



Article

Reading Loops with Boccaccio, Freud and Morton

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Abstract: This article assesses the notion of ecological awareness through a re-reading of Giovanni Boccaccio's classic *Decameron*, together with Sigmund Freud and Timothy Morton. The purpose is not primarily to trace antecedents to modern and late modern thought, but rather to follow a loop that in different ways is tangible in their works and links them together despite their temporal and thematic differences. If Freud and Morton possess heuristic value for a re-reading of Boccaccio, his way of articulating an earlier and freethinking vein in the humanist tradition may prompt us to see not only what an ecological thought may be, but also that it has always been there as an unconscious awareness. We suggest that such a loop can function as a liberating deviation from a linear idea of living at the end of times. In this article, we also follow this temporal and thematic loop as a tension between disruptiveness and interconnectedness that Freud metaphorically and mythologically describes as a battle between the two giants Thanatos and Eros. From Morton's ecological perspective, everything's interconnectedness (or Eros in Freud's mythological description) is precisely what has been denied or repressed in the anthropocentric strive to master the world. What is interesting in this regard is that Boccaccio, by taking a specific disastrous event—the plague—as his starting point, also makes Thanatos and Eros the themes that interconnect his stories into a weird loop.

Keywords: ecological awareness; Boccaccio; humanism; Freud; the unconscious; Morton; love; death; loops



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For I do not see that anything can happen to me that is different from what happens to fine dust in a whirlwind.

(Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*)

We shall never completely master nature; and our bodily organism, itself a part of that nature, will always remain a transient structure with a limited capacity for adaption and achievement.

(Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*)

The ecological thought has been there all along.

(Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*)

1. Introduction

Crisis, dying, and apocalypse are words that come to mind in a time of pandemics, global warming, migrant and refugee crises and species extinctions—the dark list can be made longer. A return to the premodern period can, however, give our growing “ecological awareness”, to use eco-theorist Timothy Morton's term, a historical resonance that points to a future. What I propose in this article is a re-reading of a premodern text, namely Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, not only in the light of such an awareness but also to show that a communication with the past can highlight what kind of awareness we are dealing with when we say that it is ecological.

As has been pointed out, it “is not unusual for Morton to use early modern texts to explain his theories” and “illustrate the ecological thought” (Shiflett 2020, pp. 51–52). Furthermore, early modern studies have recently demonstrated that the very confrontation with ancient texts can challenge and interrogate contemporary theory and criticism (Goul

and Usher 2020, p. 11). Nevertheless, Morton also states that he is not advocating “a return to premodern thinking” and he affirms that the “ecological thought is modern” (Morton 2010, p. 5). In a sense he is right: the very term ecology was coined in the mid 19th century by German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, and our present global warming makes it more than actual. But if the ecological thought is about everything’s interconnectedness—if it is a thought that insists, as Morton puts it, that “we’re deeply connected even when we say we’re not”—then this thinking must consequently be connected to the past (Morton 2010, p. 8).

Morton’s ecological perspective invites us to challenge the idea that the present has left the past behind, which is why the ecological thought may be met with resistance: it is “difficult because it brings to light aspects of our existence that have remained unconscious for a long time; we don’t like to recall them” (Morton 2010, p. 9). Furthermore, Morton’s use of the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious does not only imply the return of a repressed past. It could even be so that new connections between past and present, or temporal *loops*, using Morton’s term, are necessary in order to better rethink and imagine the possibility of a future beyond our current crisis.

It is not easy to imagine the future in our time. Philosophers such as Catherine Malabou and Bernard Stiegler have, in other contexts, explored the impact of our era on the subject’s very capacity to think and dream. Stiegler describes our time in his book *The Age of Disruption*, in the line of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as characterized by late capitalism, which is a “new kind of barbarism” that not only accelerates global warming but causes a loss “of the feeling of existing, the loss of the possibility of expressing one’s will, the correlative loss of all reason for living and the subsequent loss of reason as such” (Stiegler 2019, p. 8). On her side, Malabou engages with Freud’s theory of a death drive to explore what happens to subjects that suffer from traumas “without hermeneutic future” (Malabou 2012, p. 8). As already noted, Morton also turns to psychoanalysis to develop his ecological thought, and among other things he uses Freud’s theory to describe what he sees as our civilization’s “destructive machination: *death drive*” (Morton 2016, p. 53).

