

«Live Self», Death and the Experience of Limit. The case of Victor Egger, Paul Xilliez, and Thomas Mann

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Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The «Live Self» in the face of death. 3. The relationship between memory and merit. 4. Visions of death, melancholy and «live self» in the Leysin sanatorium. 5. Conclusion: Xilliez, Thomas Mann and *The Magic Mountain*.

Abstract: I propose here an historical and theoretical overview as regards a crucial phase of French philosophy and psychology at the end of the 19th century. First, I'm going to take into account the last years of the 19th century (particularly 1896-1897), when many different intellectuals became attracted by «near-death experiences [NDE]». Amongst them, the French philosopher and psychologist Victor Egger (1848-1909) developed a unique reflection on the moral dimension of biological death, working in between philosophy and psychology, and literature too. Thus, in the second part of the article, I investigate the theoretical contribution of Paul Xilliez (1868-1896), a young priest associated with the *Grand Séminaire* of Nancy and pupil of Egger at the University of Nancy, who devoted himself to the study of psychology and philosophy of his time. More specifically, I am going to analyse his «spiritual testament», entitled *La psychologie du tuberculeux* (published posthumously in 1897 by his *Séminaire* colleague Léon Jérôme

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[1867-1934]). This is particularly to the extent that, having been written after his hospitalisation in the Swiss sanatorium of Leysin, this same text reveals some surprising coincidences with the main themes discussed by Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg* (1924). Therefore, the comparison between the two works is worth shedding light on the French psychological and philosophical sources of the great German writer.

Keywords: *experience of limit, death, live self, Victor Egger, Paul Xilliez, Thomas Mann.*

1. Introduction

Victor Egger was an esteemed academic who counted Félix Ravaisson, Albert Lemoine and Paul Janet among his masters, Marcel Proust among his students, and Émile Boutroux, Ernest Renan and Henri Bergson among his colleagues – the latter showing some well-documented theoretical affinities with the same Egger².

Because of the centrality of introspection that characterises his method, during his academic career. Egger received more attention from the philosophical *milieu* than from the strictly psychological one. The main reason of this is that Egger clearly shown a strong distrust as regards tests and questionnaires³. At the same time, the methodological orientation which Egger presents under the label of «descriptive psychology»⁴ also includes

2 See L. Dauriac, *Une doctrine contemporaine de psychologie. La psychologie de Victor Egger*, in «L'année philosophique», 19 (1909), pp. 81-109; R. Roni (a cura di), *Victor Egger e Henri Bergson. Alle origini del flusso di coscienza. Con due lettere inedite di William James e di Henri Bergson a Egger*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2016; Id., *Victor Egger (1848-1909). La filosofia spiritualista in Francia tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Mimesis, Milano 2020.

3 V. Egger, *La physiologie cérébrale et la psychologie*, in «Revue des deux mondes», 24 (1877), pp. 193-211; V. Egger, *La parole intérieure. Essai de psychologie descriptive*, see the preface to the second edition, pp. I-VII, Alcan, Paris 1904.

4 See his first book: V. Egger, *La parole intérieure. Essai de psychologie descriptive*, Germer Baillière, Paris 1881.

extraordinary facts studied by parapsychology.

The term «parapsychology» was introduced in 1889 by the German philosopher and historian of psychology Max Dessoir (1867-1947) in order to describe the still unknown borderland between everyday life and abnormal and pathological states of the psyche⁵. This theoretical and methodological orientation is particularly evident in the case of «near-death experiences»⁶.

In his two studies on *Le moi des mourants*⁷, which are a further elaboration from his earlier work on dreaming⁸, Egger does not propose just a neutral description of the extraordinary states of consciousness. Above all, as we shall see, he develops important moral reflections which are in the tradition of the «spiritual exercises»⁹.

More specifically, in the «panoramic view of the dying», in which nobody can avoid an evaluation of their own life, what emerges is not the pure Cartesian *cogito* – namely a theatre of clear and distinct cognitions – but rather the human being as a primarily moral organism. Egger clearly shows that when death is imminent, especially when this comes at the end of a long time of illness, the consciousness – which appears as disorganised and impoverished by the deep disturbance of the organism – presents more or less abnormal phenomena, «undoubtedly difficult to classify and very different depending on the circumstances: excitement, depression, delirium, amnesia, hypermnesia with a capricious appearance»¹⁰.

Remaining within the limits of individual consciousness, Egger actively dialogues with his colleagues¹¹, affirming that, during the arc of life, it is

5 M. Dessoir, *Die Parapsychologie*, in «Sphynx», 7 (1889), pp. 341-344; J. Schlieter, *What is Like to be Dead? Near-Death Experiences, Christianity and The Occult*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 135.

6 R. Moody, *Life After Life*, Bantam Press, New York 1975.

7 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants*, in «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», 41 (janvier 1896), pp. 26-38 ; Id., *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, in «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», 42 (octobre 1896), pp. 337-368.

8 V. Egger, *La durée apparente des rêves*, in «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», 40 (1895), pp. 41-59.

9 See in particular R. Roni, *Alle origini «filosofiche» del monologo interiore. Victor Egger, Fichte e gli «esercizi spirituali»*, in «Estetica. Studi e ricerche», vol. XIII, 1 (2023), pp. 205-228.

10 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, cit., p. 337.

11 Such as Taine, Ribot, Sollier, Féré.

necessary to cultivate a «middle self» (*moi moyen*), namely a combination of wisdom and action, which is the correlate of our «live self» (*moi vif*). Because of this strategy, the subject is not unprepared for death. However, at the same time that can be referred only to «slow» death. Even though, the situation radically changes in case of sudden death, in reason that the subject has no time to (psychologically) prepare itself for that.

This is clearly shown by the episodes notably described by the English writer Thomas de Quincey, and the Swiss geologist Albert Heim. Similarly the Swiss psychoanalyst Oskar Pfister – as it is mentioned in a recent study by Jens Schlieter¹² – describes the panoramic view of the past as a «(dis)play of consolation» (*Trostdarbietung*) that greatly reduces the impact of the death drive.

