of dynamic form, the shift in mood is striking.⁸⁷ Gombrowicz articulates Form as an equally dynamic notion, but his account nevertheless imparts a sense of foreclosure and imprisonment, since the process of socialization that constitutes the dynamic essence of Form involves manipulation, indoctrination, constant duels and symbolic rapes to such a degree that Form almost descends on the characters, much like the way History descends on Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*. At this point, it must be noted that Thomas Pfau argues that in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Goethe employs an "emergentist" narrative logic as opposed to the teleological logic of his botanical writings due to "vicissitudes of socialization" that involves "a progression that is neither predictable nor susceptible of repetition."⁸⁸ After all, malformations aside, the developmental trajectory of a plant is more or less foreseeable, whereas human life is susceptible to

⁸⁶ *Ferdydurke*, 72.

⁸⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, Goethe suggests that the German language makes frequent use of the term "*Bildung*" to designate "what has been brought forth and likewise what is in the process of being brought forth" and hints at the double sided process of formation: "What has been formed is instantly transformed, and if we would arrive, to some degree, at a vital intuition of Nature, we must strive to keep ourselves as flexible and pliable as the example she herself provides." (Goethe, 1989; 24)

⁸⁸ Thomas Pfau. "Bildungsspiele: Vicissitudes of Socialization in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*." *European Romantic Review*, 21: 5, 567-87. (2010)

strange twists and turns, so that Wilhelm Meister does not know what is to befall him in the future any more than Johnnie does. However, Wilhelm inhabits a historical moment in which it is still possible to achieve a smooth integration with society – even though, as it is in the case of the Tower Society, it may turn out that society was watching him all along, recording his every move. Perhaps it was with this gesture that Goethe was already hinting at the illusory character of the idea of self-determination, making *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* notable for its virtuosic use of irony that Schlegel praises so enthusiastically. And if the *Bildungsroman* is a phantom genre, as Marc Redfield argues, it is not so much because of the paradox of exemplarity, but more essentially because the fantasy of *Bildung* was a phantom to begin with.

Be that as it may, in *Wilhelm Meister*, the said irony is still buried in the unconscious of the novel, rather than exploding with such an intensity that shatters the form, as it does in *Ferdydurke*. Yet, Johnnie is trapped in the late modern world of postwar Poland where contradictions and unresolved antagonisms are boiling on the surface of everyday life, and escape is only possible as long as it is “from one mug into another.”⁸⁹ Thus, Goethe’s dynamic form is supplanted by a fluid, yet well-determined one, which annihilates even the illusion of a possibility of self-determination.

Regress of Reason

⁸⁹ *Ferdydurke*, 281

In addition to its treatment of Form, *Ferdydurke* subverts the *Bildungsroman* by undermining the progressive model of rationality and its close association with the idea of maturity developed by the major thinkers of *Bildung*, particularly Kant. Kant famously characterizes the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” and immaturity as “the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another.”⁹⁰ As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, “understanding without the guidance of another” is essentially understanding guided by reason, which, “by virtue of its own consistency...organizes the individual date of cognition into a system.”⁹¹

Kant identifies “laziness and cowardice” as the reasons why a great proportion of men remain in “permanent immaturity”, and it is “dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments” that shackle the individual to that state.⁹² He refers to the Enlightenment as “an almost inevitable consequence,” if the public is allowed freedom. Yet, Kant’s claim is inherently paradoxical to the extent that freedom is in fact undermined by the assertion that one is only free to be mature. Thus, while the Enlightenment starts out as an emancipatory project that aims to free reason from the yokes of dogmatism, it ends up as yet another authoritarian discourse that forgoes difference for the sake of identity and converts everything, “even the human individual,” into the “repeatable,

⁹⁰ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53

⁹¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 82

⁹² Kant, “Enlightenment,” 55

replaceable process, into a mere example for the conceptual models of the system.”⁹³

In effect, the Enlightenment’s measures to rationalize and demythologize the world only replace the old myths with more radical ones.

Consequently, the Enlightenment establishes a new myth of maturity, which is contradictory with its cult of youth. This contradiction marks the epistemological origin of the *Bildungsroman*, which it tries to resolve by narrativizing the conflict within the confines of the life of a single individual; youth serving as the necessary starting point that is to be surpassed in order to attain maturity as its telos. In fact, *the Bildungsroman* advances an aesthetic corrective to Kant’s rigid project of rationality that infinitely abstracts from “all social and historical contingency”⁹⁴ for the sake of a pure reason and its claim to universality. It is important to note that the notion of individuality as the instantiation of social and historical contingency is also discarded with the same gesture, since individuality implies the existence of a surplus beyond the limits of reason carefully delineated by Kant to avoid confronting “the treacherous, inchoate world of the unconscious, of wayward drives, compulsions, desires, anxieties and fluctuating motives forever blending with one another.”⁹⁵ The *Bildungsroman*, then, inserts these missing social and historical elements into its aesthetic project through the figure of the individual. Pfau, for instance, points out that “Goethe and other major literary figures conceive of the social as but the catalyst

⁹³ Adorno and Horkheimer, 56

⁹⁴ Thomas Pfau, “Beyond Liberal Utopia: Freedom as the Problem of Modernity”, *European Romantic Review*. Vol. 19, No. 2 (April 2008): 94

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94

allowing the self gradually to discover its radical singularity.”⁹⁶ Be that as it may, it must be noted that limits of individuality are still largely circumscribed by society in the classical *Bildungsroman*. In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* for instance, as the narrative of his life recorded by the Tower Society unrolls before his eyes, Wilhelm discovers the irreducible power of society on what hitherto appeared to him to be his own individual choices.

