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**“DER MENCH [SIC] IST EIN
GEWOHNHEITSTIER”:**

Beckett and Habit

As is well known, the concept of habit, together with that of time and memory, plays a pivotal role in Beckett's early essay *Proust*. Beckett defines habit as “a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lighting-conductor of his existence.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 515-16). As such, habit is a necessary evil, the blindness in face of the violence of life without which life itself would be unbearable. Nonetheless, no habit can hold forever, and when it is broken, because of some external change, the subject is exposed to the world as it really is, and the periods preceding the construction of new habits “represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 516). The potential fertility of this suffering lies in the fact that it is then that the psychological mechanism leading to involuntary memory can be more easily triggered. Identity itself, Beckett claims, is simply a form of habit, nothing but a convention: “we are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 517).

This bleak view of habit plays a central role in many of Beckett's works. In *Krapp's Last Tape* the protagonist is trapped in a cage of habits – drinking, eating bananas, listening to and recording tapes – physically represented by the piles of spools and boxes on his desk. The routine helps him go through his days but at the same time makes him forget the revelation he had in his youth, a revelation that inspired him. Krapp thus becomes more and more similar to his tape recorder, repeating over and over again the same things without actually living them. In *Happy Days*, Winnie is another clear representation of the deadening effects of habit and routine, which gradually diminish the freedom and strength of the subject, while at the same time hiding it from the realization of the passing of time (See Collins 1974). In *Endgame*, habit is the law of the sadomasochistic relationship between Hamm and Clov,

exchanging “all life long always the same questions, the same answers”. In the short story *Dante and the Lobster*, habitual behaviour – in particular the preparation of the Gorgonzola cheese sandwich – seems to be the only centripetal force in an otherwise radically centrifugal character.

These aspects of Beckett's conceptualization of habit are often related to the author's interest in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, as the second reality created by habit corresponds to the Veil of Maya that hides the truth of life but that at the same time makes life possible. Nonetheless, besides this negative view, Beckett often seems to offer a more nuanced representation of habit. For instance, in the novel *Murphy*, habit plays an ambiguous role. On the one hand, as the mere and meaningless repetition of something, it is negative; in this sense, the sun is a creature of habit that shines “having no alternative, on the nothing new” (Beckett 2006, I, 1), and work is an institutionalized routine from which the protagonist flees because he is afraid it may limit his freedom and eventually be the end of him. On the other hand, the protagonist's way of using the rocking chair represents a different and more positive form of habit. The chair is almost a part of his own person – or, as Beckett would have it in *Proust*, an “organic eccentricity” of his body – and its mechanical pendulum-like movement that does not take anywhere represents the repetitiveness of habit to its extreme. However, it does not limit Murphy's freedom, and he does not shun it. On the contrary, rocking himself is the means thanks to which the protagonist can access his inner being and be free in a more radical way.

The rock got faster and faster, shorter and shorter [...] soon his body would be quiet. Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped. Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free. (Beckett 2006, I, 253)

Murphy achieves a state of withdrawal from the world which was already experienced by Belacqua in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. In that case, though, the protagonist was not free to access this dimension at his own will, but he had to wait passively for it to come to him. “The will and nill cannot suicide, they are not free to suicide. [...] He remembers the pleasant gracious bountiful tunnel, and cannot get back.” (Beckett 1992, 123) This idea corresponds to the claim expressed in *Proust*, according to which the subject, in order to access revelation has to give up his will, but this of course cannot be done voluntarily, as it can only happen by surprise. On the contrary, Murphy has found a way to make his will commit suicide, and this happens precisely thanks to habit. By letting habit win over while riding his rocking chair, Murphy's will can be paradoxically switched off at will, fading away in the radical mechanization of its motion.

Such more positive aspect of habit becomes very important in many of Beckett's mature works. Habit is here understood not only as the veil that hides reality from the subject's sight, but also as the sum of the peculiar aspects of the subject himself, that is,

the mark of his identity. Moreover, habit is not always seen as merely passive, but also as an active and productive force. In *Watt*, for instance, not only is daily life in the house of Mr Knott regulated according to rigid schedules, but the characters themselves are almost only represented through their habits as distinctive traits. Also, the hypertrophic use of the combinatorial logic in the novel seems to emulate the mechanic and repetitive aspects of habit, thus showing how passive iteration can be a legitimate way of making a story proceed even when faith in words is lost and nothing seems to be left to say¹.

