

On Psychic Pain

*Dull sublimary lovers love
 (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
 Absence, because it dath remove
 Those things which elemental it*

John Donne
 'A valediction: Forbidding mourning',
Songs and Sonnets.

Talking of psychic pain otherwise than in vaguely imaged terms does not imply reviewing in all their variety of origin and expression, the different types of neurotic or psychotic suffering encountered in psychoanalysis, whether the suffering is directly eloquent or whether it requires the process of regression to be actualized. On the contrary, it entails reflecting on the *specificity* of pain. To begin with, what is it that allows us to transpose onto the plane of psychic experience, a set of feelings, an actual experience, a 'vécu', which for every one of us is so intimately related to the body, to a part of the body, even to an organ ('the seat' of pain)? Furthermore, what is it that differentiates pain from the other feelings and affects of unpleasure, anxiety in particular? Can pain be included in the range of affects that are unpleasant – at the end of the scale – or should one grant it a prototypical function, or even the value of an irreducible experience?

It is only with reticence that some authors appear to have accepted the introduction of the notion of psychic pain into the psychoanalytical field. The reticence might be explained by a vague fear that full recognition of pain could turn into an apology of pain, into an excessive valorization of pure feeling, unthinkable and inexpressible, into a religion of salvation through agony. It is true that the temptation of a sort of mysticism of the negative does exist. Perhaps psychoanalysis, on the contrary, although it considers suffering as a condition for starting a psychoanalytical treatment and aims at least at diminishing it, finds it difficult to accept being assimilated into an acknowledgment of pain: in our culture the right to happiness is soon transformed

into a duty to obtain it, the right to fall ill and be looked after into a demand for good health, and the right to enjoyment into compulsory pleasure.

Nevertheless, we can attempt without too much apprehension, at least as a hypothesis, to circumscribe the concept and the experience of psychic pain. We shall rely (1) on Freud, who, without having fully developed his ideas on the subject, never ceased to interest himself in the specific problem – in his eyes, quite puzzling – that the existence of physical and psychic pain poses; (2) on the clinical analysis of neurosis, my lack of experience preventing me from tackling that of psychosis.

For, indeed, there does exist in Freud the outlines of an original theory of pain. This theory is explicitly present at both ends of his work: in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) and in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). But it is also implicitly present over the whole length of the course, suddenly erupting and shaking the whole edifice, with, for example, the introduction of narcissism, the re- adoption of the old question of trauma as a breach, the definition of primary masochism, the irreversible production of the death instinct, and finally the 'negative therapeutic reaction', the 'choice' of an anchorage in pain, which is 'preferred' to a change perceived as an unbearable renoucement.

But let us not go too fast. First I shall briefly go over the indications in the 1895 *Project*. Indications, yes, but drawn by a firm hand, as is the remainder of this text, a true 'screen-memory' of Freud's work, in which the lines of future development are already drawn.

In it Freud describes the experience of satisfaction of an infant as the model of the emergence of desire, which he readopts as it stands in Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is possible to think that if, in this work, the anxiety dream is not strictly differentiated from the nightmare itself, it is because Freud refers exclusively to the experience of satisfaction in order to establish his thesis of the dream as wish-fulfilment and neglects the 'experience of pain' (*Schmerzserlebnis*) which is at the heart of the nightmare. For in the *Project*, he opposes the experience of satisfaction – and this is the point which interests us – to the experience of pain (*Schmerzserlebnis*). The pair of opposites thus introduced is not, as one might expect, pleasure-unpleasure (*Lust-Unlust*) but, on the one hand pleasure-unpleasure (or better still, unpleasure-pleasure), the process which rules the course of the experience of satisfaction) and on the other hand pain. It is true that this distinction is not always rigorously maintained (thus, in 'Mourning and melancholia' (1917e) Freud talks of the 'unpleasure

of pain', *Schmerzhaft*) but it is important for us that, in those original days when Freud used every element at his disposal to give a structure to the new field opening up before him, the *bipolarity* should be described in these terms, *at the very moment of psychic functioning*. There is, in this, a dualism which is no less fundamental than the later instinctual dualisms, an antagonism which is all the more interesting in that it is imprinted in the body, in two elementary and irrecusable bodily experiences: the pleasure-pain pair from which associationist psychology was already attempting to derive the entire complexity of affective life).