Wilhelm was not outraged by the surveillance techniques of this proto-panoptical society; in fact he was quite delighted at the fact that his choices turned out to be in harmony with what has been designated for him. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, articulates Form as an oppressive force, and his obsessive insistence on immaturity is to be read as a pledge to individuality. Kant is one of the most prominent figures whom Gombrowicz criticizes for promulgating the myth of maturity,⁹⁷ which operates on the principle of “understanding without the guidance of another,”⁹⁸ one that is completely at odds with Gombrowicz’s disavowal of autonomy as an illusory notion.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 98

⁹⁷ “I can’t believe that Socrates, Spinoza, or Kant were real people and completely serious ones at that. I claim that an excess of seriousness is conditioned by an excess of frivolity... We will never know the dirt of their genesis, their hidden, intimate immaturity, their childhood or shame because even the artists themselves are not allowed to know about this... We will not know the roads by which Kant-the-child and Kant-the-adolescent changed into Kant-the-philosopher, but it would be good to remember that culture or knowledge is something much lighter than one would imagine”. (*Diary I*, 185)

⁹⁸ Kant, “Enlightenment,” 53

In “The Child Runs Deep in Filidor” episode of *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz sets up a guerilla attack on Kant’s antinomies, one of the most crucial set of architectonic devices in his progressive system of rationality. Antinomies constitute the major roadblocks and a potential threat to the development of reason, and Gombrowicz turns them against Kant’s own system by emphasizing their potentially regressive character. Although he uses them as a weapon to attack Kant, he attaches great importance to antinomies in art because of their strong oppositional force: “After the period in which art, philosophy, and politics looked for the integral, uniform, concrete, and literal man, the need for an elusive man who is a play of contradictions, a fountain of gushing antinomies and a system of infinite compensation is growing.”⁹⁹ Since the episode involves an inherent undoing of antinomies, a brief description of antinomies with regard to their role in Kant’s overall system is in order.

Kant’s antinomies of pure reason stem from “the architectonic nature” of human reason that “considers all cognitions as belonging to a possible system,” and hence only allows those principles that “do not render an intended cognition incapable of standing together with others in some system or other”.¹⁰⁰ Kant argues that it is in the very nature of reason to gravitate towards a secure systematic unity and completeness; yet, it is this same tendency for completeness that at times brings about a transcendental illusion, for there are cases in which two opposing assertions are proven to be equally tenable. Although assertions of this kind give rise to an

⁹⁹ *Diary Volume I*, 30

¹⁰⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 502

illusion, it is “a natural and unavoidable illusion, which even if one is no longer fooled by it, still deceives though it does not defraud and which thus can be rendered harmless but never destroyed.”¹⁰¹ Thus tension posed by the antinomies is inherent to the structure of the human mind itself; that is to say, antinomies are only possible because reason can think about them *at all*, but they are also problematic on the same grounds; that is, as a general rule, the reason should not have been able to think about them, and through this anomaly, reason transgresses the borders demarcated by the understanding. It is in this sense that the antinomies serve as the organizing devices in Kant’s overall architectonic plan, the scaffolding of which is constituted by the inquiry into the conditions of possibility of synthetic a priori judgments.

The resolution of antinomies is crucial for the proper functioning of reason, the progressive development of which would be gravely impaired if it remained stuck in the illusions of its own making. In a sense, antinomies serve as the philosophical counterpart to Aristotle’s category of conflict as an element of tragedy that sets the stage for action. They are also an integral step to reason’s *Bildung*, since the critical solution Kant provides in response to antinomies involves reason’s maturation by coming to terms with its own limitations. It must be noted that reason can only grasp its limitations within the context of its overall system, so the momentary regress caused by antinomies do not effect the collapse of the system, but its reinforcement.

Ferdydurke dwells on that brief moment of regress and acknowledges the inherent tragic potential of the antinomies by personifying the antithetic positions as

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 468

two enemies fighting in a duel that results in a bloodbath. It is striking that Kant uses the metaphor of a duel in order to portray the antagonism between the two seemingly opposing statements:

These sophisticated assertions thus open up a dialectical battlefield, where each party will keep the upper hand as long as it is allowed to attack, and will certainly defeat that which is compelled to conduct itself merely defensively. Hence hardy knights, whether they support the good or the bad cause, are certain of carrying away the laurels of victory if only they take care to have the prerogative of making the last attack, and are not bound to resist a new assault from the opponent...As impartial referees we have to leave entirely aside whether it is a good or bad cause for which the combatants are fighting, and just let them settle the matters for themselves. Perhaps after they have exhausted rather than injured each other, they will see on their own that their dispute is nugatory, and part as good friends.¹⁰²

Needless to say, parting as good friends is the least likely outcome of a Gombrowiczian duel. Indeed, the horror of the duel between Syphon and Kneadus is intensified by the one that takes place in “The Child Runs Deep in Filidor” chapter. The duel occurs between Dr. Professor of Synthethology at the University of Leyden, the High Filidor, who “acted in the pompous spirit of High Synthesis mainly by addition + infinity, and in emergencies, also with the aid of multiplication + infinity”, and his foil, the “equally illustrious” Analyst Anti-Filidor, whose specialty is to “decompose a person into parts by means of calculation in general, and by filliping noses in particular.”¹⁰³ The system within which Anti-Filidor appears from the dialectical bosom of Filidor is bound to the laws of symmetry in keeping with “the Newtonian principle of action and reaction,” which dictates that “a spiritual

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 468

¹⁰³ *Ferdydurke*, 88

phenomenon of such magnitude could not remain unchallenged.”¹⁰⁴ Since neither party concedes to the fact that he is “not only the pursuer but also the pursued,” their first physical encounter takes place when they accidentally cross paths in a classy restaurant in Warsaw, resulting in “a catastrophe ranking in magnitude among the greatest railroad catastrophes.”¹⁰⁵ The arrangement of the scene is immaculately symmetrical: Filidor, as the tall, fat and bearded figure of synthesis, is there with his wife, while Anti-Filidor, the small, skinny and clean-shaven champion of analysis is with his mistress Fiora Gente. Idealism, abstraction, order and totality are thereby set in opposition to materialism, corporeality, chaos and the autonomy of parts.

After a series of synthetic and analytic attempts of the opponents to unite and divide each other’s women, the duel ends in a fearful symmetry: “Both torsos died and slid to the ground—the duelist looked at each other. Now what? In any case both corpses already lay on the ground. There was nothing to do. Actually Analysis had won, but so what? Absolutely nothing. Synthesis could have won equally well, and there would have been nothing to that, either.”¹⁰⁶ As opposed to Kant’s symmetrical antinomies that negate each other for the sake of the development of reason (another instance that represents the passing over of the particular for the sake of a universal reason), Gombrowicz’s staging of the antinomies do not lead to a process of progression and eventual maturation. Instead, it reveals the childlike element that resides in everything. For when they are reminded about their duel in their old age, in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 87

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 88

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 100

that period of life where one is supposed to have fully matured and yet somehow often relapses into a second childhood, the opponents of the duel can only say “The child runs deep in everything.”¹⁰⁷

Modernity as Style

In contrast with the historical emergence of its Western counterpart, the idea of modernity in Poland was chiefly an import and as such, it was remarkably disengaged from its model’s structural base. As we have seen in the previous chapters, in Western Europe, too, modernity originally relied on its fantasies about itself, and as such the ensuing set of changes were very much the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Poland, however, not only lacked the economic and social base established in the industrialized Europe, but also the set of discursive and conceptual apparatuses that Western modernity mobilized in order to fashion its self-image. She thus ended up importing a ready-made image. Abstracted in this way from the social and economic mediations that brought it about, modernity itself ended up being reified and reduced to a commodity with fetishistic qualities.

