REGARDING MY FATHER

THE STORY OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S ITINERARY AS A GRIEVING PROCESS

Albert Piette[i]

> I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust accounts. Let go of them in the water. Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of him in the water
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> Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2005, p. 224

Critical of philosophical systems in which the philosopher forgets himself, the philosopher Kierkegaard lays claim to a presence in his texts. "No relevant category can be elaborated without being born of an existential experience, the one that the philosophising subject lives", writes Vincent Delecroix,

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commenting on the work of Kierkegaard (Delecroix, 2006, p. 86). Kierkegaard himself points out that "in thinking, he [the subjective thinker] thinks the universal; but as existing in this thought and as assimilating it in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated" (Kierkegaard,1953, p. 68). It is therefore important that the philosopher or the anthropologist helps the reader to appropriate the idiosyncratic dimension of his concepts, but without anecdotally rejecting one such dimension [the life of the author] in order to better extract philosophical propositions uncontaminated by circumstances and personal stakes": this is a basic principle of "the practice of existential thought" (Delecroix, 2006, p. 204) and likewise one of the challenges of this article.

Researchers in the social sciences do not conceal the "personal" aspects of their work. Ethnographers have long claimed the personal dimensions that mark their fieldwork. Georges Devereux was one of the first to promote an analysis of the anthropologist's defence and counter-transference mechanisms, in the face of the difficulties inherent in observing human beings and the possible "anxieties" of the observer (Devereux, 1967). In this case, self-observation would be a kind of guarantee of the scientific nature of ethnographic work, with a view to observing others. The presence of the anthropologist is not only that of the ethnographer in his field, but that of an individual, existing, with the circumstances of his life. Auto-ethnography even involves explicitly using experiences from one's own life to shed light on social and cultural phenomena: it is defined as "writing, story, and

method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2003, p. XIX).

It is all very obvious: the character or temperament of a researcher, and the events in his or her life, influence his or her thematic choices, concepts and, more generally, the way he or she works.

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It is possible to find one's episode of truth in a political event or in a particular situation of an ethnographic field far from one's usual practice. My episode of truth may seem banal, small-scale and egocentric: the death of my father[ii]. It was a brutal death, at a relatively young age, but nothing dramatic. I loved him, but like many other children. At the time of the separation, I quickly realised that I could not accept it[iii].

People are burnt to ashes or become skeletons. Most are more or less quickly forgotten, as if they had never existed. There are also, one might think, beings who reincarnate and others who resurrect. My father has a sort of constant in his *post mortem* life: his transformation, let us say his anthropological transmutation. He became anthropology.

[ii] I composed this text following the two prefaces written by Anthony Feneuil, who interpreted my work as an anthropology of grief and separation (Feneuil 2025 and 2026).

[iii] On personal grief in anthropology, I would specifically mention Renato Rosaldo's book (2013). One comment, however: in this book, like in some writings of Michael Jackson (for example, 1989), where illness and death are concerned in particular, is not it indeed as if it were important, to talk about themselves – but not too much – and as if information about their own lives could only be provided by insertion into a narrative on their ethnographic journey and moreover with a constant appeal to geographically distant forms of otherness as obligatory passages ? To a certain degree, there is also the case of Carolyn Ellis in *Final Negotiations* on the illness and death of her husband, claiming in conclusion a humanist approach to a complex subject, far removed from the rigidity of concepts (Ellis, 1995).

My father has not become an object of knowledge. I did not do his anthropology or anthropography[iv]. I did not try to use him to understand a social class, a profession, a period of history, a country[v]. I did not look for traces of his existence. Nor did I seek to create alternative text forms to talk about his past or my emotions. He was, in different ways, the foundation, the thread or the horizon of my work as an anthropologist. He was a trigger, a companion and an inspiration for certain ideas. Perhaps I could describe the approach taken in this text as an anthropological "autopatrigraphy", an understanding of anthropology based on my father's place in my work. The expression does not strike me as elegant enough to be retained. It is not an "anthropologised" father that I am going to present, but an "anthropologicalised" father, who has become a reason for anthropology - an epistemological father.

What happens to an anthropologicalised father? Some products mix and dissolve. The result is another product. There are others that retain their being through contact with others. Aristotle thinks about different modes of composition: "the account of certain things is based on the mode of combination of their matter, which some (e.g. honey-drink) being combined by blending, some (e.g. a besom) by binding,

[iv] This would be more the case of Nigel Rapport (2003), with the "portrait" of his father-in-law.