As a matter of fact, already in *Civilization and its Discontents*, published in 1930, Freud talks about the “fateful question for human species” in the following terms: “Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man” (Freud 1961, p. 145). The awareness of this agency is also what causes “their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety” (Freud 1961, p. 145). However, in the same book, Freud also points to forces that go beyond human control, contending that humans “shall never completely master nature” (Freud 1961, p. 86). This apparent contradiction can be sensed in our own historical moment, when a notion such as the Anthropocene indicates that the human impact on earth has reach a critical tipping point in the ecosystem on the one hand, while on the other hand its result, global warming, also demonstrates that humans cannot “completely master nature”.

Against this apocalyptic background I suggest that a re-reading of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* with Freud and Morton can point to a path where another reason can grow, which in a sense has always been there, but that has been repressed or overtaken by “the business models of the data economy”, as Stiegler puts it in *The Age of Disruption* (p. 8). In other words, by using Boccaccio, a premodern author in the humanist tradition, to illuminate an anti-anthropocentric philosophy of Morton’s kind via Freud and his revelations of forces that the human subject cannot master, and *vice versa*, and by actualizing Boccaccio’s work through our present concerns, I would like to point to the possibility of new forms of thinking and reading in times of distress.

2. Reading Loops

Methodologically speaking, what I will try to do by reading Boccaccio with Freud and Morton (and Freud with Morton and Boccaccio as well as Morton with Freud and Boccaccio) is not primarily to trace antecedents to modern and late modern thought, but rather to

follow a loop that in different ways is tangible in their works and links them together despite their temporal and thematic differences. If Freud and Morton have heuristic value for a re-reading of Boccaccio, his way of articulating an earlier and freethinking vein in the humanist tradition may prompt us to see not only what an ecological thought may be, but also that it has always been there as an unconscious awareness. My hope is that such a loop can function as a liberating deviation from a linear idea of living at the end of times. Or, as Morton puts it, regarding the weird temporality of ecological thinking: “In its fullest scope, it will have been thought at some undefined future point” (Morton 2010, p. 3).

Thus, my method is inspired by Morton’s polysemic use of the term loop, which in its simplest form can be described as an open circuit where two terms or phenomena that we usually separate from each other touch or cross one another. Among other things, Morton uses this term to rethink history “as a nested series of catastrophes that are still playing out rather than a sequence of events based on a conception of time as a succession of atomic instants” (Morton 2016, p. 69). By connecting the past and the present in this way, Morton, as we have seen, echoes the psychoanalytical idea of the return of the repressed, which in his ecological terms becomes: “We ‘civilized’ people [. . .] are the narrators of our destiny. Ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal” (Morton 2016, p. 9).

To be sure, in Morton’s work the term of the loop is as productive as it is difficult to grasp, but its main work, as far as I can see, is to articulate movements in texts and thinking that harbor difference and connectedness at the same time. However, the temporal and thematic loops I will try to follow in my reading also imply a tension between disruptiveness and interconnectedness that Freud metaphorically and mythologically describes as a battle between the two giants Thanatos and Eros. He talks about Eros as a force whose purpose is “to combine single human individuals [. . .] into one great unity”, which is opposed by “the instinct of destruction” (Freud 1961, p. 122). Freud talks only about humans here, but the “struggle between Eros and Death” could easily be translated into a more general ecological thought.

From Morton’s ecological perspective, everything’s interconnectedness (or Eros with Freud’s mythological description) is precisely what has been denied or repressed in the anthropocentric and often destructive will to master and control the world, which can also be described as a strive “to unloop the loop form of things” (Morton 2016, p. 109).

