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Agitating the Powers of Habit:

Towards a Volatile Politics of Thought

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Abstract

This paper capitalizes on the resurgence of interest in habit within social and political theory as a key concept of our time, following the recent translation and uptake of the work of Félix Ravaissou, to push our understandings of the irreducible vitality and vulnerability of bodies. It seeks to intervene within debates on the habit-body by challenging the way in which the transitions that habit gives rise to are conceptualized. Many theorizations of the habit-body have tended to stress its ever-evolving, adaptive, affective capacities for subtle alteration and gradual, incremental change. However I argue that this lends itself to an image of the habit-body that prioritizes coherence, calculation and proficiency over other more erratic and unpredictable transitions that habit might give rise to. In response, and drawing on Borges' short story *The Zahir* as its empirical lure, rather than understanding volatility as something that habit works to quiesce, this paper seeks to enroll volatility into an image of the habit-body by articulating its agitative and destructive tendencies. It does this by proffering obsession as a specific mode of habit that exhibits these tendencies towards volatility, in order to demonstrate how habit participates in some of the more unstable, precarious and heterogeneous modulations of contemporary life. Capitalizing on the ways through which habit refocuses debates on 'distributed agency', drawing attention to the volatilities inherent to habit helps us not only to dismantle ideas of the sovereign self, but in doing so, pluralizes the event and performance of subjectivities. This forces us to conceptualize the relations between thought, will and responsibility in a way that rethinks a radical politics through a revolution of the body over that of the mind.

Keywords

Félix Ravaissou, Jorge Luis Borges, habit, bodies, distributed agency, obsession

I cannot sort out my emotions; I recall my desperation when I realized that nothing could any longer save me; the inward relief of knowing that I was not to blame for my misfortune; the envy I felt for those whose Zahir was not a coin but a slab of marble or a tiger. How easy it is not to think of a tiger?, I recall thinking.

Borges, *The Zahir*¹

Prelude

At this point in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Zahir* we witness a man, played by Borges, in the grips of a force, apparently about a coin. A seemingly innocuous twenty-centavo coin—the only distinction being that the letters N T and the number 2 have been scratched into it—that was given to him in his change after paying for a drink one evening: innocent enough. His thoughts proceed relatively benignly. On leaving the bar, Borges muses over some famous coins and the legends that they were wrapped up in, and ponders how coins have often come to symbolize free will. But over successive weeks the thought of the coin gathers strength and consumes Borges' existence such that even after making a trip to lose it in a distant Buenos Aires suburb, he cannot free his mind from its image. The repeated thoughts become so distressing that Borges tries all kinds of bizarre experiments to deal with them: writing a fantasy tale to distract himself; and trying to think

about another coin in its place, amongst others. Yet the locus of his thinking becomes so knotted around this coin that everything else gradually becomes backgrounder against it: “Anything that is not the Zahir comes to me as though through a filter, and from a distance.”²

This is a story of a man wrestling with and trying to exorcise a presence in thought that refuses to subside. The presence, that Borges later learns is his ‘Zahir’, is, in the story, an Islamic belief for “beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad.”³ It is also, as the quote at the top of this paper attests to, a story that plays with the folding of matter and thought, throwing into sharp relief the Cartesian notion that thought is something that a sovereign will chooses to have and can freely command. Of particular significance, though, is that the image of thought in its actual sense is relatively inert—even inconsequential. It is, after all, just a simple coin that has little allegorical burden. It is an image of thought that enters his constitution under the radar, not though an event of trauma, or indeed of apparent significance. In the absence of signification, it hints at a different modality of thought to Proust’s infamous madeleine, an object that whilst acting as a lightning-rod for involuntary thought, is enrolled into a heady halcyon economy of nostalgia and poignancy that Borges’ coin lacks. Indeed we learn at the start of the story that the Zahir might be all kinds of things: a tiger, a blind man, an astrolabe, a small sailor’s compass, a vein in marble, the bottom of a well.⁴ What the story invites us to consider therefore is not the image of thought in its actuality, but in its virtuality: the worldly relations it sets up and, crucially, the dynamic through which this thought-image takes place.

Throughout the narrative, it becomes evident that the dynamic involves repetition. The thought-image of the coin *keeps returning*, manifesting itself in different guises, sometimes in dreams about the coin; at other times in musings of how to stop thinking about the coin. Indeed there is something both passive and active about this repetition—as something that Borges *sustains* but also something that he is *animated* by—as we witness his subjectivity increasingly given over to this particular thought-image. Furthermore, the repetition of this thought-image seems to perform in a way that is highly volatile, nibbling and gnawing in unforeseen and unpredictable ways as Borges’ life becomes gathered around it. This thought-image seems to be sustained by a force that is neither of the coin, nor of Borges himself, but might more faithfully be understood as a force that combines this folding of activity and passivity: a force that we might name ‘habit’.

Introduction

This paper capitalizes on the resurgence of interest in habit within social and political theory as a key concept of our time, following the recent translation and uptake of the work of Félix Ravaillon,⁵ to push our understandings of the irreducible vitality and vulnerability of bodies.⁶ For Ravaillon, habit is way of attending to the plasticity of bodies, inciting dynamic ways of thinking about bodily transitions as evidencing a dual logic of continuity and change. This paper seeks to intervene within debates on the habit-body by challenging the way in which these transitions that habit gives rise to are conceptualized. Many theorizations of the habit-body have tended to stress its ever-evolving, adaptive, affective capacities for subtle alteration and gradual, incremental change. However I argue that this lends itself to an image of the habit-body that prioritizes coherence, calculation and proficiency over other more erratic and volatile transitions that habit might give rise to. In response, and drawing on Borges’ short story as its empirical lure, this paper argues that many of our current conceptualizations of the habit-body have tended to emphasize the coherence of the habit-body in ways that obscure its concomitant volatility. Rather than understanding volatility as something that habit works to quiesce, this paper seeks to enroll

volatility *into* an image of the habit-body by articulating its agitative tendencies. It does this by proffering obsession as a specific modality of habit that exhibits these tendencies towards volatility, in order to demonstrate how habit participates in some of the more unstable, precarious and heterogeneous modulations of contemporary life. Capitalizing on the ways through which habit refocuses debates on 'distributed agency', drawing attention to the volatilities inherent to habit helps us not only to dismantle ideas of the sovereign self, but in doing so, pluralizes the event and performance of subjectivities. This forces us to conceptualize the relations between thought, will and responsibility in a way that rethinks a radical politics through a revolution of the body over that of the mind.⁷

The argument is staged in two parts. The first part of this paper seeks to argue how many conceptual and empirical renderings of the habit-body have drawn attention to its coherence by focusing on the capacity of habit to refine and generate particular bodily competencies for practical action. Part of this tendency towards coherence emerges through the particular evaluative modes of reflection and anticipation that are deemed to compose and steer this habit-body. In the final section of part one, I speculate on some of the challenges regarding this conceptualization, specifically questioning the arrangement of forces that are deemed to be internal or external to the powers of habit; and empirics that tend to imagine habits as extensive rather than intensive. The second part of the paper returns to Borges' short story to consider ways of recuperating the volatility of the habit-body. Spotlighting the intensive rather than extensive movements of habit, exemplified so lucidly in Borges' obsessive thinking-habits, enables us to consider modes of reflection and anticipation that are less coherent and more volatile, thereby pushing towards an ethical sense of politics that acknowledges the hurt and potentially-destructive capacities of habit.

1. Coherent habit-bodies

For Paul Ricoeur habit "participates in the familiarity and at the same time strangeness of life which is so close to us and so disconcerting to the awakened consciousness."⁸ This folding of a life that is so intimately at-hand, with a life that is strangely distant, anonymous and not quite of us captures the paradoxical and beguiling nature of habit. Habit is an indispensable trope for considering the constitution of bodies, cleaving open crucial political questions concerning the forces that fold matter and thought. Indispensable, since the modulations of repetition and difference, obduracy and transformation, that comprise habit invites us to question some of the stubborn dualisms that have often splintered organic from non-organic life; voluntary from involuntary agencies; freedom from determinacy; inside from outside; and activity from passivity. Given that philosophical approaches to habit evidence very different ontological commitments and through different degrees of abstraction, to address the trope of habit in the singular obscures the diversity of apprehensions that have been advanced.⁹ Habit names a multitude of *different* configurations of thought and matter, answerable to different philosophical contexts.

