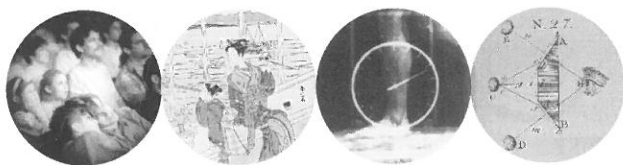


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Depression and the logic of separation: situating Pierre Fédida's 'La Relique et le travail du deuil' (The relic and the work of mourning)

M. Stone-Richards

Abstract

This article introduces the work of psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida on the work of mourning, separation and depression. Fédida's work is first examined in relation to works by Freud, Lagache, Mannoni and Laplanche. After explaining the importance of anthropology in the conceptualization of mourning, attention is then directed to clinical interpretation illustrated by Georges Rodenbach (*Bruges-la-morte*) and Chantal Akerman (*Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*). Attention is drawn to the role of substitutive formations, leading to an understanding of the mobility of psychic life such that the presence of unanalyzable psychotic kernels suggests not only limits to analytic experience but a corresponding presence in culture, too. From this, certain suggestions on temporality and depression – living the impossible death – lead, to a question relating to the renovation of cultural histories and studies. What should be the issue – visual culture, or a philosophical anthropology of culture and visibility where crisis and resistance become forms of the unanalyzability of the time of the other?

Key words

Chantal Akerman • depression • Georges Rodenbach • mourning • philosophical anthropology • separation

At the moment when memory no longer recounts, is no longer either reassuring or heroic, there, in its place, comes repetition. And here, too, madness – but not just any madness: the madness of woman, madness which takes as form woman or the absent. (Fédida, 1978b)

Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.

The rest remains, the rest remains and kills.

William Empson, 'The Years' (1984)

L'insolite expression 'travail du deuil', wrote the late – and neglected – Daniel Lagache in his 1938 essay 'Le Travail du deuil: Ethnologie et psychanalyse' (Lagache, 1977[1938]).¹ Even more strange, more mysterious, however, is the functioning of the relic and the psychic mechanism which underwrites its power, its capacity, namely *Verleugnung* (disavowal). How is it that we might come to speak of the relic – a leftover, a residue, a rest, a remnant, in any case something no longer in motion – in intimate relation with the process, activity and work of mourning, the *intense and arduous effort* of which Lagache spoke? This relation between immobility and motion – the freezing of affect, the immersion in silence – is but the first of a number of compelling problems, indeed, enigmas and paradoxes explored by the French psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida in a set of related essays on depression, mourning, melancholia and the hypochondria of the dream in his important book *L'Absence* (1978a).² Elsewhere I have given the outlines of Fédida's approach and conception of the analytic situation, here I shall limit myself to situating this essay on 'The relic and the work of mourning'.

The terrain of loss

Most psychoanalytic accounts of mourning would, normally, begin with Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) and, perhaps, the essay 'On Transience' (1916). Jean Laplanche would agree, whilst pointing out that 'Mourning and Melancholia' is not the only significant text on mourning, that there is, too, what Freud himself considered his best book, namely *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), which is, says Laplanche (1992a[1991]), 'very little read nowadays', especially the second chapter devoted to 'Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence', the major part of which is dedicated to taboos of the dead.³ Now, it is precisely with Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, chapter two, that Fédida begins his account of the relic and the work of mourning, depression and the *enigma* of mourning. The tacit engagement with *Totem and Taboo* – and here one might, again, mention Lagache,⁴ along with Octave Mannoni's (1969[1963]) essay 'Je sais bien, mais quand même' – is meant, first, to identify the problematic in play as that of belief (*croissance*) rather than any claim to knowledge (*savoir*), and the psychic mechanism, *Verleugnung*, which underlies it: Of course I know (*Je sais bien*), but really ... (*mais quand même*). Anthropology is clearly meant to be a levelling: Freud draws upon contemporaneous literature on Polynesia; Lagache calls upon Robert Hertz (1928[1907]), whose material is drawn from the Dayaks of Borneo; finally, Mannoni centres his argument on the 1959 French translation of the autobiography of the Hopi Indian Don Talayesva, *Soleil Hopi* (1959). At no point, however, does Fédida draw his examples from the ethnological, for his approach is part and parcel – as even Laplanche will allow himself⁵ – of a *philosophical anthropology* and so there is no hint of exoticism. Instead, clinical practice, art and literature – often Symbolist and Surrealist – provide the repertoire of examples, which is to say, that the anthropology is that of a