With his moral reflections about death, Egger offers a crucial contribution to the history of the idea of consciousness, especially as regards the way how that was dealt with between the 19th and 20th centuries. Framing his research within a «pure psychology» which avoids all occult and esoteric shortcuts, Egger examines a datum whose main constant and universal character is temporality. Egger's method is thereby *introspective*. This makes it possible to study internal phenomena and classify them as well into *strong states* (such as sensations) and *weak states* (such as images), without anyway neglecting the analysis of intellectual states or thoughts (such as objective scientific conceptions) and moral feelings (of good and evil, associated in turn with sensations of pleasure and pain).

At the end of this study, Egger argues that, «doctors know less than priests» about what happens to the consciousness at the moment of death: the Christian religion, insofar as it imposes on the believer the obligation to prepare himself for death with a final examination of conscience, artificially provokes the live self of the dying. The case of Paul Xilliez is emblematic of this theoretical conclusion provided by Egger¹³.

12 J. Schlieter, "Death-x-Pulse": A Hermeneutics for the "Panoramic Life Review" in *Near-Death Experiences*, in G. Blamberger, S. Kakar (Eds.), *Imaginations of Death and the Beyond in India and Europe*, Springer, Singapore 2018, p. 149.

13 I have developed all the issues discussed here in my recent book: R. Roni, *Filosofia, psicologia e letteratura in Francia (1896-1897). L'Io dei morenti di Victor Egger e La psicologia del tubercoloso di Paul Xilliez nel sanatorio di Leysin*, traduzioni e note di Riccardo Roni, con

During the academic years 1890-91 and 1891-92, Xilliez had been a very young pupil of Egger's at the University of Nancy, where he obtained the Licence in Philosophy (session of 20 November 1891¹⁴) under Egger's supervision and with a mention «assez bien». Also, he was closely connected to the religious *milieu* of the *Grand Séminaire* of Nancy.

In the following year, on the 29th of March 1892, and again under Egger's supervision, Xilliez examined Bergson's thesis (the *Essai*), obtaining an excellent mark, together with a *Dissertation de l'infini*¹⁵. On October 1892, Xilliez was appointed by his ecclesiastical superiors as a lecturer at the Saint Pierre Fourier Institute in Lunéville, where he remained for two years, also holding later the chair of Philosophy and Rhetoric.

At the end of the academic year 1893-1894, Xilliez asked for a leave of absence to return to his studies, writing a doctoral thesis in medieval philosophy on Alexander of Hales (1185-1245), and visiting libraries in Paris, Strasbourg, Innsbruck and Munich. In 1894, he went to the *École des Carmes* in Paris (to which he had applied for admission), where he attended courses and practical exercises at the Faculty of Arts, and lectures at the *Collège de France*, the *École pratique des hautes études*, the *Institut catholique*, the *Faculté de théologie protestante*, and the *École libre des sciences politiques*); once a week, he gave lectures also at the Laboratory of Physiological Psychology at the Sorbonne, founded in 1889 by the physiologist and psychologist Henri-Étienne Beaunis, former professor of physiology at the University of Nancy, and directed by Alfred Binet.

At this stage, as it is recalled by his colleague Jérôme, the aim of obtaining the *agrégation* in philosophy was to be the crowning achievement of his work and studies. On July 1895, even though Xilliez had not the satisfaction of fully achieving his purpose, he at least came very close to that, emerging from the struggle with honour. He left Paris and the Sorbonne on the 21st of August 1895, and he never returned. Then it came to a tragic epilogue, with an attack

un saggio di Luciano Mecacci, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2023.

14 See «Annales de l'Est», 1892, p. 175.

15 V. Egger, *Fonds Victor Egger*, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne «Victor Cousin»: MSVC 433, paper 137.

of tuberculosis, a short stay of about two months in the Swiss sanatorium at Leysin, and then his death soon after his return to his family¹⁶.

Based on the observations he had made on himself and on the other patients he had met at Leysin, with subtle and penetrating psychology as well as a charm full of sadness, Xilliez undertook to write a study on tuberculosis to be presented at the International Congress of Psychology in Munich, and for which Jérôme kept his notes and published the article in 1897 with his preface in «La Quinzaine. Revue littéraire, artistique et scientifique», an interdisciplinary journal active from 1894 to 1907, and directed by the French philosopher George Fonsegrive (1852-1917). Written from the point of view of the psychologist and the novelist, the article *Psychologie du tuberculeux* deals with themes such as death, illness, a certain vitalism, psychological introspection, melancholy, dreams, the aesthetic and moral dimensions, and tuberculosis (which is presented as a psychic phenomenon).

Although there is no explicit reference to Xilliez in Thomas Mann's works, the comparison of Xilliez's article with key passages from *The Magic Mountain* suggests that Mann was well aware of the *Psychologie du tuberculeux*.

2. The «Live Self» in the face of death

Thanks to Egger's method of analysis, the self emerges as the total memory, the consciousness of the past as such, «the series of past states of consciousness which are retained under the gaze of the present consciousness and which are therefore summarised and condensed by processes whose nature is very mysterious, but whose results have the evidence of a factual truth»¹⁷. In highlighting the two main phenomena associated with this, namely the astonishing rapidity of thought and imagination, as well as the reviewing of the entire course of a life, Egger emphasises the activity of the «live self» (*moi vif*). Therefore a moral dimension of any identity becomes increasingly important.

However, the crucial test for the temporal persistence of the self is how the

16 L. Jérôme, *M. l'abbé Paul Xilliez, professeur de philosophie à l'Institution B. Pierre Fourier de Lunéville (1868-1896)*, Imprimerie catholique de René Vagner, Nancy 1896.

17 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, cit., p. 339.

individual manages to cope with forgetfulness, boredom, and unconsciousness; that is the self is reduced to an «abstraction without memories and joys», namely a particular state of confusion and loss in duration sometimes resulting in catastrophic consequences, insofar as it prevents the subject from spending time to think of itself, to translate itself into concepts and propositions, and perhaps even to leave its works to posterity.

Thereby, Egger compares the experience of dying to the one of dreaming:

«What is the nature of this spontaneous reaction of memory to the idea of death? The very precise observations of Mr L... and Mr Bouthillier, I think, make it clear to us: the fact in question is a dream, in the sense that it consists exclusively or mainly of visual images. [...] And is not the rapidity of thought, which Darwin and others have pointed out – in this case it does not matter that it is partly illusory – also one of the characteristics of dream images? Thirdly, a final comparison: these series of images, which seem to summarise past lives, they were reported in dreams during sleep, without, unfortunately, saying what the occasion of this extraordinary dream was. I therefore conclude as follows: the ordinary dying person thinks and narrates his past; the accidental dying person sees his past as in a dream»¹⁸.