Thus, through its innate quality, pain is presented in the *Project* as 'indubitably' different from unpleasure. From the point of view of the process in question, its first essential characteristic (and this is a definition which will remain unchanged) is the phenomenon of a breaking down of barriers, occurring when 'excessively large quantities of energy break through the protective devices', and then a discharge, within the body, of the cathexis thus accumulated. Pain is an effraction, it supposes the existence of limits: limits of the body, limits of the ego, it brings about an internal discharge, which could be called an *impllosion* effect.

In a *Draft* (1895) of the same period concerning melancholia there is a rush of words like 'wound', 'internal haemorrhage', 'hole in the psychic sphere' — a *hole* not a *gap*, an *excess*, not a *lack* — and also, in succession: absorption, suction, pumping. Let us retain the metaphor, unusual for Freud, of internal haemorrhage. Very special mechanisms are employed to fill it up, more reminiscent of the functioning of an organism or a hydraulic machine, than that of a mental activity. An excess of excitation hinders any binding activity, even at the level of the primary process: the too full creates a void. This 'too much' we find so often in expressions of the monotonous complaint of all bodily suffering, 'My God, it hurts too much.' For, when *man* says he suffers like a *beast*, he calls on *God*. What is remarkable in this short text, weighty with intuition, is that the (apparent) melancholic impoverishment is opposed to the (real) neurasthenic impoverishment: in one case too much, in the other, not enough. With pain as an *effraction*, we are *no longer* in the other economic register in which the theory of anxiety is situated: increase and decrease of *tensions*.

One can put forward the hypothesis that once he had posed from the very beginning this fundamental bipolarity between the experience of satisfaction and the experience of pain, Freud neglected — 'repressed' — the second and for a long time he devoted himself with

passion to following the ups and downs of the first: the theory of the dream as wish-fulfilment, definition of the symptom as a compromise formation, the insistent search, crowned with success, of pleasure hidden in suffering. [It is on this last point that we will insist here.] For, one of the most certain facts gained through our experience, as J. Laplanche quite rightly noted, is that in *every* subject under analysis we find suffering, and the movement of the treatment consists in discovering and showing by what detours this suffering is produced, induced, unconsciously sought by the individual himself, in order to obtain a premium of pleasure in some other intrapsychic place. The second Freudian topography in particular allows in this sense a complex series of exchanges, of which the most simple expresses itself thus: pleasure for one system (the super-ego for example), unpleasure for another (the ego, for example). Even traumatism does not escape this elementary rule of arithmetic: did not Fenichel rightly speak of 'traumatophilic personalities following what Freud designated as 'fate neuroses' and what Abraham said, already in 1907, of the sexual trauma apparently *endured* as an infantile form of sexual activity?'

However, one cannot but be aware of the fact that a whole dimension, always present on the horizon of human experience — pain — returns time and again in the work of Freud, almost in spite of himself. The key-text here is certainly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g). So what is this *remainder*, so honestly and imperatively sought by Freud, this something that *in the end* neither the pleasure principle nor even masochism can quite encompass? What is it that is, in the proper sense, *beyond* the principle of unpleasure-pleasure, if it is not pain?

It is in Appendix C of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926d) that we find the most frank, if not the most clear, attempt to differentiate anxiety and pain. (The fact that this attempt at clarification appears in an Appendix confirms our hypothesis that Freud has difficulties in integrating pain into his theory.) There are three densely written pages which should be cited in their entirety, but of which I shall limit myself to stating the major points.