Twice removed from the surrounding reality, modernity in Poland ended up becoming more of a matter of appearance and an aesthetic category than a socio-economic one, even in realms that transcend the aesthetic as such, i.e., culture and the organization of the everyday. In short, it became a “lifestyle”. Yet, modernity was

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 101

experienced all the more forcefully and overwhelmingly in its reified form; as concretely as one would experience a piece of furniture.¹⁰⁸

In *Ferdydurke*, the headquarters of this new modern lifestyle is the bourgeois household of the Youngblood family, a microcosm of the belatedly modern post-war Poland, which is set in stark opposition to the coexisting feudal social relations that will be the subject of the following part. In the house which Pimko describes as “modern and naturalistic, favoring the trends, and foreign to my ideology,”¹⁰⁹ modernity is played out as its model’s blank replica and becomes a self-referential signifier. Nearly all references to the modernity of the Youngblood family in *Ferdydurke* is in one way or another about a style that seems to be dominated by the dictum “modernity for modernity’s sake,” the representative figure of which is the daughter of the family, the schoolgirl Zuta, “sixteen years old, in a skirt, sweater, and sneakers, athletic looking, easygoing, smooth, limber, agile, and impudent! ...a perfect schoolgirl in her schoolgirlishness, and absolutely modern in her modernity.” Recalling Moretti’s diagnosis of youth as the primary feature of modernity, the schoolgirl is described as “doubly young—first by age and secondly by modernity—it was youth multiplied by youth.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ This is not particular to Poland. The experience of modernity as a lifestyle can be observed in other national situations that have similar experiences with modernity, like Turkey.

¹⁰⁹ *Ferdydurke*, 103

¹¹⁰ *Ferdydurke*, 105

While the schoolgirl is defined by her “sporty ignorance” and “indifference”—an emblem of the general non-committal attitude of liberalism¹¹¹-- her parents are still marked by the memory of their quasi-feudal past and thus anxious to reassert their modernity (hilariously, often out of context), resulting in “that particularly trashy and disgusting young-old, modern-antiquated poetry born of the union of the prewar fuddy-duddy and the postwar schoolgirl.”¹¹² Reduced to Jameson’s formulation of pastiche as “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style,”¹¹³ modernity shrinks into to a set of blank forms and a regime of behavior, the vacuity of which is overcompensated by an hyperbolic style that verges on farce.¹¹⁴ A typical mealtime in the Youngblood house, for instance, involves Mrs. Youngblood’s chants of freedom and condemnation of capital punishment while passing the salt.¹¹⁵

However liberal and progressive the members of Youngblood family may

¹¹¹ For Adam Smith’s concept of “the impartial spectator” and his ideas on “indifference” in general, see D.D. Raphael. *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith’s Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press: 2009

¹¹² *Ferdydurke*, 109.

¹¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 18.

¹¹⁴ In fact, it is through pastiche that modernity is, for the first time, given its proper content in the form of “sheer images of itself” (*Postmodernism*, 18). Jameson discusses pastiche in the context of postmodernism, a period that succeeds the historical moment of *Ferdydurke*. Yet, the aesthetics of belated modernity seems to stand much closer to that of postmodernity, rather than modernity. This is the reason why Gombrowicz is often referred to as a postmodern writer *avant la lettre*.

¹¹⁵ “Here you are, Victor, have some salt,” she said in the tone of a true and faithful comrade and a reader of H.G. Wells, as she passed the salt to her husband, and, with her gaze turned partly into the future, partly into the space, a gaze emphasizing the humanitarian revolt of a human being who combats the infamy of social ills, injustice, and injury, she added: “Capital punishment is obsolete” (139)

think of themselves to be, the house turns out to be even more oppressive than school, as Form continues to impose itself by means of “that tool of tyranny”: style¹¹⁶.

Against his better judgment, Johnnie falls in love with the schoolgirl; in fact, he falls in love not so much with the schoolgirl herself as with her overwhelmingly modern style,¹¹⁷ which he repeatedly refers to as something that imprisons him: “Is it possible to extricate oneself from someone, under one’s own power, when that person’s style dominates you completely? ...Oh, style—the tool of tyranny! Oh, damnation!”¹¹⁸

The fact that Johnnie is fully aware of his entanglement in the modern schoolgirl’s style almost against his will ultimately makes little difference. In spite of modernity’s self-understanding is founded upon a firm affirmation of rationality, its inherently phantasmagorical character operates on the level of fetishism, as Lacan has formulated in the paradoxical logic of “je sais bien, mais quand-même.”

¹¹⁶ One remembers Nietzsche’s forewarning in *Beyond Good and Evil*: ““The democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of tyrants.” Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 177

¹¹⁷ “She would sit down to dinner, oh, so mature in her immaturity, so self-assured, indifferent, and self-contained, while I sat there for her, for her, I sat there for her alone...And never, not even once, did I catch her letting go of that modern style in the slightest, never providing me with a chink through which I could escape to freedom, to bolt! This was precisely what captivated me—the maturity and autonomy of her youth, the self-assurance of her style” (137).

¹¹⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 138

In effect, Gombrowicz's characterization of the family's modernity as a "tool of tyranny"¹¹⁹ touches on one of the fundamental contradictions of modernity: For all its claims to liberty, rights and emancipation, modernity imposes itself so forcefully that it essentially negates freedom. For although one of the pillars of modernity is the idea of emancipation, this emancipation is only possible at the cost of the systematic reorganization and the abstraction of the world (Descartes' rescue operation to secure the autonomy of reason from the possibly illusory world of the senses being one of the inaugural gestures of the project). Pfau notes, for instance, how Kant forgoes freedom for the sake of the project of Reason itself: "Freedom, it turns out, is not coextensive with rationality but, on the contrary, implies at all times an agent's potential for ignoring or openly disavowing a commitment to rationality. As the radically contingent ground of reason itself, freedom emerges as a permanent constraint on the utopian aspirations of Enlightenment Rationalism and Liberalism."¹²⁰ Although modernity advocates secularization, it replaces religion with an equally powerful belief in the idea of "system" that demands the exclusive commitment of its followers.