The live self, as this reveals itself in these cases (but this applies only to the adult subject), represents the willingness to react to the catastrophic state of fear of dying, precisely because of the perceived conflict between strong and weak states. There are thus two ways of being related to the past: the strong self, strengthened by life, which becomes accustomed to the past precisely because it is «pregnant with a better future»; the weak self, strengthened by the perception of imminent death, which sees «the past suddenly appear in the form of images when there is not enough time to formulate it into propositions». Death, in the latter case,

«is the end of the self, the sudden cessation of the series of states of consciousness which are stored by memory; the idea that this series is coming to an end awakens

18 *Ivi*, pp. 367-368.

the idea of what it was, and, depending on the circumstances, this idea is either propositional and abstract, or consists of a rapid succession of images, each of which corresponds to an emotion, a particular nuance of either joy or sadness»¹⁹.

The organism so weakened by the threat of imminent death may experience the loss of the continuity of the present as a «catastrophic reaction»²⁰, whereas the strong self, because it is «successive and conscious», manages to remain in contact with its environment, «in order to enrich it and take possession of it, to submit to its influence or its will, to constantly receive and constantly create new objects, until it is surprised by this incessant renewal»²¹.

Egger explains that the activation of the live self does not follow any mechanical reason, but rather it relies on an «intelligible and logical reason»²². Indeed, as a young person grows older, the successful adaptation to the demands of the environment breaks down, and the individual, as a reaction, turns in on itself, considering itself as an object, as the old person does. Thus it begins the adaptation of the human subject to the internal environment, a process that only the strong self (endowed with a living sense of subjective personality) can experience as something worth to be known and preserved over time.

In Aristotelian terms, it is precisely between these two extremes that one must strive to achieve a «middle self», namely a wise spirit of action which is able of remaining stable in the right measure. Also, if it is true that the individual completes itself only by facing death, then the more lively self can be catastrophically unleashed even in melancholics depressed by their memories. The importance of time in the construction of personal identity is already clear from the passages quoted above. The subject must ensure that death does not correspond to any abrupt halting of a destiny, to the end of a lived past, nor to the cessation of a hierarchy of well-connected memories grouped under concepts that summarise them; neither to the disappointment of a series of desires and

19 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants*, cit., p. 28.

20 K. Goldstein, *Der Aufbau des Organismus. Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen*, M. Nijhoff, Den Haag 1934, p. 78.

21 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants*, cit., p. 32.

22 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, cit., p. 342.

hopes through which the past is extended into a «dreamed future»²³.

Therefore, the individual must be able to enrich, concentrate and organise itself, and the idea of the future must be able to unite itself with the feeling of the past. Egger emphasises the intellectual reaction that suddenly brings the past to the surface of the adult consciousness in the form of images, that is when there is not enough time to formulate it into propositions. According to Egger, the agitation of life must therefore be reduced in support of self-knowledge. After being dispersed over time, consciousness folds back on itself, reflects, sums up the past, and transforms becoming into thought.

Subsequently, Egger goes on, any consciousness can know itself only if it can survive itself. Nevertheless, in his perspective, “to be” means “to desire” and “to want”; that is “to act”. Consciousness merges itself to the physical and social environment to enrich and possess it, but also being submitted to its influence or its will, so that new objects are constantly received and created as well, as a surprisingly incessant renewal.

3. The relationship between memory and merit

Examining the dying self allows Egger to correlatively articulate the study of spontaneous memory, namely of those cases in which the situation does not allow anyone to sympathise with one’s behaviour. It should not be forgotten that, in the same years, Bergson presented his decisive study on memory. Here, he cites Egger’s two articles to support his own theory of the «two memories», confirming the thesis that conscious memory loses in extension what it gains in penetration, thereby moving the subject from the world of dreams to the real world, in which one acts rather than imagines²⁴.

23 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants*, cit., p. 32.

24 H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit*, PUF («Quadrige»), Paris 2012⁹, p. 172. See R. Roni, *La visione di Bergson. Tempo ed esperienza del limite*, Mimesis, Milano 2015 ; R. Evrard, *L’exaltation de la mémoire: une approche bergsonienne des expériences de mort imminente*, in «Intellectica», 68 (2017), pp. 257-289. Bergson developed this example again, as Evrard suggests (*ibidem*, pp. 257-258), in his presidential address to the Society for

The influx of memories, as Egger explains in his first article, indicates that the organism is coming to an end, and the idea of imminent death has the power to evoke the past in consciousness²⁵, provided that the subject's consciousness remains somewhat intact. The human organism, however, must be able to think of itself. To do this, the subject must have a memory as the main guarantee for the preservation of personal identity through time. Thanks to memory, the individual becomes a self, but it is necessary to calm the «agitation of life» (an observation that Egger shares with Bergson). Having been dispersed over time, consciousness folds back upon itself, reflects, sums up, and «makes thought»²⁶ of the becoming.

It is at this level that *merit* and *demerit* become meaningful. Both of them, according to Egger, are the moral qualities of every person, of the conscious individual who says “I” at a certain point in his existence²⁷. However, the nature of this “I” needs to be well explained. In one of his academic courses at University of Paris, Egger rejects the idea of a substantial self, which would be the subject of metaphysical and substantive psychology. Rather, according to «empiricist» or «phenomenalist» psychology, Egger states that the self is essentially mutable. The only point of support for the individual is the bond of solidarity between different moments as they can be sighted in their continuity, namely the memory of each moment of our past.

According to John Locke and William James, Egger's main thesis claims that we are what we are because of our past. The latter cannot be forgotten precisely because «the continuity of our conscious life implies the memory of our past». Similarly, the idea of the self, which is almost always present to us, «consists above all in the idea of our past»²⁸. Every present moment is pregnant with the past and it correlatively implies «a certain present value of the individual, for

Psychical Research in 1913, «where he located the trigger of this exaltation of the memory not merely in a simple sensory-motor imbalance, but in a sudden demobilisation of the vital impulse». H. Bergson, *L'énergie spirituelle*, PUF («Quadrige»), Paris 2009⁹, pp. 61-84.