For Descartes, and later Kant, habit is rooted in the body as a negative, mechanistic automatism which potentially inhibits the freedom of the mind, depriving actions of their moral virtue. On the other hand, and earlier, for both Aristotle and Aquinas, habit participates in a more productive way to an economy of moral virtue which involves the cultivation of good habits and the elimination of bad habits. Such a focus on practical dimensions of habit is echoed in Hume's empiricism where habit participates in the formation of judgments, thus also performing in a more positive way as a mode of orientating the body. However, the lineage of thinking about habit that underpins this paper is the development of spiritualist vitalism in nineteenth century French thought, specifically through Pierre Maine de Biran and later by Félix Ravaisson. Whilst their ontological

commitments and sympathies are at times disparate and at odds with one another, both offer sustained reflections on habit that emphasizes the *dynamic and vital* character of repetition and continuity, rather than a trope of dulling automatism. Through the work of de Biran and Ravaissou, it is habit that makes change possible, and therefore emerges as a positive hinge to circumvent dualistic thinking about the body through the way that it folds the vital and the vulnerable. For both, 'being-there' is comprised, crucially, in the double movement of the active and the passive, of bodies that can give and receive form, such that over time, the passive impressionable body is transformed into a spontaneously acting and more self-aware one. Significantly, Ravaissou's thought was to have a profound influence on the development of vitalist and phenomenological theorizations of the body as evidenced through the thought of Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, whose writings on the subject also substantially inform this paper.

That attending to the constitution of habit-bodies is not just of philosophical concern is evidenced in its imbrication within contemporary political thought. Habit is often mobilized as a way of accounting for various forms of inertia and non-action (and thereby appealing to a Kantian understanding of habit as a dulling, mechanistic attribute), presenting a compelling explanation as to why people continue to carve out lives that are, for whatever reason, unsustainable in light of the hurt and suffering they might cause to themselves and others. This is particularly evident in research that has focused on the stubbornness of transforming rhythms and routines of everyday life in relation to multiple 'crises' ranging from obesity¹⁰ to climate change.¹¹ More productively, albeit ominously, an understanding of the potentials inherent to habit have been capitalized on in the workplace to enhance the economic productivity of laboring bodies.¹² Yet in spite of the diversity of theoretical approaches and applications that habit animates, I want to suggest that the type of habit-body that many contemporary social researchers invoke is rather specific.

Purposive habit-bodies—

Many that have sought to understand how the powers of habit modulate life have done so by focusing on how physical bodily practices are constituted through habit. Taking their cue from phenomenological understandings of corporeality, particularly inspired by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, these are mutable bodies that are emergent syntheses of their ongoing action rather than pre-given or inert.¹³ Emerging from these phenomenological understandings, habit assumes a productive role through its capacity to generate corporeal competencies that materialize over time and through repetition such that a particular practice becomes second nature. This idea of the competent habit-body is signaled in the specific illustrations that Merleau-Ponty chooses to emphasize how perception is used for productive, practical ends, underscored by his assertion that "habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by *appropriating new instruments*."¹⁴ Such productivist claims for habit also owe their heritage to Mauss' conceptualization of 'body techniques';¹⁵ practical and to-hand ways of acting that, over time through habit, does not require deliberative, reflective thought. Exemplary contemporary empirical illustrations here include Crossley's ethnography of circuit-training;¹⁶ Kim's work on woman's bodies and consumer culture in the context of South Korea;¹⁷ and Tyler and Abbott's study on the development of flight attendants' skills.¹⁸ Overtones of the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey can be discerned through these examples where habits

... involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials. They assimilate objective energies, and eventuate in command of environment. They require order, discipline, and manifest technique. They have a beginning, middle and end. Each stage marks progress in dealing with materials and tools, advance in converting material to active use.¹⁹

These competent body techniques enroll the force of habit as a central constituent in Foucault's 'technologies of the self', whereby individuals "to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."²⁰

Key to these competencies is, then, that they are acquired through repetition. Practices repeated over and over sculpt bodily capacities for action in particular ways such that those practices become increasingly perfected and refined. As such, many of these studies implicitly appeal to the double law of habit that de Biran outlines which is subsequently developed by Ravaisson. In their schematization of habit, they distinguish between *movement*, which is taken to be action that is directed, willed, by the body, and *sensation*, or passion that is taken to be unwilled sensation. In tandem, these sculpt the body's capacity for perception by creating impressions, where the repetition of voluntary movement and involuntary sensation has contrasting effects. Thus "the continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually *easier, quicker and more assured*."²¹ Many ethnographic studies have therefore emphasized the second part of this law, by illuminating the transformative effect on the body of de Biran's 'active' habits. In doing so, they demonstrate how habit can sculpt a particularly refined body. Such coherences are enduring in part because of the plasticity of the body. This is not an elastic body that returns to an originary form but one that becomes modified through repeated practice.²² Here, habit gathers rather than disperses, holds rather than releases, underscored by Ravaisson's assertion that habit is an "idea in action, from which it cannot be unbound."²³ The force of habit here therefore becomes one of specialization, rather than flexibility, persuasively illustrated by Ravaisson's example of "a man accustomed to carrying out strong movements with the muscles of his hands and fingers writes less firmly than another."²⁴

This tendency towards coherence is taken up further through Bergson's writings on body memory, and is articulated most explicitly in *Matter and Memory* where Bergson describes two forms of memory: recollection-memory and habit-memory.²⁵ Whilst they have a distinct relation to one another, important for this discussion is how the second of these, habit memory, is preserved as a kind of bodily memory that is developed and transformed through practice. Bergson's vitalism articulates a distributed bodily intelligence where "movements, as they recur, contrive a mechanism for themselves, grow into a habit, and determine in us attitudes which automatically follow our perception of things ... thus ensured the appropriate reaction, the correspondence to the environment—adaptation in a word—which is the general aim of life."²⁶ Bringing to bear a habit-body that is contingent on the present requirements of action, Ansell-Pearson summarizes that "as beings of action and creatures of habit we are always remounting the slope of our past. The past is preserved in itself and, at the same time, contracted into various states of virtuality by the needs of action that are always seated in an actual present."²⁷ Indeed it is the purposive character of habit-memory rather than its autonomy that is significant here. For Bergson, habit-memory "has retained from the past *only the intelligently coordinated movements* which represent the accumulated efforts of the past; it recovers those past efforts, not in the memory images which recall them, but in the definite order and systematic character with which the action movements take place."²⁸ These coherences that echo Dewey's pragmatism are emphasized by Bergson's choice of terminology, such that actions "organise into a habit."²⁹

Recollection-memory or 'image memory' is the totality of the past retained whether or not it is needed for practical use. This memory "stores up the past by mere necessity of its own nature."³⁰ So when we attempt to recall an event, it is image memory that is being appealed to. However, whilst the two types of memory pertain to different logics, they run side by side. "Of these two memories ... the second, which is active, or motor, will, then, constantly inhibit the first, or at least only accept from it that which can throw light upon and complete *in a useful way* the present situation."³¹ Such is the primacy of praxis in Bergson's account that, coordinated with the perception of the present, only those memory-images that are supportive of praxis are kept at the fore.

So to summarize the argument so far: the habit-body that is appealed to in much contemporary social and political thought is imbricated within a logic of purposive practice, implicitly appealing to de Biran and Ravaissou's double law of habit where an idea-in-action becomes refined and perfected through repetition. This utilitarian image of the habit-body is encapsulated by Ricoeur's assertion that "the essence of habit lies in its use-value: I *know how*, I *can* do. Habit which can be understood is a power, a capacity to resolve a certain type of problem according to an available schema."³²

Calculative habit-bodies—

Whilst refinement emerges through repeated practice, this coherence is also contingent on the corporeal intelligences that are special to this human habit-body. These are intelligences that permit habit to be deployed in the productive and purposive ways as outlined above. Indeed it is this intelligence that distinguishes de Biran and Ravaissou's spiritualist vitalism from the more automated, mechanistic negative apprehensions of habit, particularly those of Descartes and Kant. For Ravaissou, it is the specifically human capacity for reflection on habit that gives rise to these corporeal intelligences. To appreciate this, we need to visit Ravaissou's hierarchy of forms of life—a precursor to Darwinian evolutionary thinking. The first part of Ravaissou's *Of Habit* outlines how habit operates at different levels of life: from the inorganic realm where there is no capacity for habit, through to the highest realm of animal life where the capacity for habit is most developed. For Ravaissou what is special to this higher realm is the presence of a "centre with the capacity to measure and dispense force."³³ So a body that operates "in its own way and in its own time",³⁴ has the capacity to develop habit intelligently for productive ends.