What is interesting in this regard is that Boccaccio, by taking a specific disastrous event—the plague—as the starting point for a narrative where love and play are central themes, turns his work into a weird loop. At any rate, I think that Giuseppe Mazzotta, in his analysis of the *Decameron*, comes very close to Morton’s use of the loop when he describes the design of the work as “not quite a chiasmus”, where “each experience is both a digression from and a frame to another, the plague for the play, and the play for the plague, without ever intersecting as in a chiasmus, though they well might” (Mazzotta 1986, p. 45).

3. A Weird Ethos

It is well known that Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* in the aftermath of the pandemic known as the Black Death that swept through Europe in 1348. He famously frames the one hundred stories told by ten narrators that he gives the title *Decameron* with a description of how the plague hit the city of Florence, where the narration also takes its starting point. The pandemic happened during a period of time when renaissance humanism was beginning to explore human experience beyond the Christian doxa, and Boccaccio studied Greek and Latin literature with a focus on rhetoric that he cultivated with pleasure in his writing.

Accordingly, it is with a specific rhetorical gesture that he opens the *Decameron* (after the Greek terms for ten days *deca* and *hemeron*). The first line in the preface reads: “It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 3). This is especially so, he continues “in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others”, and the author himself confesses that “I am one of them” (Boccaccio 2021,

p. 3). Thus, the preface takes its starting point in “a matter of humanity”—*Umana cosa* are the very first words of the text in the original—that more specifically reveals itself not to be about disease or death, but about the *pathos* of love and the relation to others.

Boccaccio starts his narration by seeking to capture the reader emotionally, and it is his promise to remedy amorous suffering that turns out to be the first argument for the one hundred stories to come. Boccaccio writes more concretely that his own pain was relieved by “the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided” and that he now wants to “provide some relief in exchange for that which I received” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 4). As it happens, the author also knows that “charming women” are in greater need of consolation because they cannot express their desires and love openly due to family conventions and societal restraints. Therefore, and in order to offer a “refuge for those who are in love”, he plans “to recount one hundred stories [. . .] told over ten days [. . .] by an honorable company made up of seven ladies and three young men who came together during the time of the recent plague that was responsible for so many deaths” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 5).

Boccaccio’s stories have often been assessed as a kind of literary escapism, as if the “plague that necessitates the escape is seen to provide the literal alibi that makes any serious concern with the world irrelevant” (Mazzotta 1986, p. 47). As Mazzotta has argued, this is a “critical cliché” that reduces the complexity of the playful strategies in the work (Mazzotta 1986, p. 69). Another way of approaching these strategies is to see them as part of an art of living in a world of crisis and death that offers “a re-creation or reimagination” of this reality (Rebhorn 2021, p. xxiii). Moreover, and from a rhetorical point of view, one could say that this art harbors a certain *ethos* or playful and ironic attitude based on the acceptance “that the things of this world are completely unstable and endlessly changing”, as the author puts it in the conclusion (Boccaccio 2021, p. 528). Boccaccio’s emphasis on instability and change also suggests that the polyphony of voices that takes form in the work differs from “voices that had championed human exceptionalism” (Gouwens 2016, p. 50). In any case, there is a relation between what Mazzotta calls “the radical contingency of every experience in the *Decameron*” (Mazzotta 1986, p. 45) and its strategies of irony and play, which in the final analysis are open-ended. Without going into the stories as such, but restricting my reading to the author’s peritexts (the preface, the introductions day 1 and day 4 as well as the author’s conclusion), I would like to suggest that Boccaccio’s *ethos*—which is specifically articulated in the peritextual material—could be defined as an ecological awareness.

A first and important aspect of this fuzzy but essential notion in search of another reason that could help us rethink and imagine a future is “realizing that nonhumans are installed at profound levels of the human—not just biologically and socially but in the very structure of thought and logic” (Morton 2016, p. 159). To be sure, such a decentering of anthropocentrism is not obvious in a premodern text that takes as its starting point the *Umana cosa*, but I want to stress the fact that its main themes as they are depicted and represented by Boccaccio not only reveal human forces but also nonhuman forces, which I will try to clarify in a first step by turning to Freud.

