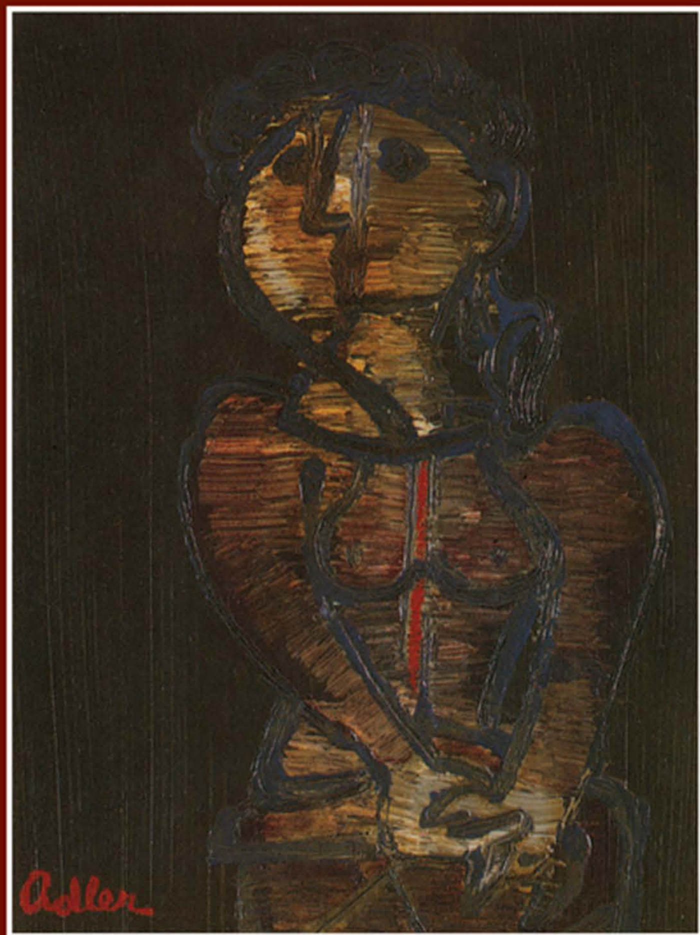
DIDIER ANZIEU

A SKIN FOR THOUGHT

Interviews with Gilbert Tarrab



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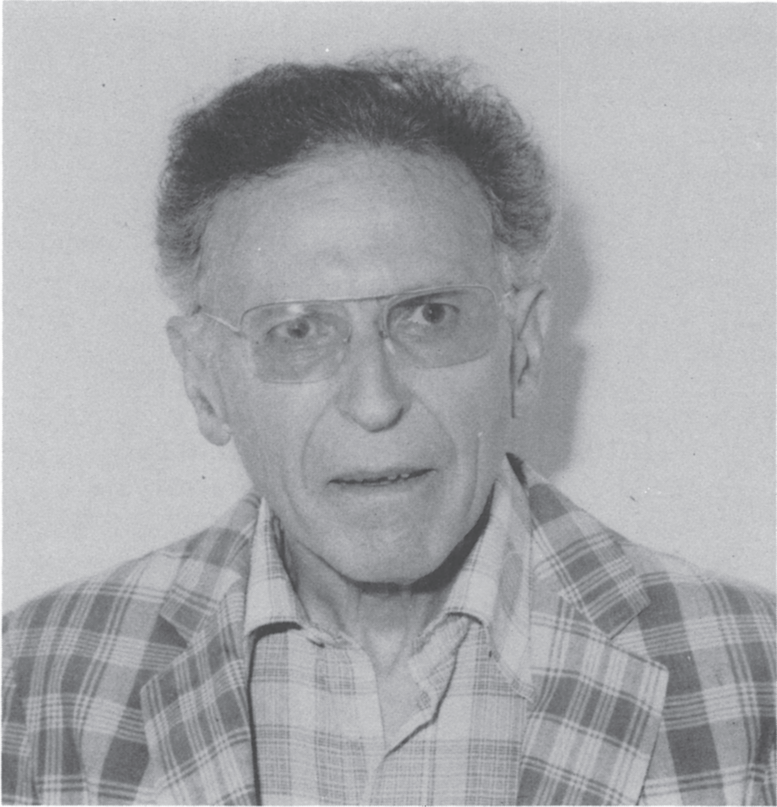