[v] I am thinking of the anthropologist Anand Pandian, who uses his grandfather's portrait to retrace the transformations of India in the twentieth century (Pandian and Mariappan, 2014). I am also thinking of Bertrand Tillier's book (2023), which, as a historian specialising in images, tells the story of his father and the Algerian War, particularly through his use of photography.

some (e.g. a book) by gluing, some (e.g. a chest) by nailing and some by a combination of combinations" (Aristotle, 2004, 1042b). There is no doubt about it, my father has become a skeleton. It is a form of dissolution, decomposition, disintegration that makes him lose the coherence of his former self. Transformed into anthropology, he is not in the same kind of dissolution. It is as if he has been transformed into an anthropological solution through contact with my work. He is melted into anthropology, like sugar or soap, but recognisable, not by its smell, flavour or colour, but by what the words I use refer to, as an indication of him. Just as a photograph is a trace of what the light imprint has touched. He is both the person whose absence triggers anthropologist's reactions, the "topic" explicitly present, the figure repeating itself like a guiding thread, extending itself, less recognisable, into research themes or theoretical choices.

Dictionaries define grief as a "very great sadness, especially at the death of someone". If I ask myself what I have done regarding my father, my answer is: "anthropology". In this way, my work as an anthropologist appears as a grieving process. There are various moments in this "anthropologicalisation" of my father. They have an impact on each other. That is what I want to show in this article. At every moment, I will take the liberty of regularly referring the reader to my work, a book or an article. For this, I apologise to the reader[vi].

[vi] Of course I will not repeat all the bibliographical debate that is present in these other publications. I will only sketch it out each time - it would be another article.

Taking notes

His death generated a strong intolerance towards the certainty that I had of this definitive absence. I am 29 years old. He is 64. We are in November 1989. I understand that his absence may lead me to forget the life we shared. My parents are Catholics. The village priest, who comes to pray near my dead father and whom I ask as if he were a magician for the key to knowledge, advises me, faced with the risk of forgetting, to write. It is against absence that beliefs develop. Writing, in this case taking notes, has its adversary: oblivion.

I came up with the idea of a kind of implicit contract between my father's life and my ethnographic skills, which consist in observing and describing people's actions. That is what I said to myself at the time. During the first few days after my father's death, I resisted. I was afraid to write and also afraid of what I was going to write. Fear of entering the very moment of writing, fear of encountering the acts, gestures and words to be described. Fear, too, that writing will dissolve and spoil his presence. My aim was to capture my father's face, gestures and attitude. It would indeed be like photographing him, even though I have very few recent photos and, above all, no film in which I could see him live and move. Writing down the details became the hope of preserving, beyond death, the life and features of my father. I also knew that I had to move fast: this presence depended on my

memory, my recollections, my ability to write and to find the right words. These were my feelings and my ideas at this moment.

I resisted for a few days. Then, one evening, it is gone. Why that evening? I do not know why. And almost every evening, I wrote in my office. Note-taking, at the same time as weakening my pain, seemed to stop the course of my life. Against the flow of time, I immersed myself in the past. A bit like the ethnographer who tries to remember in the evening, to reinvest himself in the situations he has encountered and to write[vii].

For several months, almost every day, I wrote and took notes on my father's instants. And at the same time, always like an ethnographer reflecting on what he observes, I recorded my impressions, my moods, my thoughts on life and death. These were extraordinary moments. So eagerly awaited and desired that I wanted them to overflow, to invade my day. As if to avoid this risk, I decided to reserve the note-taking time for the evening after my own work. About an hour of writing, between 7 and 8pm. It was like a ritual. I wrote on white A4 sheets. With a fountain pen (given to me by my father on my last birthday), using blue ink, like all the others I will write. As if it were more respectful, more beautiful than a simple biros. In this way, I made my father present, for a moment that seemed "out of time". Between November 1989 and August 1994, more than 700 hundred pages were

[vii] There is a large literature on therapeutic writing. I mention in particular Lengelle (2021). And also on the grieving process, see especially the recent book by Ciupak and Smith (2025).

written[viii]. Roland Barthes'mourning diary lasts a little more than a year (Barthes, 2012).