regard at the near-to or presence-at-hand and thereby the everyday. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* is seen to be, if I may so put it, part of a clinical anthropology opening onto such questions as: What is the role of the dead in the continuing in life of the living? To what extent does the psyche – whose archaic strata determine successive processes of sedimentation in identity and character formation, processes originary with cannibalistic incorporation – depend upon ambivalence (a necessary acceptance and rejection), upon mechanisms of incorporation and projection? And what happens when these mechanisms and processes become frozen, fall under 'the charm of the object [which] is ... at the source of melancholic forms as well as of a persecutory position'? (Fédida, 1978d). *The charm of the object* implies an autonomy of the object, albeit derived, and here the relic, as that particular kind of object whose function is to mediate between the living and the dead, comes into its own as a means of protection, but also in such a manner that one may begin to comprehend the psychic investments and mechanisms deployed to protect the subject against the encounter with its own death, or, more precisely, the representation of its own death. Here, the issues become dramatic – whence the example, following from Gisela Pankow's *L'Homme et sa psychose* (1969), taken from the Belgian Symbolist Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* (1892), wherein the relic of the narrative – the remnant of the beloved's tresses – functions as a stabilization of a potentially psychotic mechanism – a borderline case, in other words – until psychosis is triggered by the defilement of the relic-hair, whereupon, in an unreflecting, sudden and murderous act the principal protagonist Hugues Viane kills the woman, Jane Scott, who has defiled the relic-memory of his dead wife. For both Fédida and Pankow, this spontaneous psychotic act – from passivity to violent and accomplished suddenness – signals the resolution of a process of mourning that had become dangerously and disastrously stalled (cf. Pankow, 1969), whence, in Fédida's characterization, that immobility which 'makes of the body the sepulchre of the lover henceforth consecrated to absence' (Fédida, 1978d). (In another context, I shall argue that something similar can be said for another great Belgian artist, namely, Chantal Akerman's film of 1975, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.)

Substitutive formations

The terrain of loss that is mourning points, as we have seen for Fédida, not, in the first instance, to time (as is the case for Laplanche), but to a clinical anthropology whose spatiality is that of a struggle for *separation* – of the living from the dead, of protection against the encounter with one's own death – whence the significance for Fédida that the relic and the fetish correspond to similar substitutive formations. (In his essay, 'Je sais bien, mais quand même', Mannoni points out that it is in the essay on 'Fetishism' of 1927 that Freud opens his questioning on belief through his discussion of disavowal, cf. Mannoni, 1969[1963]) Though the relic is not a fetish, 'one cannot', argues Fédida, 'fail to be struck by the homology of two processes which lead, through different arguments – in the one instance death, and in the other castration – to substitutive formations marked by compromise' (Fédida, 1978e: 58). From here, clinical material becomes transposed with clinical theory: to what extent are such substitutive formations 'normal' and not pathological, the question which

Freud confronted in his 1938 essay on *Spaltung*, thinking aloud: is such an observation banal, or might it be something more unnerving? For Fédida (1992), whose general conception of analytic action is termed, in its cultural dimension, a *tragic psychopathology*, such 'normalization' is indeed unnerving as it points to the limits of psychoanalysis and the thinking of separation necessary to sociality, symbolicity and the possibility of thought (*la pensée*) insofar as it foregrounds the question of what remains and which may well be unanalyzable – what William Empson (1984) in his villanelle, 'The Years', characterized in the enunciation, the recognition that 'The rest remains, the rest remains and kills':

Question here signifies a something *unanalyzable* which at one and the same time serves a 'psychotic kernel' foyer of life and death, traumatic place or non-place of creation, a *blind spot* subtracted from the mythic ideal of knowledge of oneself through psychoanalysis. (Fédida, 1978d)

This blind spot becomes the centre of analytic thinking. It is only in the light of this *limit*, this blind spot, that one can then return to an analytic conception of time through the melancholy of the dream: 'The *great enigma of mourning* is perhaps in the power of a time leaving sleep to the living in order to dream death and thereby protecting them from a violence which alone the melancholic knows' (Fédida, 1978d).