Modernity's systematizing and universalizing impulse is not limited to the discursive sphere, as it also has a decisive impact on the practical realm, i.e., Liberalism as the emblematic ideology of modernity. For, Liberalism also operates on

¹¹⁹ Fittingly, Pfau argues that one of the main achievements of early Romanticism is "to have located tyranny not merely caprices and excesses of the ancient regime or the younger Pitt's repressive domestic policies, but more particularly, in *the oblique coherence of social conventions, customs, manners, and habits*" (italics mine 2008: 95)— in other words, what we today call "lifestyle."

¹²⁰ Pfau, "Beyond Liberal Utopia," 94

the methodological formula of relinquishing the particular for the sake the universal, which has helped realizing “the Enlightenment project of stabilizing social life in a set of ‘average’ values.”¹²¹ Thus, the paradox of liberalism results from a tendency to emphasize the equality of all individuals in order to secure its discourse of rights and personal liberty, while at the same time postulating a “unique and distinctive” agency.

If the elusive question of freedom is covered up by liberalism’s more tangible discourse of rights and personal liberty, it is essentially because the issue of freedom could at any moment touch on subjects too slippery for reason, i.e., immaturity. After all, freedom in its true sense would grant one the right to choose to be immature; and yet we have seen that modernity understands freedom and immaturity as mutually exclusive terms. An alive and kicking representative of modernity’s paradoxical denial of freedom, Johnnie is not free to be immature, and his peculiar amorphous state between youth and maturity is absolutely unacceptable for the modern family. For all her chants of liberty and revolution, Mrs. Youngblood, in particular, cannot tolerate this “young, blasé old man,”¹²² a complete negation of the “wildness, audacity, nerve of the unbridled postwar generation,”¹²³ and continuously torments Johnnie with her modernity.

At mealtimes, whenever we had found time, there were conversations about Moral Freedom, the Era, Revolutionary Upheavals, about

¹²¹ Ibid., 86

¹²² “Progressive as they are, with all their energies geared toward the future, they hold a cult of youth more ardently than it has ever been held by anyone before, and nothing annoys them more than a boy messing up his tender years with posing” (Ibid., 112)

¹²³ Ibid., 115

Postwar Times, etc., that went on endlessly, and the old woman was thrilled that the Era was making her younger than the boy who was younger by age... And with the sophistication of the intelligent, modern engineer's wife that she was, she tormented me with her vitality, with her experience of life, ... and with having been kicked during the first World War while a nurse in the trenches, and with her enthusiasm, and with her wide horizons, and with the liberalism of the Avant-garde, Active, and Bold woman, and also with her modern ways, daily baths, and with what had thus far been a covert activity—her now overt visit to the toilet. Strange, strange things!¹²⁴

Gombrowicz's reference to the avant-Garde is highly telling, considering its decline in Poland's next-door neighbour Russia during the rise of Stalinism in 1930's. Although Stalinism's endorsement of Socialist Realism as the official aesthetic regime of the state is often considered a profound rupture from the practices of the Avant-Garde in the 1910's and early 1920's, in historical continuity of things, it was in fact the Avant-Garde's will to power and its utopian claim to effect a new world out of the raw material of the old one that set the stage for totalitarianism. Boris Groys, for instance, argues that "the demand for complete political power that follows from the avant-garde artistic project" is eventually supplanted by "the real political power" and turns against itself, as "from its own artistic project, the avant-garde itself renounces its right of preeminence and surrenders the project to the real political power, which is beginning to take over the avant-garde artist's task of drawing up the unitary plan of the new reality".¹²⁵ Thus, the Avant-Garde's claim to the destruction of the old world and its traditional values through aesthetics, along with desire to

¹²⁴ Ibid., 134

¹²⁵ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (Princeton University Press: 1992), 26

implement this change by “placing all art under direct party control”¹²⁶ did open up the space for a total reorganization of the world. Only, it was not their own revolutionary aesthetics, but that of Socialist Realism and its return to the traditional cultural values that came to be the dominant force of their imagined world, revealing the thin line between utopia and dystopia.

The Polish avant-garde was on the rise during the 30’s, mainly thanks to the former students of Russian avant-gardes who returned to their homeland. The period would be best represented by Mrs. Youngblood’s exclamatory remarks during a dinner: “Profound changes are afoot. A great revolution in customs and traditions, this is a wind that demolishes, these are subterranean upheavals and we’re riding upon them. It’s the era! We have to build anew! Demolish everything that’s old in this country of ours, leave only the new, demolish Krakow!”¹²⁷ Ironically, only a few years down the line, Krakow would be the capital of Nazi Germany’s General Government in 1939 and then placed under the total control of the Stalinist regime, revealing modernity’s oppressive character buried under a glossy façade of progress.

Chaplin and Gombrowicz

Ferdydurke parodies the ultramodern lifestyle of the Youngblood family by means of an equally extravagant style, that of the slapstick comedy. Given its emphatic depiction of the human body as an aggregate of disparate elements rather than an organic whole (faces, noses, ears; all becoming occasional weapons or sites of

¹²⁶ Ibid., 36

¹²⁷ *Ferdydurke*, 119

violence) and its correlative aesthetic form that is structured on disordering its narrative elements, the whole novel is in fact dominated by the slapstick style; but against the backdrop of the modern family, slapstick particularly becomes a weapon with which Johnnie counteracts the family's modern, tyrannical style. In the same vein, comedy is to be understood as an essential tool Gombrowicz mobilizes in order to unravel the classical *Bildungsroman*'s more serious humanist mission to establish harmony between the social and the individual. Against such a strict sense of order and purpose, Gombrowicz introduces the annihilating, chaotic force of laughter.

Although laughter can at first come across as a perfectly human reaction, many late modernists give it a mechanical, anti-humanist edge. Tyrus Miller, for instance, characterizes laughter in late modernism as “the mind’s recognition of the world’s alterity,” serving to “absorb shock experience and to deflect it aggressively outward.”¹²⁸ Henri Bergson was the first to draw attention to “the absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter”: “It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.”¹²⁹ Gombrowicz mobilizes precisely this indifference inherent to laughter and uses it against the liberal indifference of the modern family, particularly that of the schoolgirl, in order to give her a taste of her own medicine, so to speak.