In the first phase, anxiety and pain are *both* seen in relation to the prevalent category of object loss: pain is seen as the reaction appropriate to the loss of the object, anxiety as the reaction appropriate to the loss of the object, anxiety as the reaction to the danger that this loss entails (loss of love, *Hilfslosigkeit*). In the *second phase*, traits specific to pain become evident, which subsequently then correct, even contradict, the rapprochement operating in the first instance: (1) Pain is (as defined in the *Project*) the consequence of a breach in the protective

shield. (2) It acts as a constant instinctual excitation. (3) The experience of pain, which the small child inevitably undergoes, is independent of his experience of need (unsatisfied). (4) Pain emanates from the 'periphery': skin or internal organ. There, Freud notes, in these traits essential to a definition of pain, one finds neither object loss, nor longing, which are present in the anxiety reaction. Yet, in the *third phase*, absorbed in his attempt to bring together anxiety and pain even to the point of integrating them, Freud effaces the traits that he has just singled out. In the case of psychic pain, it wouldn't be necessary to consider the role played by the periphery as in the case of physical pain. Moreover, the economic conditions would be the same, whether in the case of cathexis of longing concentrated upon the missing or lost object (anxiety) or in the case of cathexis concentrated upon an injured part of the body (pain). The transition from physical pain to mental pain corresponds to a change from narcissistic cathexis to object-cathexis. An object-presentation which is highly cathected by instinctual need plays the same role as a part of the body which is cathected by an excess of stimuli. The continuous nature of the cathectic process and the impossibility of inhibiting it produce *the same* (emphasized by me) state of mental helplessness. It is then easy to understand the painful character of that experience, par excellence, of object-loss: mourning.

What one may perceive that is hesitant or too peremptory here in Freud's approach, should not be attributed to his liabilities. Indeed he declares that he is unable to explain satisfactorily why the separation from the object should produce anxiety, mourning or 'simply' pain. He will content himself, he tells us 'with drawing certain distinctions and adumbrating certain possibilities'. In this case, ambiguity and contradiction are the nature of the thing itself. Pain appears to us to occupy a *middle* position: halfway between anxiety and mourning, but also between narcissistic cathexis and object cathexis. Let us attempt to specify this position.

The experience of pain takes place within a 'body-ego'. It is striking to note that it is exactly the same model — effraction, concentration of cathexis, etc. — that Freud uses to describe physical pain and psychic pain. What occurs with the experience of satisfaction (i.e. the gulf between the simple satisfaction of the vital need, the *Befriedigung*, and the complex arrangement of the fantasmatic sequence, of the *Wunschphantasie*!) is not to be found in the case of pain: there is no metaphor here, that is to say creation of meaning, but analogy, a direct transfer from one register to another: the same words are used, the same mechanisms invoked. As if, in the case of pain, the body

transformed itself into psyche and the psyche into body. For this body-ego, or this 'psychic body', the relation between the container and the contents is prevalent, whether we are dealing with physical or psychic pain.

The language of common experience can be a valuable guide in this instance: pain 'wakes up' — and sometimes 'awakens' — passes from acute to dull, 'radiates' (from the periphery to the centre). By leaps and bounds, by vibration and successive waves, pain progressively conquers all the territory, to the point of distorting its geography and revealing an unknown land. Neither had this feature escaped Freud's lucidity, notwithstanding the sobriety of his description of pain: 'It is well known that when internal organs are giving us pain we receive spatial and other representations of parts of the body which are ordinarily not represented at all in conscious ideation. I have anxiety, I am pain, could it be said through terms which are obviously abrupt. At least, anxiety can be expressed, can be coined into the formation of symptoms, can modulate itself into representations and phantasies, or discharge itself through acting out. It can even be contagious, whereas pain belongs only to oneself. Anxiety remains communicable, an indirect appeal to another; pain can only be cried out — but this cry does nothing to assuage it — only to fall back into silence where it becomes one with the being. The subject himself does not communicate with his pain. Here are some illuminating lines by Henri Michaux: 'What the sufferer does not grasp is the difficult task of relating to suffering — there lies his real suffering — suffering within suffering.' Silence alternates with cries.