Didier Anzieu

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Interviews with Gilbert Tarrab on Psychology and Psychoanalysis

Didier Anzieu

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CONTENTS

INTERVIEW ONE
The origins of a psychoanalyst 1

INTERVIEW TWO
An uncertain psychologist 15

INTERVIEW THREE
Freudian psychoanalysis,
Lacanian psychoanalysis 33

INTERVIEW FOUR
The body 61

INTERVIEW FIVE
Groups 81

INTERVIEW SIX
Regimes pass away,
but the unconscious remains 99

INTERVIEW SEVEN
Creating a work 111

INTERVIEW EIGHT
Ecology, anti-psychiatry, university 123

INTERVIEW NINE
Return to May 1968 and to groups 135

INTERVIEW TEN
A life in its setting 159

INTERVIEW ONE

The origins of a psychoanalyst

GT: Didier Anzieu, before we begin in earnest, could you tell us a little about yourself? You were born, I think, at Melun, Seine-et-Marne, on 8 July 1923.

DA: Yes, I came from the Paris area. As a child and adolescent I had the advantage of living in a fairly small town of human proportions, surrounded by fields and forests, while at the same time benefiting from the closeness of Paris. My father's family is Mediterranean. My father—an only child—was born at Sète, a port in Languedoc, where my grandfather was a baker. My mother came from a large family. Her home was a hamlet in Cantal, near Mauriac, in the Massif-Central. My father was accustomed to the sun and the sea; my mother, to a rather harsh continental climate. Their union was a far from . . . temperate one.

GT: Your origins are rather southerly on both sides. . . .

DA: The south of France has remained a constant climatic and cultural point of reference for me. It was an accident of their careers as minor officials (both my father and my mother worked in the administration of Posts and Telecommunications—what was then called the P.T.T.) that brought them together at Melun and led them to marry there. When they did not want me to understand them, they used to speak an Occitan dialect among themselves.

GT: You are an only son, if I am not mistaken.

DA: To be more precise, I am an only child. This undoubtedly goes some way towards explaining why I am attracted to group psychology. One takes an interest in what one has not had. We are driven into action and understanding by what we have lacked.

GT: What you lacked was siblings.

DA: Yes, the group of equals. But there is another side to the picture: an only child is also someone who gets too much, at least that was so for me. It took me time to identify and pinpoint this excess, to lighten the overload, and rid myself of it.

GT: What does an only son have too much of?

DA: His parents' passionate love, their ambitions, anxieties, neuroses, attention, and concern. I should clarify how this 'hypercathexis', as psychoanalysts would say, worked in my case. My arrival into the world was preceded by that of a little sister. . . .

GT: In that case she would surely have been a big sister. . . .

DA: That is true, but I meant that for me she remained definitively little, because she died at birth. You were therefore right to call me 'only son' rather than 'only child'. As things turned out, I never knew her, and I grew up as an only child. But in spirit that was not at all the case. This sister who disappeared, who marked their first setback, remained present for a long time in my parents' thoughts and conversation. I was the second, the one who had to be watched over and tended all the more carefully to shelter him from the miserable fate that had struck the elder. I suffered their fear of repetition. I had to survive at any cost, in order to vindicate my parents. But my survival was problematical in their eyes. The least attack of indigestion or the very slightest draught were threats to me. This put me in a difficult and rather special position. I had to replace a dead sister. So I was not allowed enough life. This was not really a paradoxical situation. Let us call it rather an ambiguous situation.

GT: Were you a cosseted child?

DA: Yes, in the most physical sense of the term. I was not allowed to risk myself in the outside air without being smothered under several layers of clothing: sweater, overcoat, beret, and scarf. The envelopes of care, concern, and warmth with which my parents surrounded me, one upon another, did not part from me even when I left home. I carried their load with me on my back. My vitality was hidden at the heart of an onion, under several outer coverings.

GT: How old were you when you finally rid yourself of these outer layers?