4. Non/Human Forces

Thus, I will take a big leap from the 14th century to the 20th century, and to Freud’s notion of a “technique of the art of living”, which he uses in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents* to describe “the methods by which men strive to gain happiness and keep suffering away” (Freud 1961, p. 81). Freud makes clear that there are “three sources from which our suffering comes: the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society” (Freud 1961, p. 86). As a matter of fact, Boccaccio discloses suffering in all these senses through the *Decameron*, to which I will soon return.

Among the different “techniques in the art of living” that Freud investigates in this essay, he gives prominence to the one that “does not turn away from the external world”

but “clings to the objects belonging to that world and obtains happiness from an emotional relationship to them”. And he goes on by specifying that this is the definition he gives to “the way of life which makes love the center of everything” (Freud 1961, pp. 81–82). However, Freud does not see love as a simple solution to human problems or the problems of humanity that he deploys in this late text. Love is only one part in his description of civilization as a struggle between the creation of relationships and the destruction of them, or as he puts it, a “battle of the giants”, which are Eros and Death (Freud 1961, p. 122).

It is important to note that this mythology of forces is used to describe conflicts and dynamics in “the phenomena of life”, as Freud writes here (Freud 1961, p. 119). Thus, death is a part of life, but it is part of a life that has become catastrophic. Furthermore, Freud also describes death and love as drives that the human subject cannot control. They seem to have a movement of their own when they take affective form and move together in rather weird loops, as is stated in “The Economic Problem of Masochism” from 1924: “clinical observation shows not only that love is with unexpected regularity accompanied by hate (ambivalence), and not only that in human relationships hate is frequently a forerunner of love, but also that in a number of circumstance hate changes into love and love into hate” (Freud 1950a, pp. 42–43). Despite this love-hate loop, Freud also notes that the “erotic drives appear to be altogether more plastic, more readily diverted and displaced than the destructive drives” (Freud 1961, pp. 44–45). However, if Freud states that erotic plasticity seems stronger than the destructive drives, some years later he nevertheless seems to doubt that “the battle of the giants” will be in favor of Eros.

Civilization and its Discontents is a book written against the backdrop of global economic depression and the Nazis’ accession to power in Germany. Although Freud at the end of the text expresses a hope that Eros “will try to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary”, he adds: “But who can foresee with what success and with what result?” (Freud 1961, p. 145) In this question, which was added in the edition from 1931, when the Nazis were in the process of becoming the largest party in Germany, one can perceive that the very idea of civilization in terms of progress is confronted, which the entire book also scrutinizes. Apart from the fact that Freud’s idea of the unconscious—that “the ego is not master in its own house”—could be seen as the first step towards such an undertaking (Freud 1955, p. 143), the political crisis seems to haunt his idea of the plasticity of erotic drives. But a question is not an answer. The book is open-ended. Thus, it could be argued that Freud, with *Civilization and its Discontents*, makes *unpredictability* a new cultural condition, and that he in this way reconnects, probably without knowing it, with Boccaccio, who turns it into a condition for his art.

Change and instability characterize the stories in the *Decameron*, where twists and turns of human life—sexuality, love, disease and death—are entangled with the linguistic capacity to converse and tell stories and to find pleasure in doing so without reaching any other conclusion than giving the readers an opportunity to reflect on and rethink the world they are living in, or, as the author puts it in the last line to his work, hoping that the readers “have benefited in any way from having read the stories” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 528).

To be sure, Boccaccio is well aware of Horace’s classical dictum that art should be a combination of pleasure and utility, but if there is a didacticism in the *Decameron*, it leaves the reader with no definitive answer to “the muddle of existence”, as the English translator so aptly puts it (Rebhorn 2021, p. xxxvii). Readers with an ecological view could also say that Boccaccio articulates “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definitive center or edge” (Morton 2010, p. 8). At any rate, they could find new ways of benefitting from the stories precisely due to their lack of direct or simple didactic solutions.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that the very aesthetic form of the narrative, with its intricate loop formation, to which I will come back, undermines the period’s idea of human exceptionalism. Boccaccio’s demonstrations of nature’s power—of death and diseases, as well as our inadequacy of living together on the one hand and the pleasurable plasticity of the narrative form on the other—could in fact be conceived as a “technique in the art of living”, managing the love and death loop revealed by psychoanalytic experience. Let

me try to specify how this is done by the renaissance author and thereby return to some aspects of what we today may call ecological awareness.