A contemporary writer, most gifted in capturing the flux and impact of sensations, J. C. Le Clézio, has admirably expressed the invasion of pain. In his short story *Le Jour où Beaumont fit connaissance avec sa douleur* (his pain, not pain per se) one sees how a 'simple' tooth-ache at night sweeps the man suffering from distress and the ordeal of solitude into a sort of depersonalization — the 'foreign body' infiltrating 'one's own body' until it too, in its turn, becomes foreign — passing through the grip of persecution ('I think some people are here. They are going to kill me. They've got in and are prowling around everywhere', etc.). A real sensory fantasy in which the reassuring line of division between the physical and the psychic broke down.

Another line of division that Freud appears to have hesitated to draw concerns narcissistic cathexis following effraction — and now we are bordering on traumatism; or object cathexis following loss — and now we are bordering on mourning. Here again, too strict a division

would not be pertinent, the very property of pain being to blur the frontiers. No doubt psychic pain depends – in the final analysis – on object-loss, whether real or fantastic – but to recognize the fact does not get us any further, for this loss is also the origin of anxiety . . . and of desire. In the case of pain, the object ceases to function as a possible surety; he is, at best, a substitute, and behind this substitute, there is always another one. Infinite 'transference'. Irremediably lost but eternally maintained, the object cannot be recovered through representation, which renders present another: the same yet different. Where there is pain, it is the absent, lost object that is present; it is the actual, present object that is absent. Consequently the pain of separation appears to be secondary to a naked, absolute pain.² The psychic scene is populated only by shadows, the psychic reality is elsewhere, not so much repressed as encysted.

It is because psychic pain was so strikingly absent in Simon – and even the most customary forms of anxiety – that he made me realize just what the experience of pain and the organized refusal to encounter it could signify. Simon, when he came to see me, was thirty-five. The woman with whom and in whose house he had lived and left him a few months before. Places were strongly cathected, places, and not people. Simon could minutely describe houses, apartments, rooms, even towns in which he had stayed, but more in the manner of a solitarily confined sick person than in that of an auctioneer. In these inventories, I saw all the metaphors of the maternal space that he had missed. Although he had attempted to commit suicide he was not dramatic about it, neither about the gesture nor the abandonment. He drank a lot. His sexual relationships 'didn't work' as they should have done. He did not complain about it, he acknowledged the fact with a smile. As a child he had been in psychotherapy, as a young man in analysis. But, like little Hans, he had 'forgotten everything'. Both his parents died when he was still a small child: deported, disappeared. He saw the cause of his 'infantile amnesia' in this double disappearance. He referred often to this: 'I cannot have any childhood memories because I was so small when I became an orphan.' In other words, the parents had drawn the living child into death. All that was left to him was to survive. And what survived in the sessions was an extraordinary machine to produce dreams (not to experience dreaming) to play with words (rather than letting them play), to register daily life (on condition that it remained petrified). He had built himself a closed system of enclosures and separations – a sort of

mental concentration camp in which intellectual exploits and a discrete and ironic megalomania had replaced, by turning things inside out, physical cruelty and misery. A system of which I was to be the witness, the guardian and the warrant. Highly talented, intelligent, a brilliant and inventive engineer with a rather sarcastic sense of humour, he appeared to expect nothing from me apart from a strengthening of his 'protective barrier' which had been temporarily damaged by the separation from his companion.

From the very beginning I realized the dissociation operating in him, and which must have occurred quite early on to have determined his entire mental functioning: the prevalence of the thinking process, the lack or minimal expression of affects. This obvious dissociation concealed another which made one think less of an obsessional structure than of a 'false self' type of personality. Several manifestations of transference which literally had to be seized on the wing, revealed to me that, though his explicit demand was that I should be only an 'automatic answering system', (an expert interpreter of his dreams for instance) his expectation, inexpressible and unbearable, to the ego-ideal he had been forced to build up, was that I should be completely devoted to him. Thus his protective measures did not only have a defensive function: they helped him to keep hidden, intact in himself and untouched, the tie between his mother and the little barred child. First Simon needed to feel assured that I could take care of that child. He had to find me where he did not seek me and I had to seek him where he had not found himself.