Depression and the logic of separation: the impossible death

"Leben ist Tod, und Tod ist auch ein Leben Hölderlin", 'In lieblicher Bläue ...'⁶

Here we might foreground what are the two dominant aspects to Fédida's re-thinking of mourning, of what constitutes the enigma of mourning: first, that the relation mourning–melancholia should be displaced by that of dream–melancholia towards what he terms a *melancholy of the dream* (Fédida, 1978d: 76). Why this displacement? Because hereby attention is brought to separation; in this case, as the loosening of cathexis in relation to an environment – and the enigma, the real difficulty, which is, following Freud, following Lacan – and dare one say, Breton – that of sleep.⁷ Freud, says Fédida, indicated 'that the dream gives access to a comprehension of the somatic for which the only possible metapsychology – thanks precisely to the dream – is that of *sleep*' ('La grande énigme du deuil', Fédida, 1978d: 76). In distinguishing depression from melancholia precisely, then, what is foregrounded is a *somatic depression*:

This expression is called to assume the status here of a metapsychological comprehension at one and the same time in relation to *death* (as distinct from the death drive), to dream and melancholia, and, on the other hand, in relation to primitive narcissism as well as in relation to the *egoism* of sleep. (pp. 76–7)

If mourning guarantees the non-representability of one's own death, the mechanism of disavowal entails that death still be present, and this is what the dream makes possible and what is lived in depression, namely, the impossible death:

What is called depression is defined by an economic position concerning a *narcissistic organisation of emptiness* ... which resembles a 'simulation' of death in order to protect oneself from death. And finally, *the psyche* – which is perhaps nothing more than the depressive metaphor of emptiness – far from being conceived as a vital breath would it not then be designated as an *immobility of the body* or even as *body entirely become place of absence*? Should depression not then be the vital experience of the impossible death? (p. 71)

Here we rejoin the terrain of Blanchot on radical separation and the impossibility of dying,⁸ no less than the terrain which extends from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975); for the issue that matters – in the work of Klein, Lacan and, increasingly in the post-Lacanian moment of French psychoanalysis, hence its insistent turn to the English-language psychoanalysis of analysts such as Harold Searles, Donald Winnicott and the still insufficiently appreciated Frances Tustin as variously witnessed in the work of Green, Granoff, Pontalis, Laplanche and Fédida – is that concerning the nature of separation, an interweaving set of processes underwritten by negativity: the separation from primary narcissism – without which, as Susan Isaacs argued against Freud, there could be no learning, a process re-enacted in the narcissistic collapse of melancholia – the separation from cannibalistic identification (Fédida, 1978c), the achieved separation of child in the process of mothering, the opening up of an interval between dream-sleep and wakefulness and, through negation [*Verneinung*], the accession of symbolicity. In other words, all that is encompassed in the conditions of the possibility of thought (cf. Granoff, 1976). If this is the accomplishment of culture – that aporetic compromise between the work of the negative and superego formations – then Klein, no less than Blanchot, Fédida and Derrida, is surely correct that culture is perpetual mourning, for negativity is its interior precisely where there is no exterior.⁹ Whence, then, the role of the unanalyzable rest which remains. From Didier Anzieu's *L'auto-analyse de Freud* (1975) to Derrida's *La carte postale* (1980), psychoanalysis has become more insistently aware of the implications – in terms of technique as well as in terms of its institutionalization, which is to say, the conditions of transmission of its knowledge – of what *remains* unanalyzed in Freud. In recent times, however, there has grown up a debate about borderline cases (*cas limites, cas réputés difficiles*), and the extent to which they form a distinct nosographical or clinical group, distinct, that is, in aetiology and treatment, from the psychoses and the neuroses, especially in severe cases where it is scarcely possible to identify any functional demarcation between psychosis and borderline cases. Historically, psychoanalysis was defined by Freud in terms of the transference neuroses, Freud observing that the absence of affect limited the possibility of transference on the part of the psychotic – Klein's ability to conduct analysis with children, that is, before the full development of speech would, of course, open a new path – in this respect, absence or loss of affect could be said to signify a limit in and to analysis. It is here that we can begin to see how psychoanalysis can rejoin some of the terrain of phenomenology in clinical psychiatry since the generation of Ludwig Binswanger and Eugène Minkowski in the 1920s, hence Laplanche, in his 'Préface' to the great book by Pankow, *L'Homme et sa psychose* (1969), observes that:

It would be interesting to define the reasons characterising the *object* itself, which are such that, more than is the case with the existence of the neurotic or the pervert, the psychotic world, of its nature, seems to call for a descriptive approach, the phenomenology of a certain being-in-the-world, or of a certain 'world'. It is in the field of psychosis that have generally appeared the most elaborate attempts at mutual enrichment between the psychoanalytic contribution [apport] and the approach of the philosophy of existence. (p. 11)

Phenomenological psychiatry, in which the *encounter*, and not the transference, is the significant operative concept of framework, is predicated upon the possibility of empathy with another through the meeting of a world: a world in which the possibility of access is gained through *projection*, a world in which one of the participants in the encounter is without centre because, in the breakdown of transcendence, the primitive bindings between noesis (intellection) and noema (intentional object) are undone concomitant with a radical deconstruction of temporality and spatiality.¹⁰ For such a subject of displacement, the voice – hallucinated or no – is never associated with an interior but is always associated with phenomena from without. Projection, on this account, does not depend upon transference; indeed, absence or loss of affect points to the principle problematic at the heart of any philosophy or phenomenology of existence; namely, communication, communication between subjects as well as intra-psychic communication.

In the increasing preoccupation with borderline cases, then, contemporary French psychoanalysis is addressing itself to the limits of psychoanalysis as also to the limits – or aporetic relations – of sociality and identity, hence Fédida's insistence on interrogating

...psychoanalytic technique on its confrontation with limits and thereby on the internal transformations of its practice and its theory; which is, at the same time, to re-draw the frontiers of psychoanalysis through a thinking of inexistence. ('Présentation', in Fédida, 1978a: 9; cf. Laplanche, 1992c[1991])

The emphasis upon substitutive formations – relic–fetish, mourning–melancholia, psychosis–neurosis – is no merely nosological matter, but is instead a clinical picturing of mobility, of subjection in cultural formations, in which, following Freud's (1938) late account of *Spaltung*, 'the relic is not exclusively a concern of the clinical dimension of the neuroses, but is suitable for repositioning, at another level, the question of what, along with the fetish, it designates at the heart of psychosis' (p. 59.) Again, for Fédida, *Question* here signifies the unanalyzable which is a psychotic kernel; there could not be any more powerful *image* of this limit of the unanalyzable, of the absence (of any sign) of affect, of the near incomprehensible, or the incomprehensible, utterly bewildering conjunction of near immobility and dangerous, yet precise suddenness, rushing from the tomb that is a living, impossible death, than the character of Jeanne Dielman in Akerman's eponymous film. *There*, indeed, we encounter in its radicality the enigma of mourning, of time on the terrain of loss – *Le temps qui mange la vie*, in the poem 'L'Ennemi' by Baudelaire read aloud by Jeanne and her son Sylvain (of sylvan

time?) – and, as with Hugues Viane in Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte*, the suddenness and violence of an act of temporary psychosis as resolution to mourning, before falling back into immobility and silence, as though assuming the nature of a still life. There, in its nudity, is the enigma of cultural and individual formation, the repetition that points to madness and death in a strange lucidity beyond passivity.

Visual culture, or philosophical anthropology of culture and visuality ...?