For Ravaissou, in these superior levels of life, spontaneity predominates over receptivity. But it is the delay where "reactions are increasingly distanced from and independent of the actions to which they respond"³⁵ that is important for understanding the intelligence of habit in its most developed form. For higher forms of life, learned habits are held in reserve until they are demanded by the requirement of a given situation. This is not the same as a conditioned reflex, an immediate automatic response which for Ravaissou characterizes the relation between spontaneity and receptivity of plant and inorganic life, but a release of habit that is contingent on a kind of calculation relative to the demands of the situation. This is echoed in Ansell-Pearson's discussion of Bergson where "free or indeterminate actions are ones that delay re-action, meaning that action is no longer restricted to a present and one that is always beginning again."³⁶ In contrast to simpler forms of life, this interstice between action and reaction points to how habits are contracted by the body, and stored in anticipatory readiness to be released when required by practice. Ricoeur captures this charged quality of the habit-body beautifully by suggesting that "through the rhythm which it establishes or renews it exercises a flywheel effect on the convulsive soul."³⁷

Knowing just when particular habits are required to be released therefore indicates a particular form of forethought as to the appropriateness of action that will emerge. This is what Ricoeur is alluding to when he says that in habit "we discover in ourselves astonishing

resources to which it is wisest to *trust* ourselves.”³⁸ What can be discerned here then is a kind of trusted devolution from conscious willing to bodily habits. That is not based on blind faith since, as Ricoeur points out, “we need not say that in habit *consciousness* is abolished: only *reflexive* knowing and willing are.”³⁹ Bearing in mind that Ravaissou’s combination of idealism and empiricism lead him to characterize habit as an “idea in action”,⁴⁰ we might say that an idea provides the initial motivational force which is then taken up by our “knowledge in the hands.”⁴¹ Or as Ricoeur says, “we only will the presence and, in a general way, the bearing of the useful gesture; the form arises as if of itself.”⁴²

But for Ravaissou, the capacity for human habits to be cultivated is also conditional on a reversal of this movement, such that a habit can be refined where it is brought back to sphere of conscious reflection. Indeed for Ravaissou, human intelligence emerges precisely through its capacity for reflection on habit, where “the same being at once acts *and sees the act*.”⁴³ To be clear though, reflection here is not a deliberative weighing-up of thought which we might align with a moral economy of transcendent judgment, shackled to pre-formulated criteria and necessarily underpinned by the requirement of consciousness.⁴⁴ This is not something that takes place in the mind imagined as a center of rational calculation. Rather it is much more like the immanent evaluation of modes of existence that Deleuze draws from Spinoza, where there are no moral oppositions, only a differential ethical topography that modulates through situated encounters that pertain to the capacity of bodies to continue to affect and be affected.

What we witness, then, is an oscillation between conscious will and habitual inclination, where “inclinations, born from custom, often decline if custom comes to be interrupted, and that the movements removed from the will return to its sphere after some time.”⁴⁵ So habitual actions can resurface in consciousness where action can be evaluated and recalibrated, echoing Bourdieu’s movement of bringing an action from the realm of habitus into the realm of praxis to be worked on.⁴⁶ As Clare Carlisle describes with reference to Ravaissou, “one way to deal with a tenacious unwanted habit is to lead it back to the sphere of consciousness, for only here can it be influenced by reflection and the will.”⁴⁷ Ehn and Löfgren echo this by suggesting that it is only when habits become *insufficient* and fall short in carrying life that they become exposed and some sort of rearrangement or transformation of the habit-body is required.⁴⁸ Put differently, we might posit that it is interruption that forces a specific kind of reflection, such that interruption becomes a challenge to habit, perhaps even an event that undoes the holding-together that habit performs. This is not an interruption from within, but an interruption from outside.

So it is this oscillation between conscious will and its uptake through the spontaneity afforded by habit that enables an idea to be realized and refined. Indeed when conceptualized as an ‘idea in action’, we can say that habit therefore gives birth to bodies *with direction*. In her discussion of habit in relation to Hegelian thought, Catherine Malabou claims that “we can recognize in the animal an elementary form of seeing what is coming, of the *voir venir*.”⁴⁹ We can see a similar anticipational intelligence in Bergson’s habit-memory too, given that “we become conscious of these mechanisms as they come into play; this consciousness of a whole past of efforts stored up in a present is indeed also a memory, but a memory ... always bent upon action, seated in the present and *looking only to the future*.”⁵⁰ In this guise, the force of habit generates a kind of determinacy or fate in the way that it opens up particular conduits, mirroring the kind of tubular dwelling that is alluded to in much writing on habit. Thus there is an anticipational tendency that takes place within calculation where habit works to pull specific futures into the present. Such anticipation is characteristic of Ravaissou’s higher animal realm where we have a center “that knows, that values, *that foresees* and decides.”⁵¹

But precisely which conduits are opened up and which direction habit-bodies take is contingent on an initial idea. Although reflection on habit guides the habit-body, it is the idea that orientates habit, and appeals to a teleological and expressly political dimension of Ravaisson's thinking. Whilst the double law of habit states that repetition or continuity strengthens movement (activity) and weakens sensation (passivity), both Ravaisson and de Biran acknowledge an activity in passivity and passivity in activity (particularly since sensation often motivates movement and gives rise to ideas in the first place). To grasp this point, we need to bear in mind that for Ravaisson, where repeated activity reduces sensation, it "develops and perfects" perception and the capacity for judgment.⁵² Accommodating this logic, Ravaisson distinguishes between 'active sensations' and 'passive sensations' through the contrasting figures of the drinker who drinks *to get* intoxicated (to lose perception) and the connoisseur who drinks *to refine* their palate (to enhance perception). This designation of purposive practice 'in order to' is a feature of the habit-body that Carlisle parallels with the 'passive' TV viewer for whom repeated exposure of distressing images might induce compassion fatigue, and the 'active' TV viewer, say training to be a counselor, might develop an enhanced sensitivity.⁵³ Such distinction, with clear moral overtones, seems to hinge on different dispositions, different ideas, which generate different fields of political action.

To summarize, habit-bodies gain their coherence through a calculating capacity that is contingent firstly on how the force of habit is held in-reserve until it is required by a situation, and secondly, on the oscillation between idea-as-will and action-as-habit where reflection on habit can refine action. An 'idea in action' also implicates a teleological dimension which influences the specific direction that is opened up by the idea. Building on these theoretical maneuvers, I want to conclude the first part of this paper by suggesting how coherence has come to define the habit-bodies that feature in contemporary social scientific research.

Benign proficiencies—

One reason for this emphasis on coherence presents itself through the arrangement of forces that both compose and are deemed to interrupt the habit-body. Less characteristic of Ravaisson's understanding, but certainly more prevalent in recent explorations of how the habit-body is implicated in the rhythms of everyday life, has been a residual inside and outside, not of the body as such, but the inside and outside of the powers of habit. In terms of composition, this provokes an important question of what forces, drives, tendencies and events are gathered into the image of the habit-body and what are forces are deemed to be external. Here we are faced with the task of delimiting and circumscribing the forces that are gathered by habit. We might take our cue once more from Ravaisson where he, for example, points out that nutrition is more of an instinct than a habit since it is not a phenomenon that could have once been guided by conscious thought, and therefore does not follow the double law of habit. For others, interruption is taken to be radically anterior to habit, as something from the outside of the habit-body that has the capacity to disrupt or stall: the experiential shock of the encounter that habit helps to insulate. Here habit imagined 'as order' is set up against forces that effect a disordering. This distinction is reinscribed to an extent where the habit-body is aligned with rhythm, such that ordering (synchronization) is taken to be the coherence that is unbalanced and disordered by counter-rhythms. Indeed the two terms are often conflated such that "rhythms and habits are *interspersed* with disjunctures and connected via suspensions, interferences and repair work"⁵⁴ which again delimits habits as the gluey plateaus of coherence and resilience that protect against interference and intervention. Here, habits are once again depicted as interlocking and mutually supportive.