Just like the hero in the Le Clezio story (and perhaps like himself as a baby) it was through tooth-aches that he 'became acquainted with his pain'. For a whole session he wavered: was he going to give his money to the dentist 'to get his mouth repaired' (his own words) or to the analyst? He gave it to the analyst . . . and the so-called 'psychic' pain could at last be met. It was not very spectacular: it started with a fearful session (nothing very unusual to us), nevertheless marked not by an affect of shame, as one might have expected from a man riddled with heroic identifications, but by gratitude. Next followed a patient rediscovery alternately pained and serene, of the mother (but should one say, rediscovery?) a mother idealized to begin with, through some photographs and relics that had been kept, then the object of anger and jealousy. This woman about whom I knew nothing, apart from her tragic death, became present and, in exactly the same movement Simon took shape and life for me. His all too agile verbal and intellectual machine started to creak (he was at a loss for words), he was able to give up certain puerile narcissistic gratifications, the homosexual

'seduction' so obvious in the transference gave way to a shared experience of pain from which a psyche, no longer cut off from its roots but finding its flesh, could be born. If Simon, as an adolescent, could fantasize that the 'universe had been born from a breath of wind' it was less a denial of any subjection to a lineage and a fulfillment of his wish for anarchy, than a desire to avoid at all costs the encounter with the original pain. But now he could have said in the very words of Le Clézio's character: 'I need my pain, if it were not for my pain, I would be nothing.'

It's obvious, I will be told: this is a case of blocked work of mourning, the analysis enabled Simon to undertake and work through the mourning. And I entirely agree; if he had previously spoken of the past death of his parents, he had never allowed it to speak to him in the present, and the analysis made this advent possible. Nevertheless I should like to make a more precise point. Strongly suppressed (I would not say: repressed) psychic pain in this patient took some time to show itself, but its presence was always tangible *à contrario*: a mental structure built on the model of manacled defence, neutralization of affects, alternation of infatuation and demigration of the self, fear of dependence and compulsive seeking of partners, an untrusting production of texts of dreams, a feverish search for techniques of writing as if he could only act on words and even on letters, etc. In saying that the analysis revealed to him that he loved and hated his mother, that he felt guilty of having survived her and full of anger and disappointment because she had abandoned him, we would not be merely stating a banality (we have to admit the banality of our 'discoveries') but we would be by-passing the essential. Rather the analysis did in fact show him that he could rejoin his mother, find the tie with her, without dying himself, or, even better, that he was not forced to mourn over himself indefinitely. Thus his pain did not only emanate from the loss of a love object and of care. The mourning which had arisen so early and been precociously interiorized, had brutally deprived him of an object to love of course but, just as much, of an object to move and to *make suffer!* he was then reduced to functioning in a closed circuit. There was in him an obvious division between 'word-presentations' and 'thing-presentations', between a mental activity without respite and a non-productive psychic life, as if it were encapsulated. His own psyche, just as his mother, had ceased to nourish him. All he could do, in his own words, was to 'organize his territory', sometimes elevated to the dignity of an empire, sometimes reduced to the dimensions of a cage. The trial of pain, like that of the agony of pleasure which was equally forbidden to him, signified the

transgression of his own limits. Pain: at the frontiers and juncture of body and psyche, of death and life.

With René the landscape is apparently totally different. In this case the present is so crushing as to leave me for a long time without resources. Too emphatically present in the sessions, either heavily silent, or noisily accusatory with a frankly persecutory tone, a sensibility exacerbated by the analyst's slightest words, by the slightest movement, continual conflicts with all those possessing the slightest power whom he meets through his work. And, on my side, the discouraging impression that we all know well, of the 'leaky casks of the Danaids' emptying themselves out at one end as they get refilled at the other, René revealing an incapacity of narcissistic stockage. As soon as any progress is achieved in insight or any success obtained in reality, it must be negated.

René certainly suffered as a child, between a passionate, hysterical mother, and an alcoholic father who was psychologically and materially absent. He forces me to undergo what he has undergone from his mother: violent attacks and unforeseeable retreats, words that hurt more than gestures, that hurt with a rare certainty of touch, an inveigling watchfulness, infuriated explosions, an intolerance to absence that induces guilt. Sometimes I incriminate him *in petto* as he used to incriminate his mother, as he still accuses her today, whilst he persists in trying to 'change' her, here again with striking actuality and unawareness of time.