We knew, indeed, that thought has available only a small number of *alarm signals* in order to manifest its extreme distress. (Breton, 1933)

If the image – as 'pathic' power – reaches to and transforms wholly the time of the subject, then, it goes without saying, one will no longer be able to speak of psychic 'history' in the simple sense: in the dream as in the symptom, the past is no longer situated 'behind' the present of a given state. (Didi-Huberman, 2002)

Fédida's thinking has long been in dialogue with art and problems of visuality: of especial importance and distinctiveness is the exemplary role of Surrealism in articulating his conception of the dream (see Fédida, 1978g). As far back as 1966, Gaston Ferdière (in Alquié, 1969)¹¹ could comment on Hans Prinzhorn's *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (1984[1922]) that no one 'had yet had the good taste to translate' it into French, something that would not be achieved until 1984 by Marielène Weber as a doctoral thesis under the direction of Fédida; closely related to the visuality and art from the psychopathological margins, and mediated by Fédida's interpretation of Surrealism, is his reading of the *informe* inflected by a psychopathology of the movement of forms;¹² here, we might also mention his intimate dialogue with the philosopher, cultural and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman which is, by now, well established, but there are also younger scholars thinking in renewed terms of a cultural history (of art and thought) for which Fédida's work is becoming more important.¹³ The historical origins of art history and the humanistic disciplines are firmly rooted in forms of cultural history and anthropology before the impact of positivism encouraged the adoption and internalization of a model of causality alien to the time of histories born on psychic investments: it has been a long time since the 'humanities' have been able to conceive of an exit from the crude sociologies of knowledge and reductionism that were the consequence of positivist causalities, but it is equally clear that the present time, at times nearing crisis, is one of profound anxiety. The form of cultural history whose models might draw from Fédida and the tradition of thought important to him – the phenomenology of Binswanger, the clinically inflected phenomenology of Henri Maldiney centred on a thinking of crisis and suddenness,¹⁴ no less than the reflexions of a Maurice Blanchot – could not, however, be farther removed from what currently passes, at least in certain places, for visual culture with its attempt to supersede or replace art history, for any renewed cultural history – hence the arrival, *enfin*, of Warburg – could not be one that imagined itself freely, easily speaking

from the position of the other, neither could it be one in which imagery is divorced from its modalities of resistance, or even fascination, charm; rather it would be one which acknowledged *a time of the other*, as also *a time of the object*, and imagery as continuous with a masking of negativity. Such a practice of cultural historization, part-and-parcel of a profound rethinking of disciplinarity in terms of anthropology, would be a history and study of crises and resistances, the anachronization of time leading to de-translations and re-translations, and of that which remains – because with Laplanche we agree that there is always *already* something *to translate* (*à traduire*) – beyond representation, what, in other words, remains unanalyzable, inassimilable, and which thereby poses a challenge to facile institutionalization (cf. Laplanche, 1992b[1991]: 327). The unanalyzable in analysis, in culture is the threat to culture at the heart of culture: the relic, in other words, that makes possible transition and continuance through disturbance enregistering the psychotic kernel at the heart of culture. (No cultural practice, in short, if it is to be thoughtful activity, could be held apart from a philosophy of culture.) It is to make of cultural history a study of the conditions of communication. Nothing more. Though may be less.¹⁵

Notes

1. A selection of Lagache's essays is available in English (see Lagache, 1993).
2. The other essays in the group are: 'Le Cannibale mélancolique' (Fédida, 1978c), 'La Grande énigme du deuil. Dépression et mélancolie. Le beau objet' (Fédida, 1978d); and 'L'Agir dépressif' (Fédida, 1978f).
3. An English language selection of Laplanche's essays is also available, see Laplanche (1999).
4. 'Lagache, finally, whose case entitled "Pathological Mourning" is perhaps the study which does the most to re-open in a new way the question of mourning as a whole', Laplanche (1992a[1991]: 375).
5. Cf. Jean Laplanche (1992b[1991] who writes:

Beyond the empirical aspect of human existence, what is sought is a situation at once ineluctable and universal, but a situation which is that of being human and not that of a subject in general. In this sense, our philosophy remains an anthropology, and our direction is that there is no philosophy which is not anthropological. (p. 332)

For Fédida's response to this essay on time and translation, see Fédida (1998).