¹²⁸ Tyrus Miller. *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 54

¹²⁹ Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” *Comedy*. ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 99

In the fruit compote scene, Johnnie finally comes to the conclusion that the only way to escape the family is to mess up their modern style by immersing it in the distasteful poetics of the “young-old”. As Zuta talks about the boy that walked her home, and her father asks an offhand question “that may have created the impression of outdated fatherly disapproval.”¹³⁰ Johnnie inadvertently blurts out the word “mommy”, threatening her modernity and reducing her traditional gender roles. The grotesque contrast sends Mr. Youngblood to an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Dorota Glowocka points out that in the last scene of Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyka*, it is precisely through laughter’s incapacitating power that the national form comes apart, as laughter “mocks Form, revealing its inherent vacuity, falsehood, and surrogate character”: “Laughter erupts when form is duplicated and made to look at itself.”¹³¹ In *Ferdydurke*, Mr. Youngblood’s laughter serves a similar function in that it momentarily alienates him from the Form he has been submerged into and intimates the possibility of an outside. Johnnie mobilizes just this tiny fissure in Form to devise his escape plan:

Ha, now I know how to get at her style! I would stuff her brain, her intellect, with anything I could lay my hands on, then scramble it up, mince it and stir it, by fair means or foul!...I knew what line to follow. The fruit compote made it all clear to me. Just as I had messed up the compote by changing it into a dissolute pap, so I could destroy the schoolgirl’s modernity by introducing into it foreign and

¹³⁰ *Ferdydurke*, 140

¹³¹ Dorota Glowacka. “The Heresiarchs of Form: Gombrowicz and Schulz”. *Gombrowicz’s Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality*. Ed. Ewa Ziarek. (State University of New York Press, 1998), 81

heterogeneous elements, scrambling everything up for all it was worth.¹³²

Johnnie's strategy to mess up the girl's style by "introducing into it foreign and heterogenous elements" is in fact the very strategy of slapstick comedy. Apart from a couple of vague characteristic qualities, i.e., "vulgarity, too-fast action, a love of speed and violence and a hatred of authority and propriety,"¹³³ it is difficult to pin down a description of the genre, but this lack of precision is in fact a key component of the slapstick. For slapstick is not so much a proper genre as a mixture of the semantic elements belonging to other genres, and the specific invention of the slapstick does not rely on ordering various elements, but on a movement "whose main purpose lies in disordering of elements and their relations."¹³⁴ *Ferdydurke's* repudiation of the progressive narrative of the classical *Bildungsroman* is for the most part carried out through the most strategic organizational principle of the slapstick: a chaotic disintegration of form by de-naturalizing the relationship between its elements.

¹³² *Ferdydurke*, 146

¹³³ Gunning, Tom, "Chaplin and The Body of Modernity", *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (August 2010): 237

¹³⁴ Luka Arsenjuk, *Political Cinema: The Historicity of an Encounter*, Diss. Duke University, 2010

Ferdydurke achieves this effect mainly by scrambling the relationship between the parts and the whole, and making an “hommelette”¹³⁵ out of it. As he looks for a way to get at the modern family’s style, Johnnie decides that the most effective way to do so would be through a mixture of the young and old. To that aim, he finds an old beggar, puts a green twig between his teeth and instructs him to wait for him outside the modern schoolgirl’s window until nightfall, hoping that this distasteful juxtaposition of green youth and wretched old age (a Chaplinesque image) would offend the girl. As nothing of the sort happens and the girl’s indifference remains intact, he explores her parents’ room, thinking that perhaps he would “succeed in reaching them though that small part of that aura which they had left behind.”¹³⁶

On the face of it I couldn’t find fault with anything. Cleanliness, order, sunlight, thrift and simplicity—and the scent of cosmetics was even better than in old-fashioned bedrooms. And I didn’t know why the modern engineer’s bathrobe, his pajamas, face cloth, shaving cream, his slippers, his wife’s Vichy lozenges and rubberized sports gear, the bright little yellow curtain in a modern window pointed to something disgusting. Standardization perhaps? Philistinism? Bourgeois narrow-mindedness? No, that wasn’t it, no—then what? ...and then my eyes fell on a book lying open on a bedside table. It was Chaplin’s memoirs, opened to the page on which he tells how H.G. Wells had danced before him a solo of his own arrangement...An English writer’s solo dance helped me to catch that distaste, as if on a fishing line. Here was an appropriate commentary! This room was Wells

¹³⁵ I borrow this word play (which in French means “little man”, but also makes an obvious phonetic reference to omelet) from Lacan, who uses it while referring to the inner amorphousness of the baby before the mirror stage, comparing it to that of an omelet. Johnnie’s formless and immaturity would also earn him the title of an “hommelette”.

¹³⁶ *Ferdydurke*, 153

himself dancing solo for Chaplin. Because who was Wells in his dance? –a Utopian...And what was this bedroom? –a Utopia.¹³⁷

Johnnie thinks the bedroom is a Utopia, because it is too perfect to be real, almost inhumanly so: “Where was there any room for those gasps and moans that a man lets out in his sleep? Where was there room for his better half’s obesity? Where was there any room for Youngblood’s beard, a beard actually shaven off but nonetheless existing in potentia?” He seems to find Well’s “conceptual” dance that “insisted on his right to joy and harmony”¹³⁸ as dreadful and tyrannical as the Youngbloods’ style; and feels oppressed by the seeming harmony that in effect undermines his freedom. In Wells’s insistence on his rights to joy, he sees a projection of the same utopianism inherent to the liberal values promoted by modernity, and his dance thus attains a symbolic significance. In order to counteract, he replicates Well’s dance, ridiculing everything around him.

Gombrowicz’s reference to Chaplin, the master of slapstick comedy, reveals an interesting parallel between Johnnie’s dance and the dance sequence in *The Modern Times* (released in 1936, only a year before the publication of *Ferdydurke*) in which Chaplin uses his body as a tool to convert one situation into another by overturning the repetitive body movements of factory workers into a psychotic dance. Both Johnnie and Chaplin’s worker dance with the spirit of “disobedience” that Alain Badiou has discerned in Zarathustra’s dance: “What in Nietzsche’s eyes is the opposite of dance? It is the German, the bad German, whom he defines as ‘obedience

¹³⁷ Ibid., 154

¹³⁸ Ibid., 154

and long legs.”¹³⁹ Badiou argues that the essence of this bad Germany is “the military parade, the aligned and hammering body, the servile and sonorous body”, while dance is “the aerial and broken body”¹⁴⁰ While Zarathustra was dancing against bourgeois morality and its expropriation of *Bildung*’s core values, Johnnie and Chaplin’s worker are dancing against its historical and transnational unfolding into liberalism and capitalism, effecting a corporeal undoing of *Bildung*.