5. Loop Formations

In his work, Morton never defines ecological awareness, perhaps because his method is experimental and apparently an example of “a searching reevaluation of philosophy, politics, and art” (Morton 2016, p. 159). In his book *The Ecological Thought*, published in 2010 and dedicated to his daughter, he does specify that “the form of the ecological thought is at least as important as its content” (Morton 2010, p. 4). Without going further into the content of ecological thought, I think one can conclude that one of its forms, if not its main form, is the loop, which in itself is a kind of awareness, namely “that all beings are connected. *The ecological thought* is the thinking of interconnectedness” (Morton 2010, p. 7). I suggest that this perspective can be adopted for a description of the playful design of the *Decameron*, characterized by “oblique figurative and thematic reversals throughout the text”, as pointed out by Mazzotta (1986, p. 17).

Although the one hundred stories are “distributed over two symmetrical sets”, and in each part one can discern themes that are followed by reversed themes (for example, stories about love with happy endings are followed by stories about impossible love), Boccaccio’s composition is “subtle and unpredictable, continually eluding the neat patterns critics try to impose” (Stewart 1997, pp. 77–78). It is easy to think that these kinds of narrative loops—themes that are constantly reversed into their opposite—is Boccaccio’s tribute to “the many facets of Fortune” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 128). This acceptance of unpredictability can also be sensed in the author’s relation to his mentor Dante.

Although Boccaccio is indebted to Dante, there is no “figural-Christian conception” in the *Decameron*, as Erich Auerbach puts it in a classical study (Auerbach 2003, p. 224). Auerbach also notes that “the thing which is diametrically opposed to medieval-Christian ethics in the *Decameron*, is the doctrine of love and nature”, where he instead perceives an “ethics of love” that is concerned “exclusively with the sensual and the real” (Auerbach 2003, p. 226). I would like to take this “ethics of love” into my argumentation by suggesting that it harbors an ecological thought for our time.

While the disposition of the *Decameron* and its sophisticated number symbolism recalls Dante’s *Commedia* (one hundred stories instead of one hundred cantos, etc.), which Boccaccio famously nicknamed the *Divine Comedy*, there is no path leading to salvation in Boccaccio’s work. In his ‘human comedy’ (which he subtitles “Galeotto”, alluding to the book that Paolo and Francesca were reading in *Inferno* V), Dante’s verticality is turned into an affirmation of this world in its instability. Instead of an ascension towards God, everything can be turned into its opposite, or, as Boccaccio puts it in the conclusion addressing the relativity of things: “Like everything else, these stories, such as they are, may be harmful or helpful, depending upon the listener” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 525). This open-ended conclusion undermines the idea of an ultimate lesson or meaning in the work. Instead, the peritexts and the stories create a circular movement that can be compared to how Morton describes ecological awareness:

Ecological awareness is a loop because human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops. And ultimately this is because to exist at all is to assume the form of a loop. (Morton 2016, p. 160)

Thus, what I have proposed so far is that this kind of loop formation defining ecological awareness is also a structuring principle in the one hundred stories of the *Decameron* produced at the intersection of medieval vernacular literature and classical Renaissance culture in a Christian hegemony. It has been argued that this secular genre functions “as the clearinghouse for a massive body of medieval religious forms and exegetical tactics variously reconfigured, neutralized, and renovated by Boccaccio’s textual procedure” (Lupton 1998, p. 4). I would like to add nuance to this observation by suggesting that instead of clearing, it is the entanglement of themes that makes the *Decameron* a foundational text in the humanist tradition, and that this entanglement undermines the stability of the notion

of the human in the same moment as it becomes fashioned. What binds the *Decameron* together is a playfulness that is also, I would suggest, what makes the book an example of ecological awareness in Morton's sense of a loop.