25 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants*, cit., p. 30.

26 *Ivi*, p. 32.

27 V. Egger, *La morale. Le mérite et le démerite*, in «Revue hebdomadaire des cours et conférences», 1 (1908-1909), p. 601.

28 *Ivi*, p. 603.

better or for worse». Within this dialectic of consciousness, merit and demerit represent the moral side of this dialectic, since both belong to the totality of our past, insofar as it is synthesised by the present consciousness starting from our concrete actions, although the memory of actions must always be preserved. Egger directly refers to Kant's synthetic a priori judgments to strengthen the spontaneous synthesis of the concepts of moral good and moral evil first, and then the one of happiness and unhappiness, which must be able to take place in the moral subject. Thereby, one must be able to derive from life the idea and the practice of morally good happiness:

«The individual was first of all for us a pure succession of states of consciousness, an existence scattered through time, a dust (*poussière*) of phenomena; and morality was likewise a dust of opinions, of individual judgements, judgements of qualification for good or evil, made on cosmic or human phenomena, successive and discontinuous judgements [...]. With duty, personality seems to appear; the duty of good and not-evil (*non-mal*) belongs to the agents, constant, continuous causes, continuous powers of discontinuous actions, and also continuous memories of past activity; the agents are active "selves" that continue through the duration»²⁹.

According to Egger, since no one can conceive of his own merit (or guilt) without having a memory of the deeds that made him what he is, merit is the main moral element of the idea of the self. Therefore, it is necessary to everyone to keep memory of their own actions. As Egger makes it clear, this same feeling of the self (*sentiment du moi*) «requires an intact consciousness, and the idea of being about to die because of the evil from which one is suffering also presupposes a consciousness that has not yet been seriously altered by this evil»³⁰. The subject must come to «firmly believe in its own imminent death»³¹ since this «inner, personal prognosis» is the only one capable of giving rise to

29 V. Egger, *La morale. Le mérite et la personnalité morale*, in «Revue hebdomadaire des cours et conférences», 2 (1908-1909), pp. 10-11.

30 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, cit., p. 337.

31 *Ivi*, p. 338.

the idea of the self.

Also, there is one more important aspect of Egger's epistemology, this is the role that the inner word plays in the subject's experience of premature death. As the Italian philosopher Cesare Ranzoli (1876-1926) well reminds us in his *Dictionary of Philosophical Sciences* (first edition 1905), the inner word studied by Egger,

«indicates the general fact of thought that presents itself to consciousness in form of auditory or auditory-motor images, forming words or phrases that the *outer word* repeats with more or less fidelity. The inner word is thus an intermediate phase staying between the sound-word and the silent-thought, and now flowing more or less rapidly. [...] It is common to all normal people and is continuous in each of them»³².

In this specific case, the function of the inner word is to accompany the reflection of the dying and to more and more intensify the reaction of the live self, so that this word is not only an «effort» (Maine de Biran) but a real «spiritual exercise». In this regard, Egger observes:

«The logical analysis, the version and, in general, all the exercises (*exercices*) which compel one to think, use words as a means and ideas as an end; they educate (*forment*) the mind (*esprit*) to love its ideas, to cherish them, to look at them on every occasion, either to arrange them in a new order and to correct their defects, or, and more often, to restore to them what habit tends at every moment to rob them of their distinct existence and being»³³.

The live self, which «pre-exists in potency» in the consciousness³⁴, has a dialogical function, which is guaranteed by the inner word, which is always active in the subject.

32 C. Ranzoli, *Dizionario di scienze filosofiche*, Hoepli, Milano 1963⁶: «Parola interiore», p. 857.

33 V. Egger, *La parole intérieure*, cit., p. 319.

34 V. Egger, *Le moi des mourants: nouveaux faits*, cit., p. 338.

4. Visions of death, melancholy and «live self» in the Leysin sanatorium

In his two articles, Egger has been displaying how the Christian religion, by imposing on the believer the obligation to prepare for death through a final examination of conscience, artificially provokes his more live self, which has a *dialogical configuration* thanks to the activity of the inner word. Differently, on the side of pagan culture, the memoirs were apologia that did not take into account God's judgement, but mainly the opinion of contemporaries and the nearest posterity³⁵.

The experience of Paul Xilliez in the Swiss sanatorium at Leysin is very instructive to us in understanding the character of this live self, not less importantly because Xilliez was a young priest, as his colleague Jérôme recalls in his obituary, «of a meditative and reflective nature, a firm and virulently tempered intelligence, clear and methodical, but at the same time flexible (*souple*) and versatile», combined with «a rare intellectual vigour, a subtlety of penetration and an uncommon power of psychological analysis, which the habit of long meditations had developed and which would become more pronounced as the years went by». Moreover, in Xilliez, «the thinker was combined with an artist of delicate taste, with a highly refined aesthetic sense, and the scholar complemented the philosopher»³⁶.

Xilliez's posthumous article, *La psychologie du tuberculeux* (1897), is remarkable because of the depth of its psychological analysis, which forms the main plot of this admirable fragment of a novel³⁷. Based on the observations he

35 *Ivi*, pp. 352-353.

36 L. Jérôme, *M. l'abbé Paul Xilliez*, cit., p. 6.

37 Among the French literary contributions after Xilliez's work, see the psychological novel written by Michel Corday (1869-1937), *Les embrasés. Roman contemporain*, E. Fasquelle, Paris 1902, in which the French writer, moving on the basis of some of his stays in sanatorium (from Leysin to the Schatzalp in Davos) to study the psychological profile of the tuberculars, skilfully describes the affective life of the various patients admitted to the imaginary sanatorium of Mont-Arvel, starting with Amy Chardonne, the young protagonist of the novel, thus representing the tubercular as a subject *embrasé*, «inflamed» by the passions and constitutively prone to divination. On the fortune of the sanatorial novel in France, see C. Augereau, *Homo immobilis. Essai sur le roman de sanatorium*, Éditions Transhumances, Val-des-Prés 2020. Cf. also A. Bouloumié (ed.), *Écriture et maladie. «Du bon usage des maladies»*, préf. de M. Tournier, Imago, Paris 2003.

made during the two months of hospitalisation in Leysin, Xilliez's investigation is mainly aimed at highlighting «the various modifications of a psychic order that constitutes a kind of special moral habitus in the tubercular»³⁸.

Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that Xilliez read at least Egger's first article on the self of the dying, which was published in January 1896, while the second can be ruled out with certainty, as it was published in October, the month in which Xilliez died.

Xilliez was a scholar who paid close attention to the medical-epistemological debates of his time³⁹. In addition to medical sources translated into a literary form, we find references to Dante, Goethe, Pascal, Sully-Prudhomme, Barbey d'Aurévilly, and Ludovic Halévy. Also, in the background of this work, we can sense the presence of Egger and Bergson.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note what Jérôme points out in the short preface he adds to the article, namely that the second part of that (which remained unfinished) should have focused on the organic, physiological, modalities which correspond to the characters highlighted by the psychological-moral investigation of its first published part⁴⁰.

Following in the footsteps of «poets and novelists», Xilliez foregrounds a new, unprecedented, portrait of the tubercular, in which we find the centrality of illusions, hopes, reveries, and dreams even. In his depiction of the sanatorium, all the patients are «unwitting worshippers of the goddess of illusion, Maya». The psychological attitude of the tubercular is interpreted by

38 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux* (ed. by L. Jérôme), in «La Quinzaine. Revue littéraire, artistique et scientifique», 15 février 1897, p. 475.

39 He read, among others, the works on tuberculosis by the Italian doctor Enrico De Renzi (1839-1921), by Hermann Brehmer (1826-1889), the German doctor who founded the first sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis in Görbersdorf (today Sokołowsko), and by his pupil Peter Dettweiler (1837-1904), who directs the Falkenstein Sanatorium (Germany); by Aldolf Volland (1844-1919), a doctor who worked from 1873 in Davos (Switzerland), and by Hermann David Weber (1823-1918), a tuberculosis researcher and one of the founders of climatotherapy. In his article Xilliez also quotes famous scientists such as Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845-1923), Robert Koch (1843-1910) and Jacques-Arsène d'Arsonval (1851-1940).

40 *Ibidem*.

Xilliez as the most determined psychological response to melancholy⁴¹, that is to the tragedy of existence.

Thanks to the divine providence, which pours the «liqueur of joy into the goblet of hope», the sanatorium offers an «enchanted» existence (Xilliez uses this expression), which is immersed in an almost magical dimension that gives the patient «all the appearance of health». From the poetic-literary portrayal of the tubercular, Xilliez gathers all the indispensable elements for his moral characterisation. The moral habitus of the tubercular is based, not by chance (let us also remember what Egger has just said about the dying self), on his memories, in order to discover «the transformations that the individual undergoes in the different phases of the disease»⁴². Xilliez notes:

«Under the name of *habitus phthisicus*, many anatomical and physiological characteristics have often been enumerated and smugly described, the possession of which would constitute a real predisposition to tuberculosis. But some of these characteristics offer no guarantee for universality; and as for those which have any general value, they are consequences rather than conditions. They are effects, not causes: in direct relation to serious functional disorders, they translate into everyone's eye the progressive decay (*déchéance*) of the organism. This, at least, is the prevailing view at the moment. When it is understood in this way, *habitus phthisicus* can make us understand what these words mean: tubercular psychology. Just as we can study separately the physiology of the tubercular, namely the organic disorders that accompany and manifest the evolution of the disease, so we can study separately his psychology, namely the changes in a psychic order that, taken together, constitute for him a kind of moral *habitus*. It is from this moral *habitus*, known only vaguely and incompletely, that I wish to draw the main lines. I will in no way attempt to reconcile my descriptions with those of professional writers, but only to adapt them to reality. All my statements will be the result of patient and rigorous observation. As a tubercular myself, it will often be enough to refer to my

41 See L. Crescenzi, *Melancholia occidentale. La montagna magica di Thomas Mann*, Carocci, Roma 2011.

42 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., p. 477.

memories to discover the changes that the self (*moi*) underwent during the various stages of the disease. In addition, I will say what I saw around me, what I observed of the too numerous companions of misfortune who, like me, were treated in the Swiss sanatorium of Leysin»⁴³.

Xilliez adopts a point of view which is very close to the one chosen by Pascal and Schopenhauer, that is emphasising the feeling of the tubercular, the law of the heart, as this opposes to any abstract knowledge of reason. In his description of the nervous manifestation of the most alive self, as this occurs during the «psychic shock» mentioned by Dettweiler, Xilliez stresses the painful but however necessary sudden changes in the patient's ideas, that is the struggle of his happy and calm confidence against despondency and despair as well as the outcome of which is never uncertain, given the role played by optimism in these cases⁴⁴.

Xilliez highlights the «elective sympathetic movements» of the tubercular. He compares his soul to a «fragile and complicated instrument that responds to the slightest shock, to the slightest touch, with sharp and prolonged vibrations», using a musical metaphor dear to Egger and Bergson.

«Do not demand self-mastery from a tubercular. Very sensitive and irritable, he do not know how to restrain the rage the snarls in his soul, and sometimes, for the most trivial reasons, he indulges in violence, in tantrums which are as harmful as ridiculous. Power over himself, the *ἐγκράτεια*, that same virtue dear to Greece, this is unknown to him: he certainly has a will, but no matter if this can often be extreme and tyrannical, it does not seem to act freely. In a sanatorium, the daily performance of these unconscious actions, the blind obedience to the fatal impulses of hidden emotions, even all of this most effectively dissolves the belief in free will. Nothing is so bitter, so ironic, so sad, and so cruel as the vision of these existences thinking of themselves as dominated by the sovereignty of an autonomous will but they are in fact slaves. To escape the depressing conviction

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 481.

besieging the mind in this *milieu*, one must place oneself in the presence of beings with physical health and moral equilibrium, and allow oneself the salutary spectacle of the independence and efficacy of the human will»⁴⁵.