Likewise, Gombrowicz’s grotesque depiction of bodily decomposition is to be read historically, as it entails the dehumanization of organic form similar to that in *The Magic Mountain*. It is worth noting that both novels respond to war as the collapse of previously familiar forms, and in general to “the dissipation of all domesticated forms in the twentieth century.”¹⁴¹ Jarzebski points out that Gombrowicz is an artist trying to find a form “that adequately conveys the state of collapse of all ideologies and concepts of man in modern times,”¹⁴² and this is also true for Gombrowicz’s contemporary Charlie Chaplin. For both artists portray the breakdown the body of bourgeois individualism, invalidating the years of socialization spent to educate and control it.

¹³⁹ Alain Badiou, “Dance as a Metaphor for Thought”, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans.

Alberto Toscano (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 59

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59

¹⁴¹ Jerzy Jarzebski, “Gombrowicz and the Grotesque”, *Russian Literature* LXII (2007): 444

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 450

It is striking that Chaplin and Gombrowicz share an infantile fascination with the backside, symbolizing not only their revolt against bodily acculturation, but also the devolution of modern body that reverses “the upward arc of man’s evolution and reminding us of our affinities with animals and even plants,”¹⁴³ In his essay “The Annals of Anality,” William Morris notes Chaplin’s preoccupation with anal humor that overturns the logic of the head, which bears an unmistakable resemblance with Gombrowicz’s obsession with “pupa” in its breach of the codes of middle-class propriety. Thus, in his dance in the Youngblood’s bedroom, Johnnie is infusing what Julia Kristeva calls “the clean and proper body” of bourgeois individualism—cosmetically enclosed and complete onto itself, never openly emitting noises, smells or embarrassment¹⁴⁴—with a muddy and green immaturity, which thereafter hangs in the air, without ever being dispelled.

Descent into Form

Although he manages to break free from the Youngblood home, Johnnie cannot break free from Form all that easily. The last part of the novel is an allegory of independent Poland in which the oppositions between the city and the country have become completely destabilized and the utopian union between the intelligentsia and the peasantry is parodically debased into the realm of immaturity in the form of

¹⁴³ Tom Gunning, “Chaplin and The Body of Modernity”, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (August 2010): 244

¹⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8

Knaedus's desire to "fraternize" with a farmhand. Knaedus's utopian search for a farmhand to fraternize with is comical in the sense that it is a "search" rather than a genuine encounter, and he is thus horrified to find out that the peasants have degraded into animality rather than conforming to any utopian image. When they are just about to be consumed by the peasants-turned-dogs, Johnnie's Aunt appears and takes them to her Manor, where they are immediately incorporated into its social hierarchy by becoming masters to the servants assigned to them.

The manor scene has direct autobiographical resonances in that Gombrowicz spent his childhood and early adolescence between the townhouse and the manor, and hence "felt overwhelmed by both bourgeois and gentry stereotypes, which were painfully personified in his own family- a part of prewar Poland's high society."¹⁴⁵ Fiut points out that in this social class, almost everything from "attitude towards politics and servants to the proper way to hold a fork" conformed to rigid and commonly accepted rules, and if anybody dared to break them, he or she was "automatically punished by exclusion."¹⁴⁶ Thus, Johnnie's escape from the bourgeois household of the Youngbloods to the feudal hierarchy of the manor expresses Gombrowicz's oscillation between one Form and another.

In a sense, *Ferdydurke* stands as an example of what would have happened if the classical *Bildungsroman* had not reconciled the two essential, but contradictory

¹⁴⁵ Alexander Fiut, "Gombrowicz The First Post-Colonialist? *Russian Literature* LXII (2007): 216

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 216

features of modernity that Moretti has characterized: boundless dynamism of youth inspired by the principle of self-determination, and the acceptance of compromise as demanded by socialization. Moretti claims that youth is chosen as the new epoch's material sign because of "its ability to accentuate modernity's dynamism and instability", and adds that "if it had been able to do only this, on the other hand, it would have run the risk of *destroying itself as form*":

To become a 'form', youth must be endowed with a very different, almost opposite feature to those already mentioned: the very simple and slightly philistine notion that 'youth does not last forever'. Youth is brief, or at any rate circumscribed, and this enables, or rather forces the a priori establishment of a formal constraint on the portrayal of modernity. Only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be represented. Only thus, we may add, can it be 'made human'; can it become an integral part of our emotional and intellectual system, instead of the hostile force bombarding it from without with that 'excess of stimuli; which – from Simmel to Freud to Benjamin – has always been seen as modernity's most typical threat.¹⁴⁷

Ferdynurke does not make such a concession, and consequently, it does destroy its own form. *Ferdynurke* resists the organic unfolding of its essence, immaturity, into form precisely by dehumanizing it, and instead fashioning itself after body parts – legs, calves, heads, pupas, mugs-- that do not make up a body, as in Deleuze and Guattari's famous formulation of "body without organs". In fact, given their preoccupation with parts that operate independently of the whole, it comes as no surprise that Deleuze and Guattari make frequent references to Gombrowicz' works (mostly to *Cosmos*) throughout their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project.

¹⁴⁷ Franco Moretti. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. (London: Verso, 1987), 5

While *Ferdydurke* certainly operates as a kind of Deleuzian machinic assemblage, it is important to keep in mind that Gombrowicz's construct ultimately cannot escape from the final descent of Form. Indeed, the novel ends with Johnnie's conviction that "from pupa there is absolutely no escape."¹⁴⁸ Even though the novel's last words consist of the nonsensical limerick, "It's the end, what a gas, and who's read it is an ass!" and the novel thus strikes its final blow on maturity at the expense of its self-negation, it is worth remembering that in these final pages of the novel, a pupa-shaped sun reaches "its zenith, its culmination, and scorched [Johnnie and Zosia] directly from above" as a constant reminder of Form.¹⁴⁹

In fact, *Ferdydurke* is at all times self-conscious about its oscillation between form and formlessness, and establishes symmetries and repetitions throughout the work to sustain the parody of a formal unity. For instance, "The Child Runs Deep in Filidor" section is later mirrored by "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert" section, which has to have its own preface, just because the former had its own.