The very first mental images were brief. Some of them involved very everyday scenes that I have seen many times: my father getting dressed before going out, eating or watching television. The other images were of my last hours, my last minutes with him. In the very form of the writing, the speed of the jet was perceptible. The letters were often badly finished, the lines went right to the end of the page, without hesitation - only two or three erasures. The style was syntactically constructed. In these tenderly written pages, I addressed my father directly, as if he could still be addressed directly: a sort of reminder, addressed to him, of a few moments just gone by.

More precisely, writing down these moments and all the others was the transcription of a visualisation exercise. This consisted of mentally chaining together images that I tried to remember and note down at the very moment. From one evening to the next, the images of my father in a situation flashed past clearly, like sequences from a film, without going back. All I had to do was take note, trying to follow the rhythm. In this way, I made my dead father coexist with my living self, photographing him mentally. I created the film whose images unfold in my mind and often brought tears to my eyes. Such an experience of writing also served to continue what has stopped, even if, from this

[viii] A book in the form of a diary was published (Piette, 2003b). There is another book, in narrative form (Piette, 2005).

mental presence of the dead father, in his own attitude, the experience of duration, of living, was subtracted. By contracting time, the mental image made me perceive the terrible difference between the present moment and the past reality. I wanted to stay in touch. I desired my father's mental presence, I made it come, and tears accompanied the moment of my father's presence. He was not there.

I found it astonishing that details that some would consider insignificant were still remembered. They were not signs whose specific message would in itself be memorable and ensure their survival. Manifested several weeks, several months before the moment of writing, they were barely fixed by myself at the moment of the event. They were fragments of a form, parts of a whole, my father. They made sense, communicating the joy, sadness and anger that I perceived automatically, almost obviously. Without even knowing that they were stored in my memory, I discovered that they were a trace of my father, the antidote to oblivion. To recover as much as possible of what has passed. I had a schedule of situations to recover: daily activities at home, holidays at the seaside...

Volume of being

In the situations described, my father emerges with the details that characterise him. My anthropology comes back here in a very surprising way. As I have just said, when I write, I have nothing else in mind but him, concentrating on the mental images that I make

succeed one another and that my writing tries to transcribe quickly so as to lose as little as possible. What I do then seems so close to the theory of the "volume of being" that I want to describe, alone, one at a time, extracted from its context and environment - theory I have been developing only for a few years (see Piette, 2019). In my mourning diary, I do indeed insist on specific details of facial expressions, of certain gestural movements whose extreme precision may seem naive. From the mental image in which my father appears most often in his complete body, I am looking for a particular light on this or that part of the body. I put much less emphasis on the general structure of the scene, even though my father is always in specific places: his house, the garden, the street. In my descriptions, other people are secondary, my mother for example, and the social context is of little importance. They are the background that remains in the background, so much so that it is the figure of my father that is at the centre, in the foreground, his volume of being, according to the expression I use now, but not at the time of this note-taking.

To describe my father as emerging from contexts and situations, leaving little room for others: the love relationship creates this possibility. This "extraction" has been maintained in my work as an anthropologist, taking concrete form in this notion of volume of being. Am I so in love with each being that I can only see them, putting aside everything that surrounds them? I am not so much in love with each being as incapable of accepting the appearance and disappearance of each one. Unable is a big word, because I act as if I were neutralising

this emotion. From the love of my father to methodological love, death increases what seems to me to be an imperative: to describe beings, each in their uniqueness.

I have just referred to ethnography to describe this activity of note-taking. That is how I understood my writing at the time of my diary. Today I can say that these writings are not ethnographic. In fact, they are the exact opposite. They are not ethnography because they focus on a person and try not to lose that person. Ethnography has the particularity of looking at human beings, putting them in interaction, involving them in activities, associating individuals with a social class or a cultural mark, talking about contexts. And in so doing, it loses them in these various perspectives. This is also true of ethnographic portraits, such as Pandian's mentioned above or Biehl's on Catarina (Biehl, 2013; see Piette, 2025). What I see as central today in my critique of ethnography was present when I was confronted with loss and the need to write and fix. More precisely, this work is "volumography" as a description of a volume of being. It is to such an exercise that I now explicitly associate anthropology, especially existential anthropology (see Piette, 2019). Roland Barthes aptly expresses this opposition between "integration" and "detachment": "To detach is the essential gesture of classical art. The painter 'detaches' a feature, a shadow, if need be enlarges it, reverses it, and makes it into a work; and even though the work is consistent, insignificant, or natural (one of Duchamp's objects, a monochrome surface), since it always extends, whether one likes it or not, beyond a

physical context (a wall, a street), it is fatally hallowed as a work. In this, art is the contrary of the sociological, philological, political sciences, which keep integrating what they have distinguished (they distinguish it only to integrate it the more completely)" (Barthes, 1977: 68).