A second aspect that gives rise to these coherences is a more empirical aspect of how

habits are named, diagrammed and accounted for in much contemporary social scientific research. Many studies contribute to a specific performative imagination of habit as extensive movements in time and space that can be represented. Empirical interventions that account for the routine arcs of everyday life, for example, have developed the time-space prism as a technique of mapping repeated movements in space, bringing into focus patterned consistencies of action.⁵⁵ Similarly, practice-time profiles also hint at the synchronization of practices.⁵⁶ Yet in spite of this emphasis on the outwardly performative, and thus ethnographically accountable, aspects of habit, how specific habits might be delimited is somewhat more difficult. Tim Cresswell illuminates this through Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's early twentieth century movement studies in the workplace.⁵⁷ In their quest to discern the most efficient habits of laborers, they attempted to abstract and disassemble the constituent movements of habit. A task of infinitesimal fastidiousness, this illustrates the incredible difficulties in delimiting discrete movements in time according to a linear temporal schema. However, more significantly, this abstraction of a part reverts to the kinds of materialist analysis that Bergson argues detracts from apprehending the unity of matter and thought that is so vital in grasping the dynamics of habit. This analysis "resolves things into their inert elements; from simplification to simplification it passes to what is most abstract and empty."⁵⁸ Keeping in mind that mechanism is "only the fossilized residue of spiritual activity",⁵⁹ the empirical locus of research on 'everyday habits' has the potential to feel somewhat contrived in its focus on specific nameable 'ideas in action', such as 'the daily commute' or 'cooking', where only those movements that are supportive of the telos—of the idea of the activity—are gathered into the description of the habit-body, potentially overlooking a myriad of other movements that might be an integral part of this composition but, in their imperceptibility, fly under the radar.

Accounting for habit through its representation therefore reveals the problem of conflating routine, repetitious movement and even rhythm, with habit. Ricoeur is instructive here, describing how practices characterized by their regularity but do not come easily and do not become easier are not habitual, properly speaking. Ricoeur's examples are persuasive: "getting up when I do not feel like it, taking a cold shower in spite of revulsion, practice of asceticism in all its forms... we are dealing with bare effort, deprived of the support of habit."⁶⁰ We need to keep in mind here that acquired habits are dispositional tendencies "inscribed into nature"⁶¹ and are thus characterized by a plasticity that cannot be discerned just through representations. Habit is a force, an "obscure activity"⁶² to use Ravaisson's description, not the outwardly performative movement itself. As Ravaisson claims, "in the most voluntary movement, the will proposes and the understanding represents to itself only the external form and the extremity of the movement."⁶³ Indeed the tendency to align repeated practice with the inevitability of habit falls short of understanding situations where habitual action does *not* emerge. However, more significantly, by focusing on extensive movements obscures how these movements "are replaced by almost imperceptible movements, then by molecular movements, and, finally, by chemical transformations and the most secret vital operations"⁶⁴ which characterizes the *intensive* movements of habit. As Lalande summarizes, "one must not confuse the *manifestation* of habit, which renders it sensible to us, with the biological modification that constitutes it."⁶⁵ These are the intensive movements that Malabou alludes to when she describes habit as a kind of virtuality, as "a mode of presence that cannot be reduced to the present time of the now."⁶⁶

In light of these assertions, I want to suggest that image of the habit-body that characterizes much social science research feels much *too competent*, as if the habit-body was the aggregation of a collection of incrementally-developed habits defined by their coherence. If we accept Rosi Braidotti's postulation that "a subject is a *sedimentation* of established habits,"⁶⁷ then this is a habit-body that already feels too territorialized in its

contractive tendency towards refinement. Such an apprehension is echoed by Ricoeur through his assertion that “habit *fixes* our tastes and aptitudes and thus shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape.”⁶⁸ In Shapiro’s analysis of Ravaisson’s text, he compares the persistence of the habit-body to Spinoza’s notion of ‘conatus’ – the “continuous interaction of multiple durations”, where habit assists in generating a sense of ontological security.⁶⁹ Fidelity to definitions that understand habit “as patterns of repetitions that *consolidate* modes of relation and forces of interaction”,⁷⁰ echoes Ravaisson’s description of the dynamic process of restoration of an equilibrium between affections, sensations and organs: a metastability that is hardwired into the double law of habit where the sensory organs are brought “up to the tone of the sensation”⁷¹ which will reduce the intensity of repeated impacts of that sensation.

2. Volatile habits

Volatility as a fickle, flighty form of transformation, seems on the face of it to describe an evanescent quality of life that habit works to dampen. Where the consolidating transitions of habit are of the order of predictable slow-creep, volatility as an unpredictable, even explosive, non-patterned transition would seem to speak to quite an opposite configuration of forces. So how might we recuperate something of the volatility of habit, where habit might not tend towards specialization, refinement and coherence; but might also render itself through more capricious and unstable manifestations? As one response, in this second part of the paper, I focus attention on events of cognition and the specific folding of matter and thought that this invites, rather than focusing on outwardly performative practices as a way into tracing some of these incipient but often-obscured volatilities.

To begin this recuperative task, we can return to de Biran, for whom ‘mental’ processes of imagination are ‘active sensations’ which, because they principally involve the will, are movements of sorts that adhere to the same law of habit where movements becomes easier and more precise. Since “facility, rapidity, indifference... are the three concomitant results of l’habitude”,⁷² at the same time, we become less aware of the effort involved and therefore sensation subsides. For Ravaisson, imaginations, ideas and thoughts are not of a different ontological order. Thinking habits cannot be cleaved away from practical action as in Biran’s Cartesianism since habits are “at one and the same time an idea and a being.”⁷³ As previously noted, the crucial maneuver that Ravaisson makes is to emphasize how, through habit, intelligences become dispersed through the body, rather than being led by a cerebral center—thus influencing conceptualizations of body-memory and embodied intelligences in 20th century thought, particularly Bergson and Merleau-Ponty. As Ricoeur summarizes, “what I know intellectually is present to me in the same way as the bodily skills I have.”⁷⁴

The double law of habit therefore dictates that getting embroiled in an idea over time, through repetition and continuity becomes progressively dulled. The more we get used to it, the lesser the impact it has on sensation such that an idea that once agitated us in some way loses its capacity to excite. Ravaisson draws on the writings of Joseph Butler who expressly articulates this point where “thoughts, by often passing through the mind, are felt less sensibly.”⁷⁵ Initially-traumatic feelings that precipitate from the death of someone who meant a lot to us might therefore be felt with less intensity over time, as the idea becomes enrolled into a particular thinking-habit that becomes easier to bear.

But what about those ideas that, over time, do not lose their capacity to excite and stimulate? De Biran singles out a set of ideas which he says subvert the double law of habit. These are ideas which “acquire a singular vivacity and energy when the ideas fitted to excite them are more frequently produced.”⁷⁶ These can form habits where repetition,

instead of diminishing the sensations associated with them, actually strengthens them, such that they become even more present to both feeling and consciousness. De Biran describes these ideas as “phantoms which are vague and undetermined in nature”;⁷⁷ ideas that bear a striking similarity to Borges’ thinking habits in *The Zahir*:

After mysterious pictures and all the effects of superstitious delirium begin to be established in the imagination (and they are formed and developed there especially in consequence of certain primitive tendencies of temperament or of acquired tendencies which have become habitual), they fill it, *obsess it unceasingly*, leave it no respite ... Absorbed in the same group of stimuli, the individual returns to them every day with more force and obstinacy, ceaselessly summons them and no longer can or will be distracted from them.⁷⁸

This is significant as it suggests not only that the force of habit manifests itself in very different configurations, but also that one of these configurations is obsession. For de Biran obsession is an acquired tendency that has become habitual. Keeping to hand de Biran’s attitude that habit ultimately veils truth and reason, he is predictably scornful of obsession relegating this form of habit to the realm of the fanatical and delusional, since it impedes the capacity for ‘rational’ thought. Indeed for de Biran these ideas are symptomatic of an overactive imagination becoming splintered away from the Real. Yet obsession is a form of cognition that seems to diverge sharply from the productivist habit-body described in the first part of this essay, but is still a type of cognition that, as de Biran suggests above, pertains to habit.⁷⁹

Borges’ thinking-habits that refuse to subside, *that do not become easier to bear*, exhibit a remarkable resemblance to this mode of habit. Rather than getting used to the thought-image of the coin such that the sensations become duller over time, and the idea loses its initial heat of intensity, this is an idea that is generative but not necessarily in a way that it becomes more styled, in a movement towards refinement and coherence. So what if we take these more volatile thinking-habits to be a much more significant part of the composition of the habit-body than permitted by the theorizations of de Biran and Ravaissou?