And again a preface...and I'm a captive to a preface, I can't do without a preface, I must have a preface, because the law of symmetry requires that the story in which the child runs deep in Filidor should have a corresponding story in which the child runs deep in Filibert, while the preface to Filidor requires a corresponding preface to Filibert. Even if I want to I can't, I can't, and I can't avoid the ironclad laws of symmetry and analogy.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ *Ferdydurke*, 281

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 279

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 193

Thus, ironically, Gombrowicz's relentless attack on Form ultimately results in the final affirmation and sublation of Form, since form is cancelled, retained, and raised to the level of the concept all at once, bearing testimony to *Adorno's* assertion of the residual irony in modern artworks:

Every other element can be negated in the concept of form, even aesthetic unity, the idea of form that first made the wholeness and autonomy of the artwork possible. In highly developed modern works, form tends to dissociate unity, either in the interest of expression or to criticize art's affirmative character... Today artists would like to do away with unity altogether, though with the irony that those works that are supposedly open and incomplete necessarily regain something comparable to unity insofar as this openness is planned.¹⁵¹

Given his appetite for antinomies and contradictions, it is not a surprise that Gombrowicz attests to this irony: "The more you are on the outside of form, the stronger you are in its power. Mysterious oppositions, never clarified contrasts."¹⁵² It is indeed from the retention of these oppositions and contrasts as opposed to reconciliations of the classical *Bildungsroman* that *Ferdydurke* draws its strength to attack Form once again.

In fact, for all its apparent surrealism, *Ferdydurke* presents a far more accurate picture of the contradictory social order of its day than the novels generally categorized under the rubric of "realism", including the *Bildungsroman*. After all, as Jameson argues, realism "requires an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory

¹⁵¹ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 141

¹⁵² Qtd in Arent Van Niekerken, "The Anguish and Glory of Being an Outsider", *Russian Literature* LXII (2007): 519

tendencies within the social order,”¹⁵³ and the classical *Bildungsroman*’s residual illusory social harmony sinks down to the bottom of *Ferdydurke* as a problem of form. In fact, in response to Włodzimierz Bolecki who problematizes the current “post-modernisation of Polish modernism” and asks if we “should rather call it unexplored modernism?,”¹⁵⁴ it could be argued that *Ferdydurke* could very well be called a work of “unexplored realism”; provided that, in this case, we understand realism as the expression of “a grisly and terrifying objective real world beneath the appearances of our own world: an unveiling or deconcealment of the nightmarish reality of things, a stripping away of our conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence”¹⁵⁵ as Jameson argues to be the case in Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” (1918), another literary instantiation of belated modernity.¹⁵⁶

It is worth noting that the category of reality as it is taken up by the classical *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* for instance, is not so much an

¹⁵³ Fredric Jameson. “A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion”, *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 263

¹⁵⁴ Włodzimierz Bolecki, “Post-Modernising Modernism”, *From Norwid to Kantor: Essays on Polish Modernism*, ed. Grazyna Bystydzienska and Emma Harris (Warszawa, 1999). Bolecki goes on to argue that in fact, the work of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz simply reflect “the three most important variants of the tradition of mature (for it is not even possible to call it late) modernism, which has never been analysed in Poland” (134). It would not be much of a speculation to suggest that Gombrowicz would have a problem or two with this characterization.

¹⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson. “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text*, No 15. (Autumn, 1986): 70

¹⁵⁶ Gombrowicz’s modernism vs. post-modernism is one of the major points of contention among the critics. While Bolecki argues the a posteriori categorization of Gombrowicz as a post-modernist to be a situation of “the hunt for post-modernists”, George Gasyna makes a distinction between early Gombrowicz by considering him a “high modernist/avant-garde writer” and the exilic Gombrowicz a postmodernist one (2011: 69).

expression of reality as such, as it is of the Freudian “reality principle” that demands ego to compromise with the social world. Indeed, Franco Moretti notes that we have Freudian interpretations of tragedy and myth, or fairy tale and comedy, but nothing comparable for the novel, for the same reason that we have no solid Freudian analysis of youth: “because the *raison d’être* of psychoanalysis lies in breaking up the psyche into its opposing forces- whereas youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the conflicting features of individual personality. Because, in other words, psychoanalysis always looks beyond the Ego –whereas the *Bildungsroman* attempts to build the ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure.”¹⁵⁷ It could be argued that the classical *Bildungsroman* reflects the ego-ideal of its age; in other words, what modernity perceives and wants itself to be, rather than its actuality. And, as opposed to the “closed past” of the older types such as the historical novel, if the *Bildungsroman* involves “the assimilation of real historical time”¹⁵⁸ as Bakhtin has observed, it is also the fantasies and illusions of its time that are being assimilated into the novel, along with the consciousness of its hero. Indeed, Wilhelm Meister is not only thrown into a world dominated by the

¹⁵⁷ Moretti, 10

¹⁵⁸ Bakhtin, M.M, “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism”, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 52

reconciliatory tendencies of bourgeois individualism; more importantly, he is an agent of this world that emerges “in and through him.”¹⁵⁹

So it is in *Ferdydurke* that we see this process in reverse, the regression of a man “on the border between two epochs” – between maturity and adolescence, between the two world wars- who cannot really make that transition and instead sinks back into his youth as an allegory of his present moment in history, and it is first and foremost through the novel’s form that the dissolution of the older type of man is enacted. *Ferdydurke* thus communicates the brute reality of history through what we can call a formal realism. In fact, from where we stand today in history and keeping in mind Adorno’s attack on Lukács¹⁶⁰ due to the latter’s denigration of formalism and his commitment to the fantasy of an immediate reality which art should then represent, it is *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* that seems like a work of magic realism, rather than *Ferdydurke*.

¹⁵⁹ “He emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man” (Bakhtin, 1986: 23)

¹⁶⁰ “There is no way of preserving the antithesis between realist and ‘formalist’ approaches which, like an inquisitor, he erects into an absolute standard. On the one hand, it turns out that the principles of form which Lukács anathematizes as unrealistic and idealistic, have an objective aesthetic function; on the other hand, it becomes no less obvious that the novels of the early 19th century e.g. those of Dickens and Balzac, which he holds in such high esteem, and which he does not scruple to hold up as paradigms of the novelist’s art, are by no means as realistic as all that” (Adorno, “Reconciliation under Duress”, *Aesthetics and Politics* [Verso, 2002]: 163).