DA: It is too bad if my reply sounds provocative. I was fifty when I became fully aware of it. I then came up with the notion of psychic envelopes, and I published—this was in 1974—my first article on the Skin Ego. This time what

became thinkable for me was not what I had lacked but what I had had too much of. In practical life I had not in any case been waiting long enough to 'unmuffle' myself. So far I have given you a one-sided view of my parents. They were not only cautious and anxious. I must give my father his due for having helped me to develop physical and intellectual independence. My father had been a keen sportsman in his youth. He taught me very early on—I think I was three and one-half—to keep my balance on a little bicycle. I still remember that I could push off and roll along but not stop at all. He would sprint in front of me, get off his bike, and catch me as I passed by. Later on, on the weekly day off school, which then fell on a Thursday, he made arrangements to be free in the afternoon, and we would go together for long bicycle rides along the banks of the Seine or in the forest of Fontainebleau. Later still I went out alone or with my school friends. My father put me down for the local tennis club, while 'forgetting' to get me lessons; I have persisted with this sport to this very day, with the same awkwardnesses and the same beginner's illusions. . . . But I am getting away from your question. How did I react to the muffling? I became increasingly intolerant of anything stifling, and I responded fairly swiftly with temper outbursts.

GT: With temper outbursts?

DA: Yes. I had a reputation for a bad temper. Temper outbursts were my principal defect as far as my parents were concerned. For a long time I have no idea where these brutal explosions came from. They persisted until my second analysis. I then understood that they were my way of loosening the constraint, of taking air and space, and of making myself some room. Besides, although these outbursts were violent, they did not leave behind too bitter a taste in my mouth. I felt moderately guilty about them. But they often—too often—made people around me suffer, as a child and then as an adult. This suffering I have inflicted is one of the principal

regrets of my existence. What is more, my father set me the example of violent fits of temper, sometimes against my mother and sometimes against myself.

GT: Your father was very important to you at that time, more so than your mother. . . .

DA: Both my parents were equally important, but in different ways. My father René was a practical, active, materialist man. My mother Marguerite had intellectual tastes and gifts that I certainly inherited. On the other hand, everyday reality only concerned her superficially. Her discord with my father entrenched itself in this area, with her negligent, whimsical, out-of-proportion attitude towards material tasks. Sometimes she would do a lot, and at other times she would immerse herself in a book and forget the rest. Still on the subject of my mother, it is she who is responsible for my being drawn towards psychology and psychoanalysis. Some time after my birth she suffered a nervous 'breakdown'. . . .

GT: A depression. . . .

DA: Yes, a nervous depression; and if I used an English term with you, something I never do and which is out of place when speaking to a French Canadian like yourself, it is the sign that a strong emotion has been awakened in me. Let me be precise, at whatever cost: a depression accompanied by persecutory manifestations that made life more and more impossible around her. She had to be hospitalized twice, on the second occasion for rather a long time. So I was separated from her first of all at eighteen months, then at around the age of four to five. I was brought up by one of my mother's sisters, who happened to be my godmother. Her husband had died as a result of his injuries shortly after the First World War. She could not have children, and my parents took her in. She attached herself to me and also to my father, and her

increasingly important role in the household added to the tension that prevailed between my father and mother because of their imcompatible characters. This was a sort of vicious circle. Dispossessed progressively of her husband and her son, my mother lost the means of defending herself against her own latent pathology, and when it broke through openly, this precipitated my father's decision to separate from my mother and thereafter to live with his sister-in-law, not without keen feelings of guilt. My Oedipus complex was sharpened by this, and became even more 'complex'.

GT: So you have few memories of your mother?

DA: Yes and no. My father and godmother talked about her to me. I resumed regular contact with her after my marriage. On several occasions she mentioned her childhood and mine. But it has been more through slow self-analytical work than through my two psychoanalyses that I have been able to reconstruct in my mind the difficulties that my mother had in contact with me during the first months of my life. I would lurch—as I said a little while ago—from too much to too little, from too little to too much. Sometimes she would force excessive care upon me, to the point of causing pain, and over-rich food that she had to 'give' me: with these physical excesses she was undoubtedly making up for her inability to show affection and to demonstrate tenderness. At other times she would cut off, turn in on herself, forget my presence and my needs, and let feeding time pass by. Apparently I cleaned the wheel of my pram with a finger and then scrupulously sucked the grease without her noticing: it is this incident that decided my godmother to take charge of me. Madness very quickly became a domestic reality for me, full of problems, heavy with menace, but a reality that I could and still can face up to with resolution. Freud explains the attraction of imaginative literature in terms of 'disquieting strangeness'. For me, madness was an experience of 'disquieting familiarity'. As an adolescent I was afraid I might

be victim of a possible hereditary trait. After my first analysis this fear faded, and I wanted to understand what happened to my mother.