Volatility through distractive relaxation—

Whilst de Biran’s ontology distinguishes habits of the imagination from active habits that involve physical bodily movement, it is certainly not the intention here to cleave thought away from practical activity. Whilst the key question raised by Ehn and Löfgren in their book *The secret world of doing nothing* is “Where are people mentally when they are physically present?” might be mistaken for being overtly Cartesian, the more subtle overtones that such a question prompts are conducive to enquiry here.⁸⁰ Certainly whilst much writing on daydreaming implicates it within a realm that confines it to internal subjective experience, the “depths, the interior, the subjective, and the private [can be reimagined] in terms of surfaces, bodies and material relations.”⁸¹ As such, rather than thinking about the origin or significance that might be deemed to be *behind* thinking habits, attending to the forces that assemble and transform these thinking-habits allows us to focus on the habit-body as intensive, rather than just as extensive, opening up a space to consider the force diagrams involved.

In order to consider the intensive forces at play here, we need to make space for the erraticness of the event of thought itself. That is, thought as chaotic rather than logical; a disordering and an interruption, rather than a mode of experience that is composed by cogitative weighing-up of that which is already known.⁸² Fidelity to the generative creativity of thought in assembling bodies is to recognize that the event of thought does proceeding in a logical, rational manner, but is an encounter that is much more chaotic, uncertain and emergent. Ehn and Löfgren give some revealing phenomenological descriptions of how the

“disorganized flow of rapidly passing thoughts”⁸³ might takes place, citing James Joyce’s account of Leopold Bloom’s mind wanderings through Dublin as exemplary. Within human geographical writing, we might imagine Alan Pred’s⁸⁴ description of a docker’s daily journey through the streets of Stockholm reveals a similarly erraticness characterized by fleeting glimpses, transient perceptions and a sense of vagueness. Or we might draw succor from Denise Riley’s uncannily convincing description of ‘inner speech’; the silent ‘mental chatter’ that effects a kind of ventriloquism that

... is no limpid stream of consciousness, crystalline from its uncontaminated source in the Mind, but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard, the strenuously sifted and hoarded, the periodically dusted down then crammed with slogans and jingles, with mutterings of remembered accusations, irrepressible puns, insistent spirits of ancient exchanges, monotonous citation, the embarrassing detritus of advertising, archaic injunctions from hymns, and the pastel snatches of old song lyrics.⁸⁵

This kind of distracted chatter certainly shares similarities with Borges’ thinking habits. In a cab ride he airily muses that “money is abstract I said over and over, money is future time. It can be an evening just outside the city, or a Brahms melody, or maps or chess, or coffee, or the words of Epictetus.”⁸⁶ Indeed his explicit assertion “I will dream of the Zahir”⁸⁷ spotlights a subjectivity that is increasingly removed from the demands of the present. Yet whilst this points to the erraticness of thought, through their focus on representational content, these dream-like distractions again emphasize architectures of thought in their extension, rather than the intensive modulations of the generative forces at play.

In order to think about the intensive forces that constitute dreaming, as a different plane of life, we can return to Bergson’s writings on the subject. Throughout Bergson’s thought, ‘attention to life’ emerges as an important concept that designates not a narrow psychological attention, but a biological attention that names the plastic capacities of bodies to adapt to the changing demands of the world: an aptitude to contract habits. It is this attention to life that generates a sense of reality where “adaptation and choice keeps you in a state of uninterrupted tension.”⁸⁸ For Bergson it is habit—the bodily adaptation to the world—that assists in maintaining this tension. Importantly here, this is a tension that is loosened in experiences such as dreaming. Dreams are unwilled, involving no effort of concentration. But more than this, for Bergson, “the dream-self is a distraught self, a self which has let itself go. The memories which harmonize best with it are the *memories of distraction*, those which bear no mark of effort.”⁸⁹ For Bergson, it is only this absence of tension that differentiates dreams from perceptions since “the same faculties are being exercised whether we are awake or dreaming, but they are in tension in one case, and relaxed in the other. The dream is the entire mental life, minus the effort of concentration.”⁹⁰

Remembering that “it is *the needs of action* which determine the laws of recall; they alone hold the keys of consciousness”,⁹¹ dreams are sensations and images that are *not* enrolled in the present’s requirement of purposive action. In wakefulness “you reject every recollection that does not mold itself on your present state. This choice which you are continually accomplishing, this adaptation ceaselessly renewed.”⁹² Thus, dreaming is not an attenuated form of perception, rather perception can be understood as a disciplined form of dreaming. The “reality of the waking state is gained by limitation, by concentration and by tension of diffuse psychical life ... the waking state consists in eliminating, in choosing, in concentrating unceasingly the totality of the diffuse dream-life at the point where a practical problem is presented.”⁹³

We might see Borges’ obsessive thinking, then, as occupying precisely this dream-like hallucinatory state that is characterized by distraction from the needs of the present, as

attested to by his growing incapacity to answer to the demands of everyday life. The plane of dreaming for Bergson enacts a “temporary enfeebling of general attention to life: consciousness, no longer turning in its natural direction, allows itself to look at what it has no interest in perceiving.”⁹⁴ Bergson described these states through examples including ‘false recognition’—the experience of *déjà vu* where we might experience a sense of depersonalization—a coincidence of the present with the memory of the present where the virtual is perceived at the same time as the actual.

Where for Bergson the bodily capacity to adapt to the world through the contraction of habits is contingent on *tension*, this would seem to suggest that the experience of dreaming in its de-tension heralds a withdrawal from habit. So how might dreaming evidence the force of habit? Ricoeur provides valuable assistance here in his discussion of the relation between habit and effort suggesting that habit, in its release, is also contingent on *relaxation*. Indeed he concurs with Bergson that dreaming involves relaxation, aligning it with “errant consciousness, momentary difficulties of attention, fatigue, exhaustion [that] bring about in a progressively incoercible way a loss of control to which we normally more or less consent.”⁹⁵ It is consent that is the important issue here, helping to perform the crucial maneuver that habits in their automatism do not descend and overwhelm us; rather they are shapes of life that we fall back onto, enrolled, as they are, into an economy of ease since “we appeal secretly to old resources and yield to them.”⁹⁶ As such, habit becomes “an adopted attitude. It triumphs and comes to the fore when effort is held back.”⁹⁷

Borges’ obsessive thinking certainly marks an absence of self-possession and an attenuation of will that, for the coherent habit-body, provides the rudder of orientation to the service of practical action. However, the loss of control in Borges’ story feels much less consensual, and much more parasitic on the needs of the present. Yet for Ravaissón, this is the *same force* that renders habit conducive to effective practice. If the force of habit is the generation of tendencies which *may* be tendencies of the will, those same tendencies can also manifest themselves as maladies that can disturb the body. Conceived in this way, Borges’ obsessive thinking is the autonomous liveliness of a parasitic idea that has its own habits, its own existence, that becomes *untethered* from the control of the will. Obsessive thoughts seem to have a life of their own, becoming “a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness.”⁹⁸ As Ravaissón notes, these ideas are propagated by “the same force, without losing anything of its higher unity in personality, that proliferates without being divided; that descends without going under; that dissolves itself in different ways, into its inclinations, acts and ideas; that is transformed in time, and that is disseminated in space.”⁹⁹

As an inclination that escapes will and consciousness, Borges’ obsessive thinking resembles Ravaissón’s description of “movements... that gradually degenerate into convulsive ones, which we call tics.”¹⁰⁰ These are shapes of life that have little of the slow-creep predictable patterning of practical habits, resembling instead the more erratic and distractible aspects of dreaming where the gap between action and reaction is closed. So Borges’ obsession conceptualized as a volatile habit alludes precisely to the erraticness and unpredictability of how the Zahir becomes manifested in his day to day life. Whilst the focus on the Zahir intensifies, it manifests itself in many different guises, enabling us to consider a volatility that is integral to, rather than external from, this thinking-habit.¹⁰¹

However, whilst these distractible inclinations become untethered from the will, the question of whether these more volatile habits become easier to bear over time suggests that obsession points to a specific set of charged relations that mark it out as a distinct

mode of habit. The effortless through which these ideas proliferate certainly pertains to Ravaissou's observation that effort (registered as the sensibility of movement) decreases over time, through repetition. Yet Borges' obsessive thoughts are thinking habits that are not, on the face of it facilitatory, in the way that habit frees up our creative potential for entering into other assemblages of thinking and acting. In a medicalized sense, obsessive thinking is "unwanted and insistent",¹⁰² something that people desperately do not want to do but cannot seem to stop. It is ego-dystonic,¹⁰³ as psychologists would say, and it generates sad passions precisely since it closes down other creative potentials. Indeed rather than becoming easier for Borges to bear, his thinking habits become overwhelming; parasitic not only on his capacity to enter into other relations, but also jeopardizing the assemblage of habits that he previously relied on to carry him through the world which made routine action easy. This is acutely revealed in the final lines of the story where he laments "I will have to be fed and dressed, I will not know whether it's morning or night."¹⁰⁴ Obsessive thinking habits therefore infect other habits, thereby inflating the territory that obsession occupies.