Habit is thus both a positive and a negative element in many of Beckett's works, an ambiguity which can be productively questioned. In order to do so it could be useful – in addition to the reference to Schopenhauer – to relate Beckett's discourse on habit to the broader context of the coeval debate on this theme. When Beckett was writing, habit was an important theme for reflection among thinkers and philosophers within a significant tradition².

Here, I will consider Beckett's idea of habit in relation to this tradition, focusing in particular on the theories of Maine de Biran and Félix Ravaisson, because of their historical importance and potential similarities with Beckett's discourse. Beckett might have come into contact with these ideas both directly, being such an omnivorous reader, and indirectly, as these themes were widely circulating at the time³. However, my goal is not to prove an influence, but to consider some similarities which could shed further light on certain aspects of Beckett's own discourse.

The philosophical reflection on habit can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, who in the *Rhetoric* affirmed that “habit is similar to nature: nature is what one always does, habit is what one does often.” (*Rhet.*, I, x, 1369b, 1370a) The apparently small shift between the “always” and the “often” justifies the attention given to habit, as it is the reason for the paradoxical status of this apparently unproblematic concept: habit is similar to nature, in other words it is that which in human beings is closer to natural laws, but at the same time it does not totally coincide with them and it is highly idiosyncratic; it can pertain only to a conscious subjectivity, but it also makes consciousness dull by diminishing the level of its attention; it enables the performance

¹ This is not to assimilate combinatorial logic to habit *tout court*, as its meaning can vary significantly according to different contexts. For example, it can be claimed that in *Murphy* the combinatorial game the protagonist plays with the biscuits, shuffling them in order to make sure he eats them in a random way, is done in order to *counteract* habit as expressed by preference (thanks to Ann Banfield for stimulating conversation on this point).

² About the disappearance of the theme of habit from the philosophical debate in the early 30s – with important exceptions, such as Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – see Kaufmann 2001, where the author refers to two reasons: the affirmation of Darwinism against Lamarckism on the one hand, and of behavioral theories in psychology on the other.

³ Beckett's interest for the theme of habit is also proven by the extensive quotation from Geulinx's scholastic discussion on “habitus seu habitas” in Ms 10971/6 (10) at Reading.

of complicated actions, while at the same time making the powers of perception less sharp; it has the power of making the human being both stronger by means of training, and puppet-like through the alienating effects of routine.

However, if habit was already a theme of reflection in ancient Greece, it is in the early XIX century that it becomes the object of a very lively philosophical debate, especially in France. The entry *Habitude* in the *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle* puts it quite bluntly, claiming that only then did habit emerge as a “nouvel enjeu philosophique.” This 'new philosophical challenge' can be said to have been started in 1799, when the *Classe des sciences morales et politiques de l'Institut National* offered a prize for a philosophical essay on the role of habit in thought. The contest was won by Maine de Biran and his ground-breaking essay was published in 1803 under the title *Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*. Maine de Biran's seminal contribution can be summarized in two basic points: the first is the fundamental role played by habit in the distinction between the two Cartesian realms of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Habit is, in the case of the latter, a screen that divides the subject from the object but that can be abolished by the philosophical gaze: one can be used to thinking that the Earth is flat but be ready to change opinion if faced with good reasons to do so. In relation to the mind, instead, habit belongs to the dynamic of the subject itself and consequently cannot be eradicated:

Dès que le grand homme qui sait *s'étonner* le premier, porte ses regards hors de lui, le voile de l'habitude tombe, il se trouve en présence de la nature, l'interroge librement, et recueille ses réponses; mais s'il veut concentrer sa vue sur lui-même, il demeure toujours en présence de l'habitude, qui continue à voiler la composition et le nombre de ses produits, comme elle dérobaient auparavant jusqu'à leur existence. (Maine de Biran 1954, 7)⁴

Habit is not only an effect of the interaction of the subject with the material environment, but it is also part of the structure of the subject itself. As a consequence, habit has to be deleted in order to gain knowledge of the outside world, but it is the point of departure of the subject's process of self-discovery, in a somewhat similar way to Descartes' doubt⁵. The previously neglected theme of habit suddenly takes on the role of fulcrum of the analysis of the self.

⁴ “As soon as the great man who *wonders* observes the world around him, the veil of habit is lifted and he finds himself in the presence of nature, and thus he questions it freely and gathers its answers; but if he wants to focus his attention on himself, he remains within the presence of habit, which continues to veil the composition and the number of its products, as it was previously depriving them of their own existence.”