GT: What became of your mother after she finally left hospital?

DA: In the end she led an independent life after years of confinement. She worked hard to supplement the two meager pensions that my father and the P.T.T. paid her. She then devoted herself to charitable works, in which she was much liked and sometimes rather touchy. Right up to the end of her life she retained an insatiable intellectual curiosity. At eighty years of age she embarked on writing a long poem in classical form on the women in the Bible. After my marriage, as I said, I wanted to find her again in all the senses of the word: to renew contact with her, and to feel like a son with his mother. Our meetings became increasingly satisfying for her and for me—except when her persecutory mistrust returned. My father died in 1967. My mother lived until 1981. I learned to understand her, calm her, and help her re-establish permanently an unstable equilibrium. I served her as a reliable link with a reality that would otherwise have remained frightening and unsteady for her.

GT: You were saying that your relationship with your father was very different. . . .

DA: If I was able to hold out, despite being marked by the presence of a mother who had her moments of madness, and to resist the contagion and avoid mental illness—I believe I got away with an ordinary neurosis—it was because of my solid and warm relationship with my father. He overflowed with affection. He sustained me throughout all my childhood, and afterwards in many of my adult undertakings. My father lost his own father at the age of twelve, and until I was twelve myself we were close to one another. He passed on to

me the best of his prematurely interrupted relationship with his own father. With puberty, my crisis of opposition to my family setting, characteristic of that age, was accentuated by the need, which had by then become imperative, to shake off the stifling surveillance and infantilizing care that I was subjected to. There were years of tension between him and me. But in order to achieve my masculine identity, it was a good thing that he put up resistance to me. He had suffered in life. His mother died a few years after his father. Orphaned completely at seventeen years of age, he hastily took the entrance examination for the postal service, and he climbed the successive rungs of its administrative ladder, up to that of inspector. His wish, which I fulfilled, was that I should take as far as possible the studies that he himself regretted having abandoned. Geography was the most important subject for becoming a postman, knowledge of all the countries of the world and their big towns, and knowledge of sea routes and railways for the dispatch of the mail. Together with the clarinet and the bicycle it remained one of his favourite activities. During the walks that he and I took together at a steady pace among the fields and woods around Melun, my father would parade these foreign countries in conversation, down to the very smallest and most distant, and he would question me on the names of their capitals. This game stimulated my appetite for knowledge. I travelled the whole world while walking and chatting with him. This perhaps accounts for my small appetite for actual travels. . . .

GT: M Anzieu, I would like, if that's all right, to return to what you yourself call this episode of madness in your mother. It is undoubtedly a painful experience to call to mind. Could we perhaps stop a moment at the reasons for her depression? It had never happened before, I presume?

DA: Not to my knowledge. . . .

GT: What happened at that point?

DA: You are asking me a delicate question. I can hardly give you an account of what I experienced at a time when I was not sufficiently aware and was incapable of distinguishing between what was going on inside myself and what was going on around me. I talked about it as an adolescent with the family doctor; then with my mother at the end of her life. I have thought a lot about it, and I believe what happened was as follows: My mother came from a family of seven children. She was seen as the difficult child. Her father, therefore my grandfather, when she told him about her plans to marry the man who was going to be my father, seems to have tried to dissuade her: 'You are not made for marriage.' And he even seems to have warned my father, who later often regretted having remained deaf to the warning. My mother was beautiful and educated. She did not look like a peasant girl, although that was her original background. She was self-taught, she devoured books, she learned foreign languages—at the end of her life she started to study Breton—and she had a lovely style of writing. She was very pleasing to my father, and they fell in love.

But I am getting away from your question. Why her depression? Because of her fragile character. This fragility prevented her from facing up to my birth, which re-activated in her the catastrophic memory of the stillborn baby. Why this fragile character? I think it was due to the circumstance of her own birth. She was the third child of her sibling group, the third or the fourth . . . therein lies the problem. Three girls were in fact born before her. The family lived in a big stone house, near the stable and the fields. The living room was the only one with heating, in a large fireplace where big pieces of wood were burnt, where food was cooked, and inside which one could sit on benches. What follows happened before my mother was born. It was a feast day. Marguerite, the youngest of the three girls, had been dressed in an organdy frock to go to Mass. She had been left for a moment in the charge of the eldest, the one who was to be my godmother. The little one was lightly clad, it was cold, and she