I add that dealing with my father's death brought out a characteristic of my way of being. It revealed me as a "notator", a note-taker. The mourning diary ended in August 1994. I started another diary a few years later, recording my daughters' activities. I am now on notebook 113 (May 2025), A4 format. In it I record childhood as it happened and as it came to an end. It was with the same fear of forgetting these moments that I captured them, very closely with notes, but also with videos and photographs, the whole constituting very important material, at least in quantity.

The volume of being "volumuates", according to my usage. It changes, but only partially, gradually, a kind of moulting. I have therefore considered writing about oneself, in the form of a diary, which I have sometimes called "autography", as a key methodological resource for capturing the continuity of beings. This is not auto-ethnography, which aims to understand social and cultural phenomena on the basis of self-experience, as I mentioned. Rather it is a daily note-taking exercise about oneself in order to understand what a volume of being is and how it functions within itself with its internal components. The autographic exercise can be carried out by the researcher himself or

by anyone else, whether or not they have been asked to do so by the researcher (see Piette, 2022b). I will quote only this comment by Maine de Biran, reported by Anne Devarieux: "If we thus had various memoirs made by observers of themselves, what light would shine on the science of man" (Devarieux, 2015, p. 117).

Believing

There is another issue, no longer that of oblivion, but that of the afterlife, and the hope of seeing my father again. My family are Catholics, I mentioned, sometimes practising, but not strongly and not really involved in the religious institutions. I have religious representations in myself. They are part of my stock of ideas, beliefs, I might say. But what immediately caught my attention was a specific mental attitude, arising for example in a liturgy and more generally in any situation. It is this attitude that I have tried to describe and analyse: the "act of believing", which manifests itself in different ways: a thought, an emotion, a gesture. The act of believing is a kind of approval, a more or less considered assent to the propositional content of these beliefs - a way of confirming them.

Here is what I have learnt from my own experience. The assent arises punctually, saying a kind of "yes" to the representation of the dead person's life in another world. In an elusive way, it leaves again, giving the impression, the sensation that this other world is not impossible - everyone then continues with their various daily activities. I especially

remember my thoughts of such religious representations during celebrations (for example) are not necessarily accompanied by a clear movement of assent. It often happens that I push my agreement, as if I wanted to believe, to adhere, when I perhaps feel incapable of doing so. It is as if I am forcing myself to believe against the evidence. This act of will that pushes me to believe what I want is then penetrated by a kind of reserve, a doubt that accompanies the movement of assent. In this more or less approving relationship to a representation of an afterlife, the act of believing creates a possible margin and, at the same time, degrees and intensities of approval. I am never in radical acquiescence, even for a moment. There is always a lack that reminds me that there is no objective guarantee of the existence of this afterlife, but it is always overcome by the hope of knowing more one day, later on. Of knowing that it is possible. The very strength of assent certainly depends on the stability of the content of the propositions available to the believer and the confidence he feels in the religious authority. As far as I am concerned, even if there is trust and belief available, the strength of both is blunted, eroded by doubt. My desire to believe comes up against a vagueness about what I want to believe in, and above all against the evidence of a difficult probability of resurrection. I see myself in an effort that cannot go all the way. But even when questioned, assent consists of a state of belief. Like when I wonder if my dead father will know about the changes of my professional life... This question is a form of the act of believing. I am like someone who is not sure that their religious ideas are wrong. Is

not that a definition of the act of believing: not going to the end of oneself[ix]?