⁵ “L'habitude n'est pas seulement mieux connue: elle devient un moyen de connaissance. En effet, si la distinction des facultés explique la disparité des effets de l'habitude, en retour celle-ci permet de remonter aux facultés d'origine.” (Janicaud 1997, 21) (“Habit is not only better known: it becomes a

Maine de Biran's second contribution is his distinction between *active habit* and *passive habit*. The latter has to do with the progressive dulling of sensations due to their persistent stimulation; the former with the gradual improvement of the action through repetition. Maine de Biran plays his concept of *active habit* against Locke's idea of the subject as a *tabula rasa*, that is, as the empty stage of the impressions. By doing this, he was looking for an active and original force that could overcome the restrictive limits of Locke's empiricism and safeguard the creativity and freedom of the human being⁶. Maine De Biran later expanded on this topic, making of the distinction between activity and passivity the basis of his metaphysical system in his essay *La décomposition de la pensée*.

If Maine De Biran's seminal study polarized the attention on the theme of habit, it was Félix Ravaisson, one of his pupils, who popularized his thesis – even though with significant changes – and who, accordingly, was more influential on successive thinkers. Ravaisson, the *enfant prodige* of French philosophy, published his doctoral dissertation titled *De l'habitude* in 1838, when he was only 25.⁷ Even though it is probably unfair to claim that “c'est Ravaisson qui y désigne le cœur, non peut-être du biranisme, mais de la fécondité du biranisme”⁸ (Blondel 1999, 17) it is true that his philosophical research was highly influenced by Maine de Biran and that it could hardly be understood without reference to the older philosopher⁹.

means of knowledge. In fact, if on the one hand the difference between the faculties explains the variety of the effects of habit, on the other such a variety of effects allows us to return to the original faculties”).

⁶ From the philosopher's point of view, if this active force were negated, life would be reduced solely to its participation to the inert and identity-less matter “L'être réduit à des organes passifs immobiles ne dirigerait les mouvements, serait borné aux facultés *instinctives*, il n'y aurait point en lui de *personnalité* distincte; par l'odorat seul, par exemple, son existence serait peut-être comparable, à celle de l'huître ou du polype, bien loin qu'il fut capable de former des *combinaisons*, des *abstractions*, etc.” (Maine de Biran 1954, 196) (“The being reduced to static, passive organs would not direct its movements, it would be limited to *instinctive* faculties, and there would be no distinct personality in it; by relying solely on the sense of smell, for example, its existence would possibly be comparable to that of an oyster or a polyp, and it would be far from being able to construct *combinations*, *abstractions*, etc.”). For a reading of De Biran as anticipator of phenomenology against empiricism and rationalism see Merleau-Ponty 1997, in which the author claims that “anticipant la phénoménologie, Biran semble s'y orienter vers une philosophie indifférente à la distinction de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur” (56) (“anticipating phenomenology, Biran seems to move towards a philosophy that is indifferent to the distinction between the interior and the exterior”).

⁷ See Bergson 1993 and Janicaud 1997.

⁸ “It was Ravaisson who expressed the core, maybe not of Biranism, but of the fecundity of Biranism.”

⁹ In the difference between Maine de Biran's and Ravaisson's discourses one can also perceive the shift from Enlightenment thought to Romantic Idealism, as Ravaisson refuses from the start to limit the analysis to the empirical realm as Maine de Biran claims to do. “Maine de Biran s'en tient au *comment*; Ravaisson remonte au *pourquoi*; il ne se contente pas de constater la 'loi apparente' de l'habitude, mais il

Like Maine de Biran before him, Ravaisson also grounds his discourse on a fundamental dichotomy, but in his case it is not the one between the two Cartesian substances, but between the inorganic and the organic world: the former is intended as the domain of necessity, the latter as the domain of freedom. These two territories are distinguished by the different way in which “la loi universelle, le caractère fondamental de l'être, [ce qui] est la tendance à persister dans sa manière d'être”¹⁰ (Ravaisson 1927, 17) is realized in each of them. In the inorganic realm, the general law of being is expressed by inertia, while in the organic realm it is expressed by habit. As a consequence, in the inorganic realm, beings are defined only by the reciprocal place they occupy in space while, on the contrary, it is through time that living creatures develop their identity. “Cette unité hétérogène dans l'espace – claims Ravaisson – c'est l'Organization. Cette unité successive dans le temps, c'est la Vie.”¹¹ (Ravaisson 1927, 6)