6. 'Living is death, and death too is a life.' Friedrich Hölderlin (1998), 'In Lovely blue...'
7. Without going into the psychopathological literature of Breton's medical training, suffice it to mention that when he published his reflections on dream and liminality in 'Le Message automatique' (1933), he avails himself of Pierre Quercy's *Les Hallucinations* (1930); Leroy's essay, *Les Visions du demi-sommeil* (1933) was published in the same year as Breton's essay, whilst in 1934 Daniel Lagache published his medical dissertation on 'Les Hallucinations verbales'. Breton's thinking, in other words, in its own way stays abreast of, and responds to, certain developments in the medical psychiatric, or more specifically, psychopathological literature of his time.
8. Cf. Blanchot's reading of Serge Leclair (1997) cf., also, Lagache (1977[1938]):

The death of others, it is said, is quite other than a biological fact; in which case, the phenomenon of death would not be anything but a kind of repetition of death at the human level: to live the death of others would be a kind of putting to death. (p. 257)

9. Why, then, should Judith Butler (1997) valorize homosexual grieving, when the psychic life is bisexual and ineluctably ambivalent?

10. On the encounter, cf. Buytendijk (1952) and Ellenberger (1958); for a Blanchotian and phenomenological account of the encounter in Surrealism, cf. M. Stone-Richards (2001) and relatedly (forthcoming).
11. The conference of which this book is a record took place in 1966.
12. Fédida reflects on both the *informe* (Bataille) and *informe substance* (Lygia Clark), see Fédida (2000[1994]).
13. At the Chicago CAA of 2001, Charity Scribner delivered a paper on 'Object, Fetish, Relic: Joseph Beuys and the Museum', whose conceptualization was underpinned by Fédida (1978e) along with Mannoni (1969[1963]).
14. Cf. Maldiney (1973/4[1961]); this essay is extensively discussed in the first significant study – by a non-Lacanian – of Lacan's conception of psychosis in De Waelhens (1972).
15. At this juncture, the problem of separation would need to encompass the problem of *distance* necessary to the experience of thinking, an approach to the conditions and possibility of thinking essential to the reflections of Warburg, Heidegger and Adorno.

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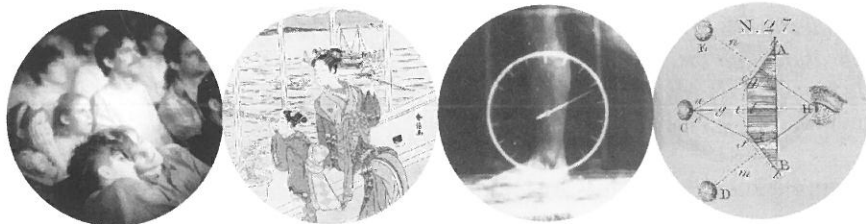
M. Stone-Richards has recently completed a collection of essays *Surrealism and the Work of Culture* (under consideration by Ashgate Press); his edited anthology of *Philosophy/Psychiatry/Psychoanalysis: French Writings on Surrealism* is forthcoming from the University of Texas Press. He is currently working on problems of time, culture and limit-experiences in contemporary French phenomenology and psychoanalysis (encompassing Debord, Akerman and Marina Abramović). His most recent study dealing with the problem of time and liberty is 'Néo-Stoïcisme et éthique de la gloire: Le baroque chez Debord', which

appeared in *Pleine Marge* 34, December 2001. His long study on 'Failure and Community: Preliminary Questions on the Political in the Culture of Surrealism' will be published by Raymond Spiteri and Don LaCoss (eds) *Surrealism, Politics, Culture* (Ashgate Press, 2003).

Address: 4942 N. Winchester-2, Chicago, IL 60640, USA. [email: mstonerichards@earthlink.net]

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