Towards the end of the story, Borges speculates on how his life might unfold were he to surrender to these obsessions: "Calling this future terrible is a fallacy, since none of the future's circumstances will in any way affect me. One might as well call "terrible" the pain of an anesthetized patient whose skull is being trepanned. I will no longer perceive the universe, I will perceive the Zahir."¹⁰⁵ In this hopeless fantasy, he is quietly consoled by the insulation from the demands of the world that this obsession might increasingly provide, where the practical and prosaic demands of the world will ebb away. Yet significantly, Borges *does not altogether surrender* to these thinking habits. His constitution is not exclusively devolved to that which remains outside his control. To speak of the unwilling effortlessness of the obsessions themselves therefore belies the ways in which specific forms of willfulness do participate in the emergence and sustenance of these habits in ways that *accentuate* their volatility. Rather than becoming effortless, these obsessions become *more* present to consciousness through two ways that Borges lives out his situation. This is significant as it demonstrates how obsessive thought does not mark the attenuation of willfulness, but instead brings about a new configuration of the "obscure activity"¹⁰⁶ and willful desire. The ways that Borges comes to know and act with his thinking habits brings to light new relations that emerge between thought, habit and cognition under such volatile conditions.

Volatility through rumination—

Over the course of *The Zahir*, Borges' changing apprehension of his obsessive thinking accords with Ravaissou's description of how the active, perceptual dimension of sensibility becomes enhanced over time, through repetition. Indeed reflecting towards the start of the story, he claims "I had no suspicion at the time that these "thoughts" were an artifice against the Zahir and a first manifestation of its demonic influence."¹⁰⁷ Later in the story, we witness Borges' deciding to visit a psychologist and reading books in order to make sense of his situation, to enhance his knowledgeability. Yet whilst knowledge and judgment, understood as the active dimensions of sensibility, come for Ravaissou with a certain pleurability, what we see in Borges' case is how his perceptual judgment becomes folded into the more anxious refraining, volatile logic of obsession itself.

The concept of rumination seems particularly apt at describing this torsion of the willed and unwilling in Borges' obsessive thought. Given that 'throat' is the Latin origin of the word 'rumination', it is curious that something that is often assumed to take place so firmly within the cerebral sphere has its etymological origins elsewhere in the body: in a passageway, a place of transience, rather than a center of processing, as Cartesian imaginations of the

body would have it. The rumen is the first stomach of an animal where plant food is softened and then regurgitated back to the mouth to be chewed again to assist digestion. It follows, then, that to ruminate is to chew, to turn over in the mouth *again*; or perhaps metaphorically a giving-voice to a thought.

On one level, rumination follows a very productivist logic of competency and accountancy which might on the face of it align with the rudder of anticipation and reflection within the description of the coherent habit-body set out in the first part of this paper. Rumination is often aligned with event of decision-making, and therefore with anticipation, where to ruminate on something is to anticipate and weigh-up in thought the possibilities of that decision. To ruminate is to exhaust an idea in thought, to attempt to think every possible manifestation of it to reach a particular threshold of competence; thereby also reigning into the actual as many of the incipient virtualities of an idea. As such, rumination coincides with a kind of labyrinthine thought that Serres speaks of in relation to the inner ear and the maximization of communicative information. Yet this same logic can be transposed to consider how *rumination seeks resolution* in the way that it becomes intimately acquainted with a specific architecture of thought, together with all the frustrating cul-de-sacs, initially-optimistic false-leads and unsettling claustrophobia that such a figure implicates:

... the maze is the best model for allowing bodies to pass through while at the same time retracing their steps as much as possible; it gives the best odds to finite journeys with unstructured itineraries. Mazes provide maximum feedback ... Let us seek the best way of creating the most feedback loops possible on an unstructured and short itinerary. Mazes provide us with this maximisation.¹⁰⁸

This signals a certain coherence-in-dwelling that is gained by distillation: slowing down and becoming a skilled navigator within a specific territory of thought. This is an analytical intelligence that has echoes of Umberto Eco's discussion of 'over-interpretation'.¹⁰⁹ Whilst for Eco, this excess of significance heralds potentially creative possibilities, for Borges, we witness an inability to move beyond his specific territory of thought. Rumination over why and how his constitution is transforming in such profound ways does not stabilize Borges' habit-body, but instead agitates it further. As the story unfolds, we see that the attempts to exhaust the image of thought, are actually feeding it. The more he invests in its thought, the more virulent the Zahir becomes. Paralleling psychological writings on obsessive-compulsive disorder, the thought-image gathers and reassembles the past: "The next day I decided I'd been drunk."¹¹⁰ Previous events and memories transformed in the event of rumination. Through rumination, events become rewritten and gain other significances, and become unbearably consequential. As Bergson writes, "what is wrong with the dreamer is rather that he reasons too much... when he ventures to give an explanation, his logic, required to bind together incoherent images, can only parody reason and verge on the absurd."¹¹¹

Yet for Borges, the exhaustive quality of rumination also offers a potentially productive escape from the hurt caused by his obsessive thought. At the end of the story Borges speculates that "In order to lose themselves to God, the Sufis repeat their own name or the ninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away."¹¹² Echoing the dynamics of focused meditation, as a strategy to quiesce the power of his obsession, repetition and focus here might generate an indifference that has the capacity to open up and expose the body to other intensities.

Volatility through changing conditions—

The second manifestation of a willfulness that folds through these unwilling obsessions emerges through Borges' attempts to introduce *other ideas* to his habit-body in the hope

that those other ideas might take hold and extinguish the life of the ideas that have such a tight grasp over him. Whilst the incessant but unpredictable return of the Zahir is an involuntary image of thought, though the story, Borges attempts to become skilled at knowing the conditions under which this image of thought might be more or less virulent. This is significant as it gestures to the contingency of habit within brain-body-environment circuits where the overwhelming capacities of this obsession intensifies or wanes relative to the situation. Nancy illustrates such contingency beautifully in relation to the differential capacities of thought to overwhelm at different times of day, where “the figures that day arranges for recognition rise up again from the darkness disguised in evil masks, the thoughts that we know how to manage carefully burst into anxieties, suffocations, aporias that close over and over onto themselves as long as day has not dissolved them.”¹¹³ Given that Borges tells of being “tormented by insomnia”,¹¹⁴ such an observation feels persuasive.

The significance of milieu is therefore pivotal to understanding the emergence of Borges’ thinking habits. We can see that sometimes he is not under its influence, other times he is. Milieu is central to Bergson’s description of recollection-memory which requires a certain kind of bodily composure in order for it to be actualized: a kind of suspension of practical action or detachment from the present. For him the event of recollection “still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud, from the virtual state it passes into the actual.”¹¹⁵ Yet it is the unanticipated experiences of *involuntary memory* rather than recollection memory that characterize Borges’ experience. In Deleuze’s writing on Proust, the resonances of involuntary memory bring about an immediacy, intensity and authenticity that cannot be attained through conscious attempts at recollection.¹¹⁶ However, this relies on the virtual presence of an originary past moment, together with a sensuous sign to spark the resonance. But for Borges, akin to Ravaillon’s unwilling tic, there is no originary event that precipitates his Zahir, his unwanted thinking-habit. The coin lacks significance and is not enrolled into an economy of nostalgia, sentiment or pain; and descends unannounced from the outside.