Habit and inertia are thus distinguished, but only as two faces of the same coin, complementary expressions of the same metaphysical postulate. Against Descartes and Maine de Biran, their complementarity expresses the fundamental unity of the substance of Being¹². This unity is articulated in the perpetual shifting of the border between the organic and the inorganic, the border constituted by the friction between habit and inertia, which are the same thing seen from different perspectives. As a consequence

s'efforce d'en apprendre le *comment et le pourquoi*, d'en pénétrer la génération, et d'en comprendre la cause” (Janicaud 1997, 16) (“Maine de Biran sticks to the 'how'; Ravaisson, instead, goes back to the 'why': he is not content with recording the “apparent law” of habit, but he strives to find the 'how and why', to penetrate its generation, and to understand its causes”). See also Catherine Malabou, “Addiction and Grace.” Introduction to Ravaisson, Félix. 2008. *Of Habit*. Continuum: London.

¹⁰ “The universal law, the fundamental character of being is its tendency to persist in its way of being.”

¹¹ “Such heterogeneous unity in space is Organization. Such successive unity through time, is Life.”

¹² “Biran met l'accent sur la dualité que l'habitude révèle; l'effort n'est pas soumis à l'habitude en tant qu'il est *compos et conscius sui*; il y a dans l'homme quelque chose qui est au-dessus de la nature et d'essence différente. Ravaisson est au contraire préoccupé d'établir des analogies assurant une certaine continuité entre les divers étages de l'univers.” (Blondel 1999, 16-17). (“Biran highlights the duality revealed by habit; the effort is not subject to habit as long as it is *compos et conscius sui*; there is something in the human being which is beyond nature and of a different essence. Ravaisson, on the contrary, wants to establish analogies which guarantee a certain continuity among the various stages of the universe.”)

l'habitude est la commune limite, ou le terme moyen entre la volonté et la nature; et c'est un moyen terme mobile, une limite qui se déplace sans cesse, et qui avance par un progrès insensible d'une extrémité à l'autre. (Ravaisson 1927, 40)¹³

Habit is thus the in-between of activity and passivity, the border between the subject and the object that at the same time divides and unites them. It is like a wave on the surf, as it pushes subjectivity inside nature, and then it withdraws as nature absorbs its energy. If, following Aristotle,¹⁴ Ravaisson says that habit is a second nature because it makes human actions almost similar to nature (Ravaisson 1927, 43-44), it is also true that it is a “second will”, a form of parasitism of the will that absorbs nature and thus expands its territory. Linking nature and will, habit is at the same time an expansion and a contraction of freedom, a form of both resistance and acceptance of destiny:

La progression continue des puissances successives d'un seul et même principe, qui s'enveloppent les unes les autres dans la hiérarchie des formes de la vie, qui se développent en sens inverse dans le progrès de l'habitude. La limite inférieure est la nécessité, le Destin, si l'on veut, mais dans la spontanéité de la Nature; le limite supérieure, la Liberté de l'entendement. L'habitude descend de l'une à l'autre; elle rapproche ces contraires, et, en les rapprochant, elle en dévoile l'essence intime et la nécessaire connexion. [...] L'histoire de l'habitude représente le retour de la Liberté à la Nature, ou plutôt l'invasion du domaine de la liberté par la spontanéité naturelle. (Ravaisson 1927, 54)¹⁵

The line of reflection on habit started by Maine de Biran and carried on by Ravaisson was further continued by Henri Bergson, who was a student of Ravaisson and, in 1900, succeeded to him at the Académie de sciences morales et politiques. However, faced with different philosophical challenges, Bergson's concept of habit radically changed, recovering in part, even though in a different way, the dualism that had characterized De Biran's worldview. Bergson considers habit as pure mechanism, as the colonization of the area of the *élan vital* by inert matter. Habit is the gradual death of the spirit in its penetration into matter, and matter itself is nothing else but crystallized habit, the deposit of habit in time. Bergson thus consciously ignores Maine

¹³ "Habit is the common limit, or the middle term, between will and nature; and it is a moving middle term, a limit that shifts unceasingly and moves forward in a unperceptible progress from one extremity to the other."

¹⁴ See Kaufmann 2001, 418.

¹⁵ "The continuous progression of the successive powers of one and the same principle, powers enveloping one another in the hierarchy of the forms of life, powers which develop in the opposite directions of the forms of life. The lower limit is necessity – Destiny, as might be said, but in the spontaneity of Nature; the higher limit is the Freedom of the understanding. Habit descends from the one to the other; it brings these contraries together, and in doing so reveals their intimate essence and their necessary connection. [...] The history of habit then represents the return of Freedom to Nature, or rather the invasion of the domain of freedom by natural spontaneity."

de Biran's concept of active habit, and even more Ravaisson's claim that habit is not only, as scholar Dominique Janicaud puts it, “fossilisation du spirituel, [but also] spiritualization de l'inerte” (Janicaud 1997, 43)¹⁶.