To be sure, a loop can be many things, but its formation in the *Decameron* has to do with the specific entanglement of love and death, or play and plague, as Mazzotta puts it, where "each moment is contiguous to the other, each is disjunct and partitioned from the other, the plague for the play, and the play for the plague" (Mazzotta 1986, p. 45). What this narrative entanglement of themes that we usually separate also demonstrates is that, with Morton, not only their interdependence, but also "the fatal game of mastering oneself" at the core of the humanist tradition is undermined by a thinking that realizes "the irony of being caught in a loop and how that irony does not bestow escape velocity from the loop. Irony and sincerity intertwine" (Morton 2016, p. 155). In other words, Boccaccio articulates a freethinking vein in the humanist tradition "by which the absolute truth of philosophy and its body of thought are not necessary" (Mazzotta 1986, p. 45). Instead of searching for control of, for example, the plague or the passion of love, these forces entail one another in a way that could illustrate Morton's ecological thought, namely that "things are inconsistent rather than constantly present" (Morton 2016, p. 70). Moreover, as in Morton's work, Boccaccio invites us to play with this predicament.

As the English translator notes, Boccaccio's "characters play roles and adopt different identities, however temporary they may be, creating and re-creating themselves in their clever verbal performances" (Rebhorn 2021, p. xxvii). This is, of course, also a description of the author himself, who emphasizes metamorphosis as his signum. A case in point is when, in the introduction to day four, he speaks in his own voice to his readers ("Dearest ladies") about the criticism of, among other things, his choice to "be with you [the ladies] and to busy myself with nonsense", demonstrating in an elegant manner how plasticity and Eros are linked. First, he refutes his critics by telling a story about the impossibility of humans controlling Eros, then he denounces them for "being entirely ignorant about the pleasures and power of natural affection" (Boccaccio 2021, p. 177). The erotic drive, as Freud would have it, is accepted by the author as a force that he on the one hand masters by his pen, but on the other makes him weak and compliant, like "fine dust in a whirlwind" (Boccaccio 2021, p. 177). Let us look a bit closer to how the author operates with this plasticity in order to cope with the fact that ecological loop formations not only include the forces of Eros but also necessarily those of destruction, death and even the inorganic.

6. Death in or beyond Life

When Boccaccio describes the Black Death that frames the collection, he does so by mixing a Christian perspective of sin with ancient astrology:

Let me say, then, that one thousand, three hundred, and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when the deadly plague arrived in the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of any in Italy. Whether it descended on us mortals through the influence of the heavenly bodies or was sent down by God in his righteous anger to chastise us because of our wickedness, it had begun some years before in the East, where it deprived countless beings of their lives before it headed to the West, spreading ever-greater misery as it moved relentlessly from place to place. (Boccaccio 2021, p. 8)

As Mazzotta has clarified, "the allusion to the Incarnation and the equinox is a conventional device of exordium in a large number of medieval texts" (Mazzotta 1986, p. 18). However, Boccaccio treats this topos in an ironic way, making them "mutually exclusive alternatives" (Mazzotta 1986, p. 19). Furthermore, Boccaccio's textual procedure not only undermines and twists the Christian doxa by re-introducing an ancient idea—the influence of the stars—he also turns the Christian idea of salvation into something much more material, such as the therapeutical effect of his discourse. When the author, in the opening lines of day one, explains why the recalling of the plague is necessary as an introduction to the story-telling, the image he gives of the reading effect has interesting similarities to

Freud's description of the plasticity of Eros that he also more technically labels the pleasure principle. Let us first listen to what Boccaccio writes when addressing his readers:

You will be affected by this horrific beginning no differently than travelers are by a steep and rugged mountain, for beyond it there lies a most beautiful and delightful plain, which will supply them with pleasure that matches the difficulty of both their ascent and their descent. And thus, just as happiness at its limits turns into sadness, so misery is ended by the joy that follows it. (Boccaccio 2021, p. 8)

I would suggest that this description of the looping form of emotions or affects such as sadness and joy could serve as a pictorial description of the pleasure principle that, according to Freud, "automatically regulates" mental events:

That is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension—that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. (Freud 1950b, p. 7)

Interestingly enough, these lines are from the opening paragraph of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an essay where Freud develops the idea that there must be something more fundamental than the automatic function of the pleasure principle, namely, a death drive, that transcends personal death. This beyond can be linked to Boccaccio's description of the Black Death's disfiguration of living bodies through "a most certain sign of impending death", such as "swellings [. . .] which would grow like an ordinary apple and others like an egg some larger some smaller", or "black or livid blotches [. . .] sometimes large and widely scattered, at other times tiny and close together" (Boccaccio 2021, p. 9). It is probably incorrect to compare the psychoanalytic idea of a death drive with the devastations of bodies by bacteria. Yet, Boccaccio's detailed description of the plague's transformations of living organisms could be seen as an illustration of Freud's idea that if there is a "drive to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary drive seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state" (Freud 1961, pp. 118–19). The plague as such seems to be depicted as a figure of destruction whose plasticity is a sign of death. Furthermore, Boccaccio's description of the symptoms of the plague could be seen "in a metonymic contiguity" to the amorous suffering described in the preface (Mazzotta 1986, p. 30), which interconnects the two diseases.

However, if ecological thought is about everything's interconnectedness as Morton claims, and if loops are ways of forming connections, loops can nevertheless also stop. As a matter of fact, when Freud and Boccaccio highlight affects and themes that move from misery to joy, from pleasure to unpleasure, and on a more general level, the joining and dissolving of living substances, they also demonstrate that these loops can be interrupted, in Boccaccio as a "certain sign of death", and in Freud as a doubt about the outcome of the battle between Eros and Thanatos.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle was written in the years following the First World War, but this was also a period when the so-called Spanish flu infected about a third of the world's population between 1918 and 1920, the year when Freud's essay was published. There are no direct traces of this pandemic in Freud's text except a short note to the famous passage where he observes a game—the so-called *fort/da* game—played by his grandson, consisting of throwing away a reel and exclaiming a long-drawn-out o-o-o, that in short was interpreted by Freud as a repetition of a painful experience—the boy's separation from the beloved mother that he repeated through the game. In the note Freud writes: "When the child was five and three-quarters, his mother died. Now, that she was really 'gone' ('o-o-o'), the little boy showed no signs of grief" (Freud 1950b, p. 16). Grief is, however, what Freud himself gives expression to in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger in March 1920 (Freud 2003), where he writes that his daughter had come down with influenza and died after a four-day illness. Death is haunting *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as well as framing the

Decameron as a source as well as a disruption of games, narrations, conversations, talking cures. If there are signs of death, death is in itself no sign.

To be sure, the *fort/da* game, and other examples in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* “of a compulsion to repeat a painful experience” are “scarcely conclusive” (Gay 1988, pp. 399–400), and there are still ongoing discussions about the relationship between the pleasure principle and the death drive. For example, in her exploration of mental traumas, Malabou has asked if there really exists an autonomous death drive in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory or if Thanatos in the final analysis is always in the service of the plasticity of Eros. Malabou comes to the conclusion that there is nothing beyond the pleasure principle in Freud, and that the very concept of a death drive lacks “plastic autonomy” (Malabou 2012, p. 178). She sees this incapacity of thinking beyond the pleasure principle as a problem in relation to present subjects that she describes in conformity with Stiegler as “permanently traumatized: not to want anything anymore, not to feel anything, to be prostrated, to have lost all affect; or inversely, to kill in cold blood, ‘to blow oneself up’” (Malabou 2012, p. 193). She hence suggests, *pace* Freud, that these kind of “new wounded” subjects “authorize us to affirm that a beyond of the pleasure principle is manifesting itself and taking form” (Malabou 2012, p. 199). While it seems important with Malabou to conceive of the possibility of a “destructive plasticity”, or a “destructive metamorphosis” as a constant risk or even as an urgent political message in our present era, it could be that ecological awareness is another less apocalyptic but nevertheless critical way of considering a beyond, namely as something that “has been there all long” (Morton 2010, p. 3). I will try to explain this ecological thought by returning to Boccaccio’s and Freud’s loops.