Nonetheless, we could read many of the activities that Borges engages in as an attempt to *prevent the conditions of actualization* from materializing. Far from giving over easily to the obsession, Borges’ life becomes arranged around mundane practices that *might* dissolve its force, such as taking sleeping drafts to sleep soundly. Indeed some strategies do seem to offer relief. After recounting a fantasy tale, he admits that “composing that piece of trivial nonsense... enabled me to put the coin out of my mind.”¹¹⁷ Yet for Borges, following the ‘flywheel’ logic of habit, these obsessions are stored in reserve, returning with a vengeance soon after. Furthermore, the fantasy tale itself is a story of watchfulness and vigilance that suggests it is actually just a different manifestation of the Zahir. Other ideas fail to take hold at all, demonstrated through Borges’ description of how for a few nights, after studying a pound note as a possible exorcism “the rays of light and the dragon and St. George availed me naught. I could not rid myself of my *idée fixe*.”¹¹⁸

Through experiment, far from acquiescing to the unwilling aspects of habit, we witness a man willfully trying to quiesce its force, going to all kinds of ends “to escape its orbit altogether.”¹¹⁹ Volatility here emerges from Borges’ efforts to counter the idea of the Zahir with other ideas that may or may not take hold. Significantly, it is in part *resistance* to the Zahir that sets into motion the strange and absurd events that characterize Borges’ life: events which unfold erratically and their efficacy in expunging this repeated thought is by no means assured. Whilst we might apprehend these practices as Borges’ attempt to gain a degree of self-possession, these events demonstrate how Ravaillon’s “centre with the capacity to measure and dispense force”¹²⁰ that regulates the interval between action and

reaction and generates the consistencies of the habit-body is at the same time partly responsible for the volatilities of Borges' more troubled soul.

Conclusion

The originality of Ravaillon's thought is his demonstration of how habit, rather than a blind automatism or moral impediment, is the force that actually enables change to take place and to be evaluated. As such, it is a force that participates much more fully in the general movement of life, imbricated in the process of dynamic emergence through which bodies gain sense, understanding and an awareness of self. Redrawing simple understandings of the intentionality of action and the autonomy of the will, Ravaillon demonstrates how habit as a torsion of activity and passivity is at the heart of comprehending how bodies become capable of acting in the world in ways that appreciate how our ideas of intentional, self-styled action are much more testament to the more passive synthetic folding of bodies and environments. Yet Borges' short story is a persuasive demonstration of how the same passive intentionality that delivers ease and competence, a force that is celebrated for being 'of us', becomes manifest as an intoxication: a possession of the body by an intruder that is 'not of us'.¹²¹

For Catherine Malabou¹²², this tension strikes to the heart of how habit works as *pharmakon*. However, such an dualistic evaluation as habit as either poison or remedy belies how the force of habit participates in the emergence of differently-susceptible bodies in ways that are much more contingent on the shape of its emergence, sometimes tending towards coherent habit-bodies, and at other times manifesting much more volatile forms. Furthermore what these volatile, non-patterned habits demonstrate is how rather than imagining disruption as laying outside of habit, obsession understood as a specific thinking habit is constituted by and can generate its own disruptions. As Borges' story shows, the shape of emergence in part depends on the extent to which these thinking habits facilitate or impede other habits. For Nigel Thrift the nub of obsession "is a certain lack of free will: people have little or no agency over their bodies or environments but are under the control of an affective force. That is, they are powered by automatisms."¹²³ However, Ravaillon's thought spotlights the reciprocal and subtle interplay that takes place *between* will and automatism that unfolds in different ways that bring about both coherent and volatile habit-bodies.

There are two important political implications that Borges' story leaves us to consider. The first concerns how might we go about apprehending the more parasitic, overwhelming and volatile shapes of habit, such as obsession, without enrolling them into dogmatic moral evaluations that would only judge them as undesirable. Here we might acknowledge new sites of political life where affective techniques work to *actively generate* forms of obsession. These might include the media and the particular modes of vigilance that particular film or television shows generate.¹²⁴ To this we might add other sites where forms of obsession are prized given their capacity to generate all kinds of capital.¹²⁵ Indeed to suggest that Borges is wholly intent on escaping these obsessive habits of thought would risk being unfaithful to the tenor of the story. There are moments where we can discern sparkles of pleasure from this experience of being cocooned by the container agency¹²⁶ of this force. Towards the end of the story, Borges says "calling that future terrible is a fallacy, since none of the future's circumstances will in any way affect me. One might as well call "terrible" the pain of an anesthetized patient whose skull is being trepanned."¹²⁷ Here the devolution of demands and responsibilities that obsession brings about and the subtle oscillations of joy and pain that eventuate suggests how volatile habits can become hospitable in that they shelter the body from other shocks to thought, opening up new worldly relations.

Whilst Borges' obsession might imply a loosening of 'attention to life', in Bergson's terms, a slackening of the productive tension of perception and memory necessary to give a sense of reality that is necessary to adapt to life, we might suggest that Borges' story demonstrates how obsessions reveal new 'attachments to life'. Lapoujade suggests that "what attaches us to life is our deliria. In order to live, we must render the world delirious."¹²⁸ For Lapoujade, it is the act of believing in the projection of fictions that give an attachment to life through the generation of a form of (neurotic) confidence. "We do believe in order to be confident. And confidence is synonymous with attachment to life."¹²⁹ Borges' Zahir might thus be seen as an over-attachment to an idea; an idea that holds us too-tightly. As such, the deleterious dimensions of these obsessions invites us to search for new sites of political life that might *better attend* to their volatile qualities. For Borges, writing fantasy fiction provided brief respite. But there may be many other 'therapeutic' spaces that could provide much more ideal conditions within which we can work on our habits of thinking and acting in order to generate new techniques of bodily attention.

The second political implication that this reconceptualization of the habit-body opens up concerns new ways of conceptualizing bodily resilience. Resilience is in part a question of differential receptivity and the dynamic through which some ideas take hold with ease and gather force, whilst others remain much more resistant to being incorporated into our constitution. The extent to which specific identifiable habits are compatible with other habits invites us to consider which habits we desire for ourselves and which we seek to attenuate, whilst at the same time recognizing how their cultivation and emergence is by no means assured. As Borges' Zahir demonstrates, a more volatile habit-body prompts us to think about different configurations of bodily receptivity and susceptibility where growing indifference to certain phenomena parallels new objects of enthusiasm in ways that are unanticipated and even fickle in the shape of their emergence. These different but no-less-passionate engagements with the world invite us to consider the resilience of the subject in new ways that acknowledges not only the multiplicity of ideas that modulate it, but also the incipient possibility of the threat of destruction that accompanies such transformations. Attending to the volatilities of habit suggests that we need to change our understanding of what a 'resilient' body is by moving away from a figure that merely sustains and fashions form towards a figure that is constituted as much by the annihilation of form.¹³⁰

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Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Zahir" in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Camberwell, Penguin, 1998), p. 86.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79
5. Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London, Continuum, 2008)