Dans le schéma bergsonien, l'habitude n'est pas médiatisante: dans la dichotomie matière/vie, elle est du côté de la matière; elle constitue le tribut qui nous payons à notre corporéité. [...] Bergson n'a pas discerné le côté positif de l'habitude de Ravaisson. Pour lui l'habitude se comprend essentiellement à partir du mécanisme. (Janicaud 1997, 42)¹⁷

In the context of Bergsonian philosophy the idea of habit as a mere mechanism is used in the context of the famous discrimination of “the two forms of memory” in *Matière et mémoire*. This is the distinction between, on the one hand, memory of the past as stored in virtual images and, on the other, memory as habit, as the bodily disposition to mechanically reproduce an action. The former is memory as the experience of *durée* projected toward the past, as the record of becoming that leaves “à chaque fait, à chaque geste, sa place et sa date” the latter is habit as the corporeal sedimentation of experience, which is “assise dans le présent et ne regardant que l'avenir” (Bergson 2008, 86)¹⁸, not referring explicitly to anything outside of it. Accordingly, in Bergson's thought, the role of habit is unambiguously negative: it stands for the passive element of resistance opposing the creative flux of the *durée*:

[Habit] stands opposed to the self as a free creative activity and represents a perpetual threat to its autonomy; the automatic is always ready to encroach upon the living and immediately to occupy any ground lost by it. There is an ethical quality in Bergson's thought on this, since it becomes an imperative to retain as great a degree of consciousness and freedom of action as possible, and to yield as little ground as possible to the surreptitious advent of merely habitual modes of behaviour. (Pilkington 1976, 164-5)

As is well known, Bergson's ideas were one of Proust's main influences. For Proust as for Bergson, habit is conceptualized as a thickening, a callosity on the surface of identity, that protects the subject from the outside world by gradually absorbing its surroundings and transforming them into a tough shield, but which has to be overcome in order to get to know reality as it is. The main difference between the two is that, while for Bergson there was no way to get free from habit if not by the constant exercise

¹⁶ “fossilization of the spiritual, [but also] spiritualisation of the inert.”

¹⁷ “Within the Bergsonian framework, habit is not a mediator; within the dichotomy life/matter, it is on the side of matter; it constitutes the tribute we pay to our physicality. [...] Bergson has not discerned the positive side of Ravaisson's theory of habit. According to him, habit is to be understood as essentially starting from its mechanism.”

¹⁸ “To each fact, to each gesture, its place and time [...] settled within the present and focussed on the future”.

of attention, in Proust's thought involuntary memory makes it possible. Moreover, Proust pays more credit to the positive aspect of habit as a protective screen, without which life is painful, as proved by the following quotation.

Jusqu'ici je l'avais considérée [l'habitude] surtout comme un pouvoir annihilateur qui supprime l'originalité et jusqu'à la conscience des perceptions; maintenant je la voyais comme une divinité redoutable, si rivée à nous, son visage insignifiant si incrusté dans notre coeur, que si elle se détache, si elle se détourne de nous, cette déité que nous ne distinguons pas, nous inflige des souffrances plus terribles qu'aucune et qu'alors elle est aussi cruelle que la mort. (Proust 1988, III, 420)¹⁹

Beckett's rendering of Proust's theory of habit in his essay on the *Recherche* is faithful to Bergson's reductive view, but further simplified and radicalised in its tones. As already noted, however, Beckett's actual representation of habit in his works is not always consistent with that theory, and it is often more nuanced or ambiguous, thus showing how the author was probably aware of the complexity of the topic and of the multiplicity of issues that were at stake and that were still debated at the time. Ulrika Maude has already shown in a recent essay (Maude 2011) how Beckett's treatment of the theme of habit seems to point towards a more positive and less reductive view than Proust's, showing significant similarities to Ravaisson's theories. In these cases, habit is not the deadening power that limits freedom, truth, and life, but the point of articulation of the relation between the inside and the outside, between passivity and activity, between the organic and the inorganic. Beckett seems to reject Bergson's views and adopt or reinvent Maine de Biran's idea of active habit as the condition of freedom as well as Ravaisson's treatment of habit as the interplay between freedom and nature, without which neither of the two could actually be. Habit is a mechanism, but it is also freedom insofar as it frees the mind from tending to the more menial actions. This is exactly what happens to Murphy: in binding himself to his rocking chair, he makes his will totally adhere to his habit, to the mechanical side of his body, and he thus escapes the cage of lower, or merely passive, habits. Utter passivity reverts itself into absolute freedom thanks to the overcoming of the distinction between passivity and activity in habit. As Ravaisson has it, habit becomes a “spontanéité passive et active tout à la fois, et également différente de la Fatalité mécanique, et de la Liberté réflexive” (Ravaisson 1927, 36).²⁰ Habit represents exactly the point in which the will vanishes but, at the same time, it serves as *principium individuationis*, as it holds the subject together.