In contrast to an emotional state, the simple gesture can express a state of belief, without mobilising conscious or voluntary approval. Without a specific mental state, prayer can sometimes become automatic, a kind of recitation on uncontrolled pilot. The fact that there are no active states of belief in such attitudes does not imply the absence of belief. The act of believing is also a way of behaving, of linking events. It then consists of "sensing" an additional sign, beyond what is directly visible or legible, or, even more simply, refusing not to perceive "something" at stake, in the Mass, the host, the prayer. Refusing to see it as mere fiction. There is another way in which states of belief reverberate: after Mass, I give the tramp a bit of money. Something I did not do before[x].

This type of description of belief with its variations in intensity seems to me to be a necessary minimum in the study of all expressions of relationship to supernatural beings, anywhere in the world.

[ix] I would like to refer to Anthony Feneuil's work on this subject and in particular to the importance of doubt in belief (Feneuil, 2021).
[x] See my more general analysis, for example: Piette (2015). The first texts on this subject date back to the 90s.

Proving

My belief was also accompanied by a search for proof. I read, researched and discovered so-called extraordinary events such as premonitory visions, apparitions of the deceased or turntables. At the end of the scientific protocol governing them, it was said that the only possible explanation was the existence of the "spirit" of the dead, capable of acting on matter and communicating with the living. I even decided to write about the connections or syncretisms between science and religion: the result was a little book entitled *Les religiosités séculières* (see Piette, 1993).

I also read a book, well-known at the time, *The Life after Life* and other books by Raymond Moody (a doctor). Experiences at the frontiers of death were central to my reading. I discovered new testimonies, not of direct communication with the afterlife, but of entering it... before returning to earth. I was not insensitive to such a presentation of a large number of cases and, what is more, with the same characteristics, as if the "witnesses" had been confronted with the same reality, let us say an objective one: the afterlife. In addition, I noticed the medical vocabulary was abandoned in favour of a "mystical" lexicon evoking love, benevolence, total knowledge, etc.

In these scientific-religious syncretisms, there was also the claimed demonstration of the existence of the afterlife. For example, I discovered that Régis Dutheil, a physicist, presents the afterlife as a

space symmetrical to our own, located on the other side of the wall of light. It would constitute a "superluminal world" where particles would move faster than light. Dutheil wants to demonstrate the existence of tachyonic or superluminal matter, in which the axes of time and space would be confused, with no past, present or future, and in which an observer would move very quickly to very distant locations. According to these discourses, with the exception of a few living people, such as clairvoyants and Eastern mystics, only the dead would have access to this superluminal universe, which allows them to experience special visual or auditory perceptions, a feeling of well-being and peace.

I fed on a diffuse but optimistic imagination, generated by such proposals. In my own experience as a reader, there was a seduction, a hopefulness about them. But I was not fooled by the "scientific" discourse on the afterlife. A bit like the person who rushes off to read his horoscope in a magazine, knowing that what will be stated cannot really come true. My greed for this information was coupled with a critical stance. A desire to know, certainly, but tinged from the outset with a restriction that the excesses and overt strategies of these books cannot disguise. I am aware of the hybrid and offbeat discourse of death witnesses and evidence seekers, a rhetoric floating between religion and science, using elements of both, without recognition of either. In short, such evidence of the afterlife is inseparable from its critique.

Presence of the dead and "minoration"

Through my diary and the writing exercise it involves, it would be easy to say that my father has been made present. The question of the presence of the dead particularly struck me, in connection with a theoretical reflection on non-human beings - which has also mobilised anthropology to a great extent in recent years. In my thread, the question of "minoration" is central. This thinking gradually developed.

I thus wonder about the dead - that special being, neither truly present nor truly absent -, about his modes of presence and his action. Marc-Antoine Berthod forcefully warns: "The dead cannot be reduced to the memories, representations and even less to the imaginary thoughts of the bereaved; they are not the expression of a subjective, unconscious or credulous mind. On the contrary, they impose themselves on the living in their new dead state, which is not without surprise to our modes of interpretation" (Berthod, 2005, p. 531)[xi].

While remaining cautious about the lexicon used and the actions attributed to the dead, I can admit that my dead father "imposed" himself on me. He made me cry, write down, read and believe. It is the reality of death that makes me do this, more precisely the death of the one I do not want to see anymore: my father insofar as he is dead, insofar as I do not want him to be a dead man like the others. It is fair

[xi] More recently, one of the most striking expressions of these reflections is the book by Vinciane Despret (2021).

to say that my father, as a dead man, makes me do things, because he is dead and because I do not want him to be dead.