Yes, there is no doubt that suffering is there suffering both endured and inflicted. René appears to be literally *possessed* by his mother, or rather by all the latter was able to throw out into him, thus preventing him from building his own psychic space. When I hear that René has had a serious car accident from which his son has miraculously survived the circle is completed - here again, close circuit, closed system. The psychic murder that his mother committed on him almost modified itself in him into a real murder perpetrated on the body of his son. Omnipotent and death-bringing mother; how reality occasionally comes to give credit to our phantasies!

However, it seems to me that all this system of aggressivity and guilty retaliation, of suffering endured and to be endured by others, of an eternal recreation in the transference of an object that is first idealized and then worse than bad: reduced to nothing, that all this fixed dialectics aims at holding at arm's length something that is more intolerable. Sometimes obvious, noisy, repeated suffering serves as a screen for pain. Is not the function of some suffering to *evacuate* psychic pain, and I am thinking in particular of sado-masochistic

suffering in which the subject is his own producer and master of his scenario.³ To suffer a lot, at the necessary time and for the necessary duration in order not to suffer too much, and for ever?

René knows how to say no. He only feels he exists through 'no'. That is his suffering, but it is also his strength. This energetic man who was able to complete with profit the studies he started late in life and above all to face up to dramatic family problems in a remarkable manner, whose home is always open to those who appeal to him, does not allow himself to dream or imagine: he must be ceaselessly active. René has no fantasy *life*, no slight void in himself which permits the play of presentations, the eruption and perspective of memories: it is always the same scenes that are evoked, in which he occupies, of course, the position of the powerless, enraged victim. If he loses his grip, he will fall into the abyss. I cannot help thinking here of a few verses from D. H. Lawrence, which inspired the title of Marion Milner's book: 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them.'

As in the case of Simon, even if the procedure is very different, it would be quite legitimate to mention a blocked working through of mourning for René: the internal maternal object must be maintained as an object, in a state of perpetual animation, by a harred that is clearly (clear to us, for René's recognition was long and painful) only the other side of a tyrannical love. But here too, pain does not exhaust itself in the formula of this impossible mourning: it is rather the presentiment in this patient that the 'foreign body' which has invaded him, to the point of making him confuse himself with the unceasing fight against it and its derivatives, has become vital to him: it both deprives him of his own life and assures him of his survival. The experience of pain for René consisted in discovering in analysis death *within* himself, not death wishes or anxiety, but 'deathwork' in an experience close to what André Green (1975) has described in a few profound pages as *temps mort*, withdrawal of cathexis of time, cathexis of absence. Following which, it was possible to bring out and analyse an extraordinarily active fantasmatic of the primal scene. Indeed, the sexual fantasy was absolutely not absent; at most it had been covered over by the psychic body. Incest could then take place between psychic apparatuses and not between sexes. The efficacy of reciprocal domination undermines the very possibility of living, and is far more devastating than the game of seduction. From then on, the primal scene had taken on the paradigmatic value of a struggle for power without ever having metabolized itself into a sexually differentiated scenario, for every scene which could have evoked it only gave

another 'turn of the screw' to the original trauma. Pain: the *coupling* of the external and internal, of reality and phantasy, of the past and present. This tight embrace is difficult to undo.

One question in conclusion: what part can the analyst play in the experiencing of psychic pain? In my opinion, his function is decisive in the three stages: in the defence maintained against this experience, by denial or repression, in its advent and in overcoming it. The experience of psychic pain implies a means of participation and intervention, a specific type of counter-transference that I have attempted to outline above (see pp. 170-83), and which could be illustrated by the following phrase, as full of illusion as it may be: 'enabling the other to bring himself to life'. Let us say that any analyst unaware of his own psychic pain has no chance of *becoming* an analyst, just as any analyst unaware of his own pleasure — both psychic and physical — has no chance of *remaining* one.