6. See particularly J-D Dewsbury, "The Deleuze-Guattarian assemblage: plastic habits," *Area* 43 no. 2 (2011), pp. 148–153; Clare Carlisle, "Between freedom and necessity: Felix Ravaissan on habit and the moral life," *Inquiry* 53 no. 2 (2010), pp. 123–145; Mark Sinclair, "Ravaissan and the Force of Habit," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49 no. 1 (2011), pp. 65–85.
7. Whilst *The Zahir* is a literary narrative, the more volatile image of the habit-body that it helps to open up pushes our understanding of extra-corporeal experiences that have animated recent social and cultural theories of corporeality, particularly on addiction and obsession. See for example Gordon Coonfield, "Mapping addicted subjection: toward a cartography of the addiction epidemic," *Cultural Studies* 22 no. 1 (2006), pp. 80–113; Darin Weinberg, "On the embodiment of addiction," *Body and Society* 8 no. 4 (2002), pp. 1–19; Ole Bjerg, "Drug addiction and capitalism: too close to the body," *Body and Society* 14 no. 2 (2008), p. 1–22; Mark Smith and Joyce Davidson, "It makes my skin crawl ... ' : the embodiment of disgust in phobias of nature," *Body and Society* 12 no. 1 (2006), pp. 43–67. Additionally, the scope of this discussion does not permit a more detailed and extensive engagement with this short story that would be more faithful to its multi-layered richness and intricacy.
8. Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 283.
9. Whilst to aggregate necessarily performs a certain violence by obscuring the nuances therein, the intention here is to reveal how habit as a trope has been woven through very different ontologies to generate diverse articulations of the subject.
10. See for example Clare Herrick, "Risky bodies: Public health, social marketing and the governance of obesity," *Geoforum* 38 no. 1 (2007), pp. 90–102.
11. Paul Stern, "Toward a coherent theory of environmentally significant behavior," *Journal of Social Issues* 56 no. 3 (2000), pp. 407–424; Kersty Hobson, "Sustainable lifestyles: rethinking barriers and behaviour change," in *Exploring Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences*, ed. Joseph Murphy (Oxford, Elsevier, 2001), pp. 191–212.
12. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp. 85–122.
13. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London, Routledge, 2000); Kirsten Simonsen, "Practice, spatiality and embodied emotions: an outline of a geography of practice," *Human Affairs* 17 no. 2 (2007), pp. 168–181.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 166, emphasis added.
15. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the body," *Economy and Society* 2 no. 1 (1979), pp. 71–88.
16. Nick Crossley, "The circuit trainer's habitus: reflexive body techniques and the sociality of the workout," *Body and Society* 10 no. 1 (2004), pp. 37–69.
17. Taeyon Kim, "Neo-Confucian body techniques: women's bodies in Korea's consumer society," *Body and Society* 9 no. 2 (2003), pp. 97–113.
18. Melissa Tyler and Pamela Abbott, "'Chocs Away': weight watching in the contemporary airline industry," *Sociology* 32 no. 3 (1998), pp. 433–450.
19. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York, The Modern Library, 1922), p. 15.
20. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick Hutton (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1988), p. 18.
21. Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, p. 49, emphasis added.
22. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2008).
23. Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, p. 59.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
25. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. Paul and W. Palmer (New York, Zone Books, 1988).

Bergson also describes a third sort of memory, pure-memory, a 'pure past' that is preserved in and for itself which is independent of its actualisation in the present.

26. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 84.

27. Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 173.

28. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 82, emphasis added.

29. Ibid., p. 85.

30. Ibid., p. 81.

31. Ibid., p. 85, emphasis added.

32. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 283, original emphasis.

33. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 37.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Keith Ansell-Pearson, "The reality of the virtual: Bergson and Deleuze," *MLN* 120 no. 5 (2005), p. 1116.

37. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 314.

38. Ibid., p. 290, emphasis added.

39. Ibid., p. 286, original emphasis.

40. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 59.

41. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 166.

42. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 290.

43. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 39, emphasis added.

44. Maria Hynes and Scott Sharpe, "Affected with Joy: evaluating the mass actions of the anti-globalisation movement," *Borderlands* 8 no. 3 (2009), pp. 1–21.

45. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 57.

46. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977).

47. Carlisle, "Between freedom and necessity", p. 141.

48. Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, "Routines—made and unmade", in *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk (Oxford, Berg, 2009), pp. 99–114.

49. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel. Plasticity, Temporality and the Dialectic* (London, Routledge, 2005), p. 64.

50. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 82, emphasis added.

51. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 37, emphasis added.

52. Ibid., p. 49.

53. Carlisle, "Between freedom and necessity."

54. Frank Trentmann, "Disruption is normal: blackouts, breakdowns and the elasticity of everyday life," in *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk (Oxford, Berg, 2009), p. 69.

55. Mei-Po Kwan, "GIS Methods in Time-Geographic Research: Geocomputation and Geovisualization of Human Activity Patterns," *Geografiska Annaler B* 86 no. 4 (2004), pp. 267–280; Alan Latham, "Research, performance, and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method,"

Environment and Planning A 35 no. 11 (2003), pp. 1993–2017.

56. Elizabeth Shove, "Everyday practice and the production and consumption of time," in *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, materiality and culture*, eds. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk (Oxford, Berg, 2009), pp. 17–33.
57. Cresswell, *On the Move*.
58. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. Andison (New York, The Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 281.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
60. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 283.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, p. 51.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
65. André Lalande cited in Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production. Philosophy and Individuation between Kant and Deleuze* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 113.
66. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 55.
67. Rosi Braidotti, "Postsecular feminist ethics," in *Intimate Citizenships. Gender, Sexualities, Politics*, ed. Elzbieta Oleksy (London, Routledge, 2009), p. 55.
68. Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, trans. C. Kelbley (New York, Fordham University Press, 1986), p. 57.
69. Kam Shapiro, "Reviving habit: Felix Ravaissan's practical metaphysics," *Theory and Event* 12 no. 4, unpaginated. A similar sense of ontological security can be discerned in Giddens' take on habit where "all individuals develop a framework of ontological security of some sort, based on routines of various forms", see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991), p. 44.
70. Braidotti, "Postsecular feminist ethics", p. 55.
71. Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, p. 27.
72. Pierre Maine de Biran, *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, trans. M.D. Bohme (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 136.
73. Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, p. 65. See also David Bissell "Thinking habits for uncertain subjects: movement, stillness, susceptibility," *Environment and Planning A* 43 no. 11 (2011), pp. 2649–2665.
74. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 294.
75. Quoted in Carlisle, "Between freedom and necessity", p. 135.
76. De Biran, *The Influence of Habit*, p. 131.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 133, emphasis added.
79. See Lennard Davis, *Obsession. A History* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2008) for an excellent genealogical account of obsession that comprehends it as a shifting historico-cultural problematic. However in this essay, I focus more sharply what Ravaissan's account of habit can tell us about obsession.
80. Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2010), p. 5.
81. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN, University of Indiana Press, 1994), p. 160.
82. Brian Massumi, "Introduction: Like a thought," in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and*

Guattari, ed. Brian Massumi (London, Routledge, 2001), pp. xiii–xxxix

83. Ehn and Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*, p. 173.

84. Alan Pred, *Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Modernity and the Language of Everyday Life in Late Nineteenth-Century Stockholm* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

85. Denise Riley, “A voice without a mouth”: inner speech,” *Qui Parle* 14 no. 2 (2004), p. 73.

86. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 82.

87. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 87.

88. Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy. Lectures and Essays*, trans. H.W. Carr (London, Macmillan, 1920), p. 102.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 103. It is this differentiation of attention and synthesis that allows Bergson to describe how experience takes place on a multiplicity of different planes of which action and dreams occupy different regions of a continuum.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

95. Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, p. 306.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

98. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 51.

99. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 57.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

101. Both Bloom and Pred's examples of urban distraction mirror Walter Benjamin's writing on the subject. See Alan Latham, “The power of distraction: distraction, tactility, and habit in the work of Walter Benjamin,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17 no. 4 (1999), pp. 451–473. Benjamin points to the emergence of a habitual tactility where interruption is thoroughly part of habit-body rather than external to it. Imagining interruption differently also draws succor from writings in Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies on complex tightly-coupled systems where interruptions in the form of breakdowns, failures, accidents are not exceptional but are all part of the adaptive capacities of systems.

102. Ann Graybiel and Scott Rauch, “Toward a neurobiology of obsessive-compulsive disorder,” *Neuron* 28 (2000), p. 343.

103. Tsuneyuki Nakazawa, “A spectrum for obsession and personality disorders,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 50 no. 1 (1996), pp. 11–19.

104. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 87.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 51.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 82

108. Michel Serres, *Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London, Continuum, 2008), p. 143.

109. Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

110. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 83.

111. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, p. 100.

112. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 88.
113. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 37–8.
114. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 84.
115. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 134.
116. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (London, Continuum, 2008).
117. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 84.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid., p. 83.
120. Ravaillon, *Of Habit*, p. 37.
121. See also Bissell, “Thinking habits for uncertain subjects.”
122. Catherine Malabou, “Addiction and grace: preface to Félix Ravaillon’s *Of Habit*,” in Felix Ravaillon *Of Habit* (London, Continuum, 2008), p. xix.
123. Nigel Thrift, *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London, Routledge, 2008), p. 240–1.
124. Thrift, *Non-representational Theory*.
125. Reminding us of its generative creativity, in her preface to *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick says that “Obsessions are the most durable form of intellectual capital.” Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985), p. ix.
126. See David Bissell and Gillian Fuller, “Stillness unbound”, in *Stillness in a Mobile World*, eds. David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (London, Routledge, 2011), pp. 1–18.
127. Borges, *The Zahir*, p. 87.
128. Ibid., p. 1149.
129. Ibid., p. 1152.
130. See Catherine Malabou, *What Shall We Do With Our Brain?* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 76.

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