The presence of the dead has certain characteristics. Is it necessary to specify that the dead, at the moment of writing, is not concretely present in my space-time? He is present, in specific, non-concrete ways. He has a strong mental presence, which I transform into a scriptural trace because I do not want my father to be just a mental presence. He is temporal because its presence – this mental and scriptural presence - evolves: his acts of presence will be less frequent and less intense, writing styles will become more hesitant, as the years go by (see Piette, 2003b and 2005). The dead is distinct and particular: he is not present in general. He is indeed "my" dead. But, except as a skeleton in the cemetery, he is intermittent, not always present, even if he can be present in various forms, simultaneously, in different places. He is dependent on the solicitations, thoughts or words of the living. That is why I say that a dead person, like a deity, is relational. Soon, like most of the dead in the universe, this or that dead person will no longer be present at all. Some may say that the dead exist as living beings in other worlds, those described in religious universes. At one point in my father's afterlife, I thought and hoped this, as I explained above. I will come back to that.

I indeed came to reflect on the capacity of the dead to be "minorated" as beings surrounding the living. Without a doubt, and despite the moments of tension, circumscribed in my writing rituals, this

minoration was there from the very first moments of the new dead. I know from the outset that my father can not hear me, that I can talk about him as if he was not there, that he cannot see me, that he will not feel my kiss on his cold forehead, that he will not look at the photos that I slip into his coffin, and yet that I ask to go and look for them in such and such a place, in such a hurry and in such disarray. What is more, I lived almost normally from the very first hours of his death, with this heavy sadness in the background. It is one of the most extraordinary things, even more fascinating than crying and writing. Humans are specialists in "shrinking" – shrink emotions and thoughts. Similarly, when I address him at his grave, he is there as a corpse, but I do not really imagine him as such, nor do I imagine him otherwise. I do not see the situation through to the end. I do not imagine the dead as if they were alive, but as lying there, but not as a skeleton in a coffin either. I cannot densify the presence of the dead without at the same time blunting it and reducing the excess meaning. The result is a particular, fantastic co-presence between the living beings and the dead: humans who are present, but at the same time absent, with their mode of being, according to variable intensities, with some distraction and inconsequence, and the dead who are not totally absent, with a diffuse presence, with a strong capacity to spring forth and also to withdraw.

I am thus fascinated by the observation of the mode of presence, that of the dead, my father, a strange interactant, left in the background, as if suspending any direct confrontation, except at certain moments of

my mourning diary. From there the modes of presence of non-humans in general challenge me, revealing that the possible pressure of some of these non-human entities (supernatural beings, political institutions and also domesticated animals) is rather easily counterbalanced by different ways of restricting their presence (see Piette, 2016, p. 51-74). Specifically, deities, invisible and intangible beings, are able to come and go as humans please, oscillating between a potentially disturbing presence and a distance that leaves them in the background, as if in minor mode. Their presence is often erased, even raising doubts about their existence. This possibility of minorating these invisible beings, or those that have become invisible, has been well understood by humans. They solicit them for one or other possible action, they love them, they attribute emotions to them, without necessarily having the constraints of the presence of humans. Would I dare to think that they are the perfect invention, or almost perfect?

Here, then, is my father, present in my anthropology - anthropologicalised - through the acts of believing that his death triggers, through the description and analysis of these that I try to give a general scope, through a reflection on his modes of presence. But "in reality", where is my father? Is he somewhere?

In the parishes: inquiring and no longer believing

I remember once again the answer I got from the priest I asked about my father's spiritual destiny the day after he died. At that moment, I was waiting for him to say: "Now your dad is..., his soul is...". I was waiting for a precise answer. And the priest suggested writing to remember! I wrote. But I also know that the priest did not reply... I have thought so often about this non-response that I have decided to go and do an ethnography in some parishes to find the answers. I wanted to know.