7. Weird Loops

Both Freud and Boccaccio were sensitive to human inconsistency and exposure to forces that can only be controlled to a certain extent, or cannot be controlled at all. In different ways, they depict humans as conditioned by nonhuman forces and agencies such as bacteria or drives. Boccaccio’s description of the plague gives it an agency that affects humans in unpredictable ways: “the plague began producing its sad effects in a terrifying and extraordinary manner”, as he puts it in his introduction (Boccaccio 2021, p. 8). And he not only presents a famously realistic picture of the plague’s transformation of the body and its killing of people and animals alike; he also describes how humans become inhuman by fear and egoism, and gives many other examples of “the inadequacy of the means to care for the sick and the virulence of the plague” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 13). The ways Boccaccio and Freud describe forces such as the plague or the compulsion to repeat or return to traumas could be seen as modes—or *ethe*—of ecological awareness in the sense that they are both pointing to the possibility of an interruption of the connections that existence and life are made of, but without unlooping the loop—just twisting it. Thus, this refutation of interruption—the play/pleasure principle goes on—is however not without ethical implication.

For instance, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud talks about love as an art of living that “does not turn away from the external world” but “clings to the objects belonging to that world” (Freud 1961, p. 82), although he expresses doubt regarding Eros’s power over Thanatos. Needless to say, love is the main theme in Boccaccio’s work, which takes as its point of departure as the plague. Or, as Mazzotta puts it, in “the prelude, introduction and throughout the *Decameron*, Boccaccio warns us that essential is not to learn, for knowledge comes too early or too late to be of any real use. Essential is to love” (Mazzotta, p. 45).

The difficulty in following this advice has not only to do with the entanglement of love, hate and death. Another, perhaps more serious problem is the strive to unloop the loop. Moreover, as Malabou points out, if the aim of the death drive is the same as the aim of the pleasure principle, namely to return to “homeostasis, quiescence, or tranquility” (Malabou 2012, p. 195), then a loop can stop by itself. However, if Freud failed to give the death drive autonomy, it is perhaps precisely because he is thinking in a loop, which seems to also be the case when Boccaccio describes the situation for his readers in the introduction:

Most of the time women remain pent up within the narrow confines of their rooms, and they sit there in apparent idleness, both yearning and not yearning at the same time, the varied thoughts they mull over in their minds cannot always be happy ones. And if, because of those thoughts, a fit of melancholy brought on by their burning desire should take possession of their minds, it will inevitably remain there, causing them great pain, unless it is removed by new interests. (Boccaccio 2021, p. 5)

New interests are what the author is offering with his stories, “which were written, after all, to dispel the melancholy with which ladies are afflicted” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 528). Aesthetic pleasure reveals an ethical position—or in other words, the *ethos* of play has a liberating effect. Beginning by a promise to remedy amorous suffering, the author ends his book by leaving to the reader “to say and think whatever she wishes” (Boccaccio 2021, p. 528). This is also an invitation to desire and love again.

Thus, I argue that a premodern work such as the *Decameron*, read together with a modern theory such as psychoanalysis, and in the light of what Morton calls ecological awareness, could help to define this somewhat vague but seminal notion in our historical moment of time. This is also to say that my reading is a loop, or, as Morton puts it: “Knowing in a loop—a weird knowing” (Morton 2016, p. 5). In other words, my reading method has been trying to gain ecological awareness with Morton by defining it with Freud and Boccaccio.

Even though a loop can stop, and perhaps it has in our era of a “new kind of barbarism”, I have wanted to show why Morton’s appeal—“Let’s not interrupt the loop”—is worth listening to (Morton 2016, p. 156–57), the more so as it harbors a hope that an “ecological thought must transcend the language of apocalypse” (Morton 2010, p. 19). In order to avoid a persisting apocalyptic idea resulting in hopelessness—there is no point in caring for the future since the end of the world has already arrived—we can, with Boccaccio, Freud, Morton and others, restart thinking of change for the future in terms of open-ended loops.

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