Xilliez's tubercular proceeds «by strokes of the will», according to determinations governed by reason but by a dominant emotion, by that same blind and irrational will of which Schopenhauer speaks, and which makes man so in need of illusions and dreams: «The tubercular has an easy joy, a little is enough to enchant him (*le tuberculeux a la joie facile, un rien suffit à l'enchanter*)»⁴⁶. This is the atmosphere that surrounds the guests of the Leysin sanatorium: an existence «enchanted» by Maya's necessary illusions, stubborn hopes, the most feverish emotions, the craziest actions, in other words, true «obsessions» that are projected onto the surrounding alpine landscape, rendering it just as enchanted as the psyche of the tubercular:

«Just as the doctor recommends a short walk, they will turn this exercise, which is only useful if it is moderate, into real physical overexertion (*surmenage*); once informed, the doctor will advise moderation: they will then condemn themselves to absolute rest (*repos*). They will never take the right measure: a slight haemoptysis will upset them, they will think they are lost, and yet this incident may occur during an improvement, and the prognosis is not necessarily unfavourable; but the terror (*terreur*) will hardly last longer than the incident that provoked it; they will very soon regain confidence as exaggerated as their despondency. If they notice an increase in weight, they consider themselves already out of danger, certain of a radical recovery, yet this phenomenon, always an auspicious one, may coincide with an aggravation of the local destructive process. In a word, it is instability itself, the incessant passage from one extreme to another»⁴⁷.

One more relevant theoretical core concerns the act of *vision intérieure*,

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 489.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 478.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 489.

which Xilliez traces back to the sphere of representation. In the concluding part of the article, he explains how, in the tubercular, the «variations in the energy of feeling» involve parallel modifications of both mental images and their succession and grouping. The images appear

«swift, intense, colourful: the shadows, pale and evanescent, [because] they have drunk the blood of the victims and found in this drink consciousness and life; then the field of the imagination gradually resumes its primitive solitude, the feeling becomes tired, thought fades and becomes impoverished: the shadows have exhausted their fictitious life and flee to hell»⁴⁸.

5. Conclusion: Xilliez, Thomas Mann and *The Magic Mountain*

Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* was originally conceived as a short story based on the writer's personal experiences at the Schatzalp sanatorium in Davos in the Swiss Alps (the same locality mentioned in Xilliez's article, with reference to Dr. Adolf Volland, who worked there from 1873⁴⁹), where he had been visiting his wife Katia from 15 May to 13 June 1912, as she was hospitalised there in reason of suspected tuberculosis. So, if we read the novel having that in mind, we can struck several clues which apparently have not yet attracted the attention of literary critics. In the prologue to Mann's great novel, we are told that, «this story, we say, belongs to the long ago; it is already, so to speak, covered with historic mould, and unquestionably to be presented in the tense best suited to a narrative out of the depth of the past»⁵⁰.

48 *Ivi*, p. 490.

49 Volland was to collaborate with the first *Kurhaus* in Davos, founded in 1866 by the Swiss physician Alexander Spengler (1827-1901) in collaboration with the Dutch entrepreneur Willem-Jan Holsboer (1833-1899), who was to be the main driving force behind the construction of the Schatzalp sanatorium (Thomas Mann's sanatorium) in 1899.

50 Th. Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (1924), in Id., *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe. Werke-Briefe-Tagebücher*, ed. by Heinrich Detering, Eckhard Heftrich, Hermann Kurzke, Terence J. Reed, Thomas Sprecher, Hans R. Vaget, Ruprecht Wimmer, in collaboration with the Thomas Mann-Archiv of Zurigo, Band 5; It. trad. by R. Colorni, *La montagna magica*, ed.

Notably, the young protagonist of the story, Hans Castorp, «practices his French» and wonders whether he should not have had to become a «clergyman»:

«I've sometimes asked myself if I ought not to have become a clergyman – in a certain way it wouldn't have suited me so badly. – I hope I didn't make any mistake in my French?»⁵¹.

However, contrary to any expectation, the name of Xilliez never appears in Mann's works, letters, or diaries. A systematic study (which is still lacking) of Thomas Mann's French philosophical and psychological sources⁵² could perhaps reveal some surprises, particularly about the various materials used by Mann at the different stages of the composition of *The Magic Mountain*, even though many of them have been lost. As an aside, it should be remembered that when the article of Xilliez appeared (1897), Mann, who was then barely 22 years old, had already devoted himself to French readings.

The symbolic-allegorical depth of Xilliez's article sheds light on Thomas Mann's favourite themes, especially since in the latter the symbolic-allegorical dimension is the most mysterious and the least explored. The point is crucial themes such as death, illness, and a certain vitalism, but also psychological introspection, melancholia, dreams, and the aesthetic and moral dimensions, as well as the tubercular as psychic are at the centre of Xilliez's condensed investigation and they magically re-appear in Thomas Mann's *The Magic*

by L. Crescenzi, Mondadori Meridiani, Milano 2010; Fr. trans. *La montagne magique*, traduit, annoté et postfacé par C. de Oliveira, Fayard, Paris 2016; Eng. trans. by H.T. Lowe-Porter, *The Magic Mountain*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1946, Foreword, p. V. [From now on I will quote from the English translation].

51 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., p. 110.

52 Compare, on this subject: J. Bertheau, *Eine komplizierte Bewandtnis. Der junge Thomas Mann und die französische Literatur*, Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2002; C. Simonin, *Heinrich Mann et la France. Une biographie intellectuelle*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2005; A. Brockmeier, *Die Rezeption französischer Literatur bei Thomas Mann. Von den Anfängen bis 1914*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2013; J. Stoupy, *La littérature française dans «Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen» (1918) de Thomas Mann*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2015.

Mountain. As I have mentioned just above, there is no explicit reference to Xilliez in Mann, however, as we shall see shortly, the comparison between Xilliez's article and key passages from *The Magic Mountain* suggests that Mann was well aware of the *Psychologie du tuberculeux*.

The article of Xilliez begins with a Dantesque exergue (Canto V of the *Inferno*, verses 40-43), an obvious metaphor for the damned state of the sick, whom Xilliez later defines as «degenerate», to plunge the reader into a decadent atmosphere with a decidedly literary flavour. Xilliez's admission to the sanatorium is almost like a descent into hell. As Dante puts it, «Just as wings carry starlings in a wide and full array when they migrate, so the wind carries evil spirits in all directions».