Thanks to Danièle Hervieu-Léger, I took the opportunity to carry out this research in the Catholic parishes of a French diocese, in Normandy[xii]. This was in 1995 - I stopped my daily note-taking just over a year ago. I expected a lot from this work, which consisted of observing the daily life of priests and also the lay people involved in these parishes to take over from them, as they get older and fewer in number. I attended celebrations, but also more or less formal meetings between parish leaders: meetings to organise the life of the parish, to prepare celebrations, educational workshops on various themes relating to the Church, theological debates and so on. I also asked these parishioners to talk about their motivations and, above all, their beliefs. Clearly, it was then that I decided to set off in search of

[xii] This research resulted in a book: *La religion de près* (Piette, 2022a [1999]). See a special section on my book in *Studies in religion*, 53, 4, 2024 (edited by Frédéric Dejean).

information about the resurrection, with the idea, and I thought the unstated hope, of gaining the knowledge that I still lacked. "They must know", I said to myself, without really making it clear.

As I came to understand the ways in which priests and laypeople responded to the question of death and the afterlife, I was not without some surprise and, it seems to me, some disappointment. What have I discovered? Often distance, sometimes irony, and almost always a desire to suspend and shift the response. In fact, in their response, these "believers" seem torn between the literalist discourse, which is almost impossible to express, from which the Church does not really escape, and which they cannot really believe in... and, on the other hand, "love", the simple desire to love, and to be in the presence of the beloved. Hence, when questioned, the almost infinite number of mental restrictions and successive negations. In short, a sort of stammering of people tangled up in contradictions, negations and negations of negations. No sentence was really carried through to the end, always caught up in hesitations, whether the Catholic began with a rather metaphorical interpretation or a rather literalist one (see Piette, 2003a, p. 55-73 and 2015; see also Latour, 2013b).

In the speeches, the division between a material world and a spiritual world, the existence of which is believed to be possible, seems to constitute a common foundation. But this belief is cloaked in various nuances, such as irony about the idea that there is no guaranteed content. There is also a hint of regret that there are no certain answers

to the question of the afterlife. Or the idea that the answer is not important, with the implication that "the religious" lies elsewhere. There is also a double language, with some people saying different things according to the situation (in a meeting, "no, the resurrection is not the dead being reanimated"; backstage: "I can get rid of the image of Christ coming out of the tomb", with self-irony about this admitted contradiction). Likewise, the affirmation of the limits of representations of realities deemed transcendent and inexpressible is sometimes accompanied by the recognition of their overall pedagogical necessity. There is thus an expression of uncertainty, a kind of a dialectical logic expressing, in different ways, the life and non-life of the dead (it's not material but it's real; it's not a physical reunion with the dead we loved, but it is...).

I was initially confident, but as I discovered this play of shifts, from meeting to meeting, from conversation to conversation, I understood what religious activity consists of: managing this mystery through infinite hesitations. I remembered Bruno Latour reminding me of the Gospels saying that the risen Jesus was not here, but elsewhere. Paul Veyne himself wrote that "religion responds all the less to anxieties because it is essential for it to 'remain obscure'" (Veyne, 1990, p. 525). But where is my father? And here I was, not satisfied with my acts of belief, with their permanent disbelief, wanting to know! For me, there is an important stage ahead. Have I seen too much of the half-empty bottle and not enough of the half-full one? I was disappointed, too

caught up in the ethnographic work in progress to be fully aware of it at this moment.

The result will be the progressive loss of believing. I feel it: there is nothing to say, there is no resurrection, my father has not risen and I will not see him again! I remember once again the words of my village priest, suggesting that I write, as I was waiting for some details about the fate of his "soul". The solution is elsewhere... I did not get any more answers from the priests and parishioners of Normandy, from whom I heard a lot of vacillation and inability to decide... when I wanted to find out about the resurrection. Would I say that the emotion of my disappointment triggered or activated my lucidity? In any case, I feel and understand that the "reality" of another world is impossible...[xiii]. I also sense a great deal of naivety in putting it this way. I feel far removed from Tanya Luhrmann's comments, which aim to show the anthropological importance of having the capacity to open up to other worlds, to situations that are rationally inexplicable, and to enable a possible change in the observer's own world, to realise that life can be different (Luhrmann, 2018). Tanya Luhrmann thus values the encounter with faith and its capacity to bring about change, recognising also that these configurations are rare, such as Evans-Pritchard's conversion, which does not seem independent of his interest in the religious practices he encountered among the Azande

[xiii] I could have repeated these words of Cioran with humour: "What a pity that to reach God we must pass through faith!" (Cioran, 1999, p. 86).

and Nuer. I have to say that in my case the encounter with these Catholics from Normandy - as well as some reading to understand the origin of this act of believing to religious statements - turned me from a believer into a non-believer. No doubt it could be said that I was too open to the endless debates of the parishioners. Unless, to repeat Jeanne Favret-Saada (2009), we always believe a little more than we think we do. So, while at the beginning of the mourning process the note-taker's skill was a decisive support, the ethnographic research was a complicating factor in my "beliefs".