¹⁹ “Hitherto I had regarded [habit] chiefly as the annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one's perception; now I saw it as a dread deity, so riveted to one's being, its insignificant face so incrustated in one's heart, that if it detaches itself, if it turns away from one, this deity that one had barely distinguished inflicts on one sufferings more terrible than any other and is then as cruel as death itself.” (trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff)

²⁰ “A spontaneity that is at once passive and active, and equally different from mechanical Fatality and reflexive Freedom.”

Murphy's inner world is not the passive dimension of a dark *noluntas*, but the flux of forms of freedom, in which the distinctions between the realms of spirit and matter are abolished.

In this sense, Beckett's intuition of habit as it is presented by the rocking chair proves even closer to Ravaisson and Maine de Biran. Habit is the necessary starting point of the process of discovery of oneself as it gives the opportunity to analyse the relationship between the active and the passive sides that constitute the subject. Beckett's works are full of characters trapped inside habits, ticks, forced into repetitive patterns, reduced to puppets. But Beckett does not focus on habit only to show its existentially negative effects, as a moralist would do. On the contrary, he uses habit as a probe to investigate the essence of the human being, by taking it to its extreme limits.

All Strange Away can serve as a good example. In this case we are faced with a character thrown into a space that becomes gradually smaller and smaller. In each stage of the shrinking of the room the character develops all the habits that the space allows him to perform. At the beginning there is room enough for a certain freedom of movement, and he spends his time “sitting, standing, walking, kneeling, crawling, lying, creeping, all any length.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 250). When the room gets smaller “three foot square, five high” he only has enough space to revolve and observe the four pornographic images hanging on the walls. These pictures excite his onanistic fantasy, until the possibilities of the ‘box’ are again exhausted, and the author reduces its dimension again, forcing the character to discover a new way of using it.

Enclosed in such a small volume – a three-foot cube – no possibility is left for movement, and the character lies in the utmost passivity. As such, he begins hearing a voice, probably his own, talking about religion, love, and philosophers “suggesting pursuit of knowledge.” In the prosecution of the story, as the same structure is repeated again and again, the character is gradually stuck inside a claustrophobic container similar to a uterus surrounding a huddling foetus, where he is left with only vague memories and a sort of primitive fear and indistinct desire.

An increasingly radical passivity is thus forced upon the character, who always reacts by trying to make the best – or the worst – of the allotted space by producing new habits. The confrontation between the forced passivity and the active will of the character is thus articulated on habit, which conveys the active element of the character, and it organizes it, so as to exhaust – in the Deleuzian sense – all the possibilities offered by the room. As in *Murphy*, habit is thus almost a form of resistance against the progressive decrease of freedom. This process is not only represented as a bleak masochistic literary play, but it also serves Beckett's attempt to investigate the essence of the human being. At the end of *All Strange Away* the character is described as

hinged and crooked as only the human man or woman living or not when light at full without all this poking and prying about for cracks holes and appendages. (Beckett 2006, IV, 355)

In habit, Beckett seems to say, we are at the same time less and more than ourselves. Less, because we lose control on our actions and on our will. More, because we become one and the same with the world around us. "Der mensch [sic] ist ein Gewohnheitstier", "The human being is a creature of habit" as the narrator of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* claims, is thus not a reductive definition, but a way of looking for the human being between the shifting planes of its two dimensions, where a fragile subjectivity takes place. Such an idea of the subject recalls Ravaissou's conceptualization of habit as the in-between of activity and passivity which chimes in the following intense passage from *The Unnamable*:

an inside, and an outside, and me in the middle, perhaps, that is what I am, that thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be thin as foil, I am neither one side nor the other, I am in the middle, I'm the partition, I have two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that is what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either. (Beckett 1966, 386)

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