Here we must remember Settembrini's warning to Castorp, as for the passage in which Mann refers to Dante's Canto V (vv. 38-39):

«Engineer, Engineer, said the Italian, and nodded musingly, his black eyes fixed on space, are you not afraid of the hurricane which is the second circle of the *Inferno*, and which whirls and whips the offenders after the flesh, those lost unhappy ones who sacrificed their reason to their desire? Gran dio! When I picture you, flapping about in the gale, heels over head – I could almost swoon out of sheer pity, and fall as a dead body falls»⁵³.

Usually, Xilliez observes, the severity of the disease is concealed from the patient in the sanatorium:

«The listener can only measure (and still too roughly!) the extent of the pulmonary lesions, calculate the rate of progression of the disease, count the dry and wet wheezes, the cracks, the adhesions, and if his verdict is death, he will be careful not to inform the condemned»⁵⁴.

53 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., pp. 356-357.

54 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., p. 483.

Similarly, Hans Castorp admits to himself:

«I was thinking just lately that it is pretty flat of the women up here to take on as they do about death and things connected with death, so that they take such pains to shield them from contact with it, and bring the Eucharist at meal-times, and that»⁵⁵.

The second point of coincidence concerns the experience of time and idleness, and the patient's apathy that goes with it. In Xilliez's mystical contemplation, the present appears as something eternal:

«In this veritable hallucination of feeling (*hallucination du sentiment*), he sees so clearly, feels so intimately, that the present attitude is the only one, the true one! He loves, he wants; he will never cease to love and want what he loves and wants today; he thinks nothing of so many transient passions, broken resolutions, vanished dreams: in the feeling of the present hour there is something eternal»⁵⁶.

From his side, Castorp perceives the «mystical horror» of timeless life, of life without cares and expectations, of life as tedious and stagnant corruption, of «dead life»:

«All the days are nothing but the same day repeating itself – or rather, since it is always the same day, it is incorrect to speak of repetition; a continuous present, an identity, an everlastingness – such words as these would better convey the idea. They bring you your midday broth, as they brought it yesterday and will bring it tomorrow; and it comes over you – but whence or how you do not know, it makes you quite giddy to see the broth coming in – that you are losing a sense of the demarcation of time, that its units are running together, disappearing; and what is being revealed to you as the true content of time is

55 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., p. 109.

56 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., p. 487.

merely a dimensionless present in which they eternally bring you the broth»⁵⁷.

In his idle state, the tubercular oscillates between the overexcitement of feeling and will «with its joys, illusions and foolish waste» and inertia, apathy and chaos. He is experiencing the *Stumpfsinn* (the meaning of which corresponds to the French *apathie*) which Mann will speak of more extensively in *The Magic Mountain*, as the great apathy that afflicts the patients at the Berghof – characterised by the co-presence of inertia and hyperactivity – which Mann, like Xilliez, associates to his vision of melancholia as a state produced by close contact with death and the desire it engenders. Xilliez writes:

«It is not uncommon to see tuberculars lying in bed in their gallery for several days in an absolute idleness, then, for no apparent reason, suddenly set to work again with a real doggedness (*acharnement*), exhausting themselves with reading, until fatigue plunges them back into apathy (*apathie*). Relentless and active supervision is needed to bring these children (for they are real children!) back on the straight and narrow path which they leave at every turn»⁵⁸.

The state of sickness described by Xilliez also includes the sentimental experience, with words that announce Castorp's attraction to Clawdia Chauchat. As Dr. Krokowski will admit, «symptoms of disease are nothing but a disguised manifestation of the power of love; and all disease is only love transformed»⁵⁹. And it is for this reason, as it was already indicated by Pascal and taken up by Xilliez, that «in the name of goodness and love, man must not allow death to dominate his thoughts»⁶⁰. The tubercular, Xilliez writes quoting Pascal,

«loves to feel, as it were, enveloped in tenderness, and nothing is more cruel to him, nothing causes him, with a feeling of oppressive loneliness, to suffer

57 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., pp. 183-184.

58 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., p. 488.

59 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., p. 128.

60 P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., pp. 496-497.

more acutely than the indifference or forgetfulness of the person he loves. He gives his affection, without any personal ulterior motive, to the being whom the vagaries of his changing feelings (*changeante*) or circumstances have designated for him. It would also be foolhardy to seek the decisive reason for these mysterious sentimental impulses (*poussées*) and these often unexpected choices: it is above all in the tubercular that “the heart has its reasons that reason does not understand»⁶¹.

In Xilliez’s analysis, the tubercular’s particular attitude to death makes him «essentially a psychic», being dominated by «a kind of lively spontaneity» which «precedes the slightest external excitement in order to strengthen it, to multiply its energy, and finally to transform it into fertile and powerful feelings which soon take on a life of their own, enriching themselves with the reserves (*épargnes*) of past experience»⁶². This attitude gives the whole text a clear hermetic colouring. Castorp, too, has that special faculty which allows him to see what «it is hardly permitted man to see, and what he had never thought it would be vouchsafed him to see»⁶³, and which makes Mann’s entire novel precisely an hermetic book.

«He looked into his own grave. The process of decay was forestalled by the powers of the light-ray, the flesh in which he walked disintegrated, annihilated, dissolved in vacant mist, and there within it was the finely turned skeleton of his own hand, the seal ring he had inherited from his grandfather hanging loose and black on the joint of his ring-finger – a hard, material object, with which man adorns the body that is fated to melt away beneath it, when it passes on to another flesh that can wear it for yet a little while. With the eyes of his Tienappel ancestress, penetrating, prophetic eyes, he gazed at this familiar part of his own body, and for the first time in his life, he understood that he would die. At the thought, there came over his face the expression it usually wore when he listened to music: a little dull, sleepy, and pious, his mouth half open, his head

61 *Ivi*, p. 485.

62 *Ivi*, p. 486.

63 Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., p. 218.

inclined toward the shoulder»⁶⁴.

This psychological attitude is reflected in the demon who, in Mann's case (see the chapter «The Great God Dumps»), arouses a mystical horror in which «everything appeared to have gone permanently and increasingly awry, as though a demonic power – which had indeed for a long time given hints of its malign influence – had suddenly taken control, in a way to induce secret consternation and almost thoughts of flight. The name of the demon was Dumps»⁶⁵.