Ferdydurke closes with an anticlimactic fall into normality and Form, which this time is disguised as romantic love. Neither Johnnie nor Zosia are genuinely in love, but they wrap themselves around its form like ivy around oak. As they walk and walk on the green meadows, the glorious pupa rises in the sky above them, “in its absolute continuance, brilliant and blazing, infantile and infantilizing, closed, sunken, magnified within itself and standing still at the apogee of its zenith.”¹⁶¹ After passing through the oedipalization of desire in the modern household, the novel reaches its anal stage and it is ultimately consumed by its own “solar anus,” to adopt Bataille’s metaphor, as the penultimate moment of regression of its own bizarre psychosexual development that disturbs the order of Freud’s successive stages. It is ironic that, having travelled through Hans Castorp’s eternal soup past Proust’s madeleines and its own fruit compote, this great *anti-Bildungsroman* ultimately ends with Johnnie staying true to Form by making “the appropriate attitude”, “getting the girl”, “settling down” and becoming like others, as Hegel once said about Wilhelm Meister.¹⁶² Yet,

¹⁶¹ *Ferdydurke*, 280

¹⁶² “For such years of apprenticeship end when the subject sows his wild oats, schools his desires and opinions to conform to the current circumstances and to accept their rationality, and takes up a suitable position in the social network. No matter how much he once quarreled with the world or was shoved around, in the end he usually gets his girl and some sort of job, marries and becomes a Philistine like everybody else. The wife runs the household, children arrive, and the adored wife, who was once the only one, an angel, looks more or less like everyone else. The job provides work and annoyances, the marriage vexation, and so he has the same hangover as everyone else” (G.W.F. Hegel. *Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

if Wilhelm's final sentiment was bliss,¹⁶³ Johnnie's is desperation, as he helplessly makes a plea for a third person to "hit this domesticity with his separateness." This anticlimactic ending is also the final affirmation of the supremacy of Form, which molds everything into a parody. Much like the way Hans Castorp could only find freedom in the enclosed space of the sanatorium and carve his own *Bildung* out of a parody, Johnnie can attempt to break free from Form only by acknowledging the extent to which he is shaped by it.

"It is clear that the world is purely parodic", writes Bataille in *The Solar Anus*, "in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form...."¹⁶⁴ But if everything is a parody, then Form is a parody, too. So the novel mocks Form for the last time by ending with a nonsensical limerick, in a similar way it began with its title that does not mean anything: "It's the end, what a gas, and who's read it is an ass!" Immaturity, thus, has the final word in *Ferdydurke*, and oral stage as its temporal correlative is the final destination of Johnnie's regressive apprenticeship in a world where everyone is ultimately dependent on each other, where "there is no escape from the mug, other than into another mug", and

¹⁶³ "I know not the worth of kingdom" answered Wilhelm; "but I know I have attained a happiness which I have not deserved, and which I would not change with anything in life".

¹⁶⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Solar Anus*. 1931. (The Anarchist Library Anti- Copyright, May 21, 2012), 3

where “from a human being one can only take shelter in the arms of another human being.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ *Ferdydurke*, 281.

CONCLUSION: THE CURSE AND THE BLESSING OF FORM

The geneology of modernism we have just traced reveals the forceful persistence of the aesthetic ideology set in place by the paradigm of *Bildung*. This influence is particularly discernible in the moment of high modernism, when, as in Proust, the idealist conception of the work of art as an organic unity continues to survive, even though this ideal is divested of its perspective of social harmony. The difficulty, if not the impossibility, of realizing this utopian vision was already recognized and conveyed by Goethe through a subtle irony in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. But as the brief period of optimism inspired by the French Revolution came to an end and capitalism expropriated the humanist dreams of a fully cultivated man to replace it with the more efficient model of subject production that operates on the compartmentalization of knowledge, it became increasingly difficult to suppress irony in brief textual moments; and irony eventually broke out as a form problem in modernism.

This, however, did not happen instantly. The aesthetic program of the *Bildung* paradigm continued to exert its influence until the breakout of the World War I, when the reality of social dissolution became impossible to ignore or conveniently swept under the rug for the sake of the dreams of harmony. Written in a long span of time covering the periods both before and after the war, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* portrays—or rather takes a snapshot of—the coexistence of two incompatible aesthetic regimes and their respective models of subject formation; painterly model of *Bildung* and its model of unified subjectivity, and the new photographic regime that involves the superimposition of disparate selves, with a past indelibly registered on them, frustrating *Bildung's* fantasy of the progressive, self-regulated unfolding of subjectivity. This tension can only be

traceable in the formal dynamics of the novel that, with all its additions and omissions, undermines its own claims to organicism.

The critique of *Bildung* that remains suppressed under Proust's formal irony surfaces to the level of content in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, as it underwrites Hans Castorp's story. History thus provides the modernist *Bildungsroman* with a new critical content. In this middle stage of modernism, *Bildung*'s idealization of organic forms becomes a subject matter in its own right, as Thomas Mann articulates body as a site of decomposition and decay. This relentless dehumanization of form continues until late modernism, when, as in *Ferdynurke*, Form itself is articulated as the sedimentation of social antagonism. Thus, the futility of the classical *Bildungsroman*'s dreams of harmony gradually arises from the unconscious to the consciousness of literary history through the problem of form.

The formal destruction of the *Bildungsroman* in modernist literature is not limited to the novels discussed in this dissertation. The same gesture can be found in Joyce, Beckett, Woolf, Musil, among others. In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance, Stephen's desire for an individual voice free from the constraints of nationalism and history is mirrored by the novel's sudden shift into journal form. Similarly, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf problematizes the patriarchal authority of the classical *Bildungsroman* by means of the formal opening provided by interior monologue, through which we catch glimpses of female subjectivity that was conspicuously absent in the classical form.

This is not to say that the modernists provide a solution to the problems they portray. To the contrary, all three novelists wrestle with their own set of contradictions. Although Proust recognizes the impossibility of a unified self, he still envisions a utopian, redemptive realm that can totalize the fragmented experiences of all his selves; that of the work of art. Mann still wants to retain his faith in aesthetic autonomy, even when history imposes itself as an irreducible component of art. For all his denigration of autonomy and his damnation of Form, even Gombrowicz tries to escape from the tyranny of Form by seeking solace in aesthetics, hence in another Form. But the strength of their critique derives precisely from the fact that they do not attempt to resolve these tensions for the sake of an illusory reconciliation. Instead, social and political contradictions constitute the substance of the works of Proust, Mann and Gombrowicz, who thereby provide a new model of formal realism as an alternative to the putative realism of the classical *Bildungsroman*.

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