In Xilliez, the same image appears at the very end of the article as a kind of absolute seducer *deus ex machina*. Likened to a light-fingered painter, this demon paints the entire Alpine landscape like a dream of Rodenbach or of Puvis de Chavannes:

«This landscape in all shades of white and blue, such as only Rodenbach or Puvis de Chavannes could dream of (*rêver*), seems to me a scene set up by a light-fingered demon (*démon*) for the happiness of my imagination»⁶⁶.

It is the «dysregulated and apparently inexplicable succession of contradictory impressions» that produces an «interesting and curious» phenomenon in the tubercular, namely the «transfiguration of perception (*transfiguration de la perception*)»⁶⁷ – and which contributes, in Taine's manner, to make the latter a true hallucination. We see this in the patient recalled by Xilliez at the end of the article, who says to himself:

«Tell me, then, why external things give me such different and contradictory impressions. Nothing is more bizarre, more irregular, more strange than the reaction of my soul and its response, as it were, to their provocation. Sometimes the echo they evoke in me is only a distant voice, pale as a dream, sometimes it

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 218-219.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 627.

⁶⁶ P. Xilliez, *La psychologie du tuberculeux*, cit., p. 491.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 490.

is the violent and painful tumult of a threatening reality. When, in the glow of sunny days, I let my eyes wander over the immense panorama of the Alps, nature appears to me as the sweet dream (*songe*) of my slumbering imagination [...]»⁶⁸.

Xilliez's article ends with the appearance of life, captured in its ideal transfiguration, almost a mockery of imminent death. The sick person finds himself in a state similar to the «oceanic feeling» described by Romain Rolland in his letter to Freud:

«Are these bluish valleys that go astray (*égarer*) far away, their sinuous meanders in the tangle of jagged and shining massifs not at all real! And those soft vapours, rising gently in the lukewarm ether, caressing en passant the precipitous slopes of the wet valleys; and those long dark streaks, running across the dazzling splendour of the snows, and casting on the elongated rump of the mountains the spotted fur of some marvellous beast; all these beautiful phenomena, revealing the spontaneity of a creative genius and the free play of an artistic imagination, are alien to the hard law of existence! They are ideally pure constructions of impalpable matter, the happy attempt of an art that does not have to fight against the rebellion of that which ignores it. Their shock can only be a caress, and I find myself longing for the sweetness of their embrace. They have only a reflexive being, and perhaps their fragile fabric will break at the very moment of my mind's dream of contemplating them. Sometimes, on the contrary, things appear to me with an intensity of life and power that frightens me (*effraye*). They are hard, violently real, they have a metallic density that makes me feel too much the weakness of what they are. They are all strangers to my soul, perhaps enemies. I must avoid them at all costs: I tear myself away from the spectacle of this nature of marble and granite, I close my eyes, I prepare myself in my furs for an attitude that is not too angry, and I try in silence to recover my fragile personality, shattered (*broyée*) by the harsh contact with indifferent reality, and to rekindle the little inner flame that suffers (*agonises*) under the

68 *Ivi*, pp. 490-491.

contempt of material power»⁶⁹.

Now, if we read again *The Magic Mountain*, right up to the chapter entitled «Snow», with which the great novel was supposed to end, we come across a passage that echoes the conclusion of Xilliez's article:

«Afternoons between three and four, Hans Castorp lays in his balcony box, well wrapped, his head against the cushion, not too high or too low, of his excellent chair, and looked out at forest and mountain over his thick-upholstered balustrade. The snow-laden firs, dark-green to blackness, went marching up the sides of the valley, and beneath them, the snow lay soft like down pillows. Above the tree-line, the mountain walls reared themselves into the grey-white air: huge surfaces of snow, with softly veiled crests, and here and there a black jut of rock. The snow came silently down. The scene blurred more and more, it inclined the eye, gazing thus into woolly vacuity, to slumber. At the moment of slipping off one might give a start – yet what sleep could be purer than this in the icy air? It was dreamless. It was as free from the burden – even the unconscious burden – of organic life, as little aware of an effort to breathe this contentless, weightless, imperceptible air as is the breathless sleep of the dead. When Hans Castorp stirred again, the mountains would be wholly lost in a cloud of snow; only a pinnacle, a jutting rock, might show one instant, to be rapt away the next. It was absorbing to watch these ghostly pranks; one needed to keep alert to follow the transmutations, the veiling and the unveiling»⁷⁰.

At this point, a few further clarifications are needed to complete our path from the French philosophical and psychological debate to German literature. In the case of the young Xilliez, faith, the experience of illness, the threat of death, and the admission to the sanatorium are the four main elements that make up his writing testament, a coming-of-age short story in which he moves from the melancholic inevitability of illness to an optimistic vision of the

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 491.

⁷⁰ Th. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, cit., p. 472.

eternal. Observing on himself the inexorable progression of the disease, Xilliez concludes his own life's journey and his inner maturation, sustained by his faith and consciousness of limit. Through a certain perspectivism that stages his point of view as narrator, Xilliez arrives at the recapitulation of life after having passed through the hell of human existence like a new Dante.

In this perspective, however, the point is not interpreting the collapse of the bourgeois era by criticising the process of «civilisation», as in Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918)⁷¹, but rather going even deeper and confronting the progressive loss of meaning of life itself, thanks to that higher consciousness which is well summed up by this enlightening passage from Schopenhauer, which explains why humans create philosophies and religions:

«The animal learns to know death only in death; man consciously approaches his own death every hour, and this sometimes makes life disturbing even to him who has not already recognised in all of life itself this character of constant annihilation»⁷².

Xilliez is aware of this great drama, which is heightened in the «feverish hermeticism» of the sanatorium, in which he is unable to achieve a decisive breakthrough because of the omnipotence of death, which, in the presence of his spirit enlightened by faith, renders completely useless any reflection on questions that do not directly concern the fundamentals: time, life, death, and the experience of limit.

71 See D. Conte, *Viandante nel Novecento. Thomas Mann e la storia*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2019 and Id., *Primitivismo e umanesimo notturno. Saggi su Thomas Mann*, Liguori, Napoli 2013.

72 A. Schopenhauer, *Il mondo come volontà e rappresentazione*, it. trans. by S. Giametta, Bompiani, Milano 2006, p. 105 [My own translation].