Has what I consider to be my lucid confrontation with reality contributed to completing my "methodological theism" - which is what I called my proposal to describe the modes of God's presence encountered in liturgies or parish meetings in *La religion de près* - with a realistic atheism? I think so. It is also consistent with the priority I increasingly give to the human entity - the volume of being, mentioned above - in its concrete reality. More and more, indeed, I will feel out of step with the analyses of Strathern or Viveiros de Castro on the contents of "indigenous metaphysics", which they often present as a critique of beings in their substantiality, to the point of reaching the reality of the human being (see Piette, 2025).

Up to this point, the reader will have noticed that I give a certain degree of importance to supernatural beings, their modes of action and their presence. When I speak of beings, do I mean the ways in which they are present in a situation? Yes, but not only. And this is all the

more important given that anthropologists have placed deities and other spirits at the centre of their analysis. They ask us to speak their language (see Latour, 2013a) or to take seriously the objects and terms of religious universes, to allow ourselves to be guided by their meanings, to describe and analyse a "world" where the wine is the blood, the bread is the body. This is what Martin Holbraad proposes with his equivalence of powder and power posited in divinations in Cuba (Holbraad, 2012). Which is understandable if the objective is to analyse situations and understand their metaphysics.

But it is a different matter if I am trying to give these beings complete identity cards (see Piette, 2016, p. 52-58; also 2024). The lucidity I feel should be integrated into an anthropologist's analysis. For me, it is no longer enough to say that the dead being, the divine or supernatural being, is mobile, polymorphous and undemanding, as I have noted. I want to emphasise this fundamental difference between real, concrete entities[xiv], substances, and other beings. Aristotle thought that "given that there are some things that are separate and some that are not separate, it is the latter that are substances" (Aristotle, 2004, 1070b). He specifies the "limit" of each substance: "the extreme point of a particular, the first point outside which no part of the thing can be found and inside which all parts of the thing can be found" (*ibid.*, 1022a). Unlike an animal, God is not a substance and my father is no

[xiv] See the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines entity as "a thing with distinct and independent existence".

longer one. To put it another way, the divine being does not exist and my father no longer exists. I can no longer say, as an anthropologist, that we must speak the language of God, without adding that there is no God.

There are no dead who resurrect, who look at us, who wait for us. There are the dead who have been transformed or dissolved into anthropological traces (in my case), precisely *because* they were once alive, but are now dead, and some living person has thus transformed them into such traces with effects of presence. I am probably the only one to add something to my father's trace, this effect of presence, through love. Is it then possible to say that there is a "dead" entity? There is a former living entity, that makes me cry, as dead, *because it is dead*? A former entity certainly, but it no longer exists. Traces, photographs, various objects are real, but they are not "him". Some will say that this is just evidence. I cannot think this sentence is a platitude. A presence effect is not an existence. That means that at this stage of my itinerary I do not dissociate the metaphysical freedom from the constraints of science, conscious of the danger of making us think that "objectivity, reality and truth are a bad thing" (Ferraris, 2014: 12), and of doubting the superiority of Copernicus over Ptolemy and of Pasteur over Aesculapius (*ibid.*: 14).

What have I done so far? Love has driven me to describe a being in its singularity, disconnected from the others. The pain of his absence has

led me to believe and from there to reflect on the entity that is the object of believing, to conclude that there is no entity.

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Putting dead people in the ground, in shrouds, coffins and tombs, or burning them, is an act of unspeakable violence. With or without religious beliefs, for each death, everyone, or almost everyone, acts as if it were "normal", by some mechanism that regulates, or even negates, the lucidity and intensity of the emotions. And it works at situations and moments organised by the 'managers' of the graves or ashes. I cannot see this as a matter of cultural diversity. For the living people, there is nothing to be done: it is impossible to shout and stop these operations. They show what humans have achieved since becoming aware of the reality of death and its implications: on the one hand, knowing with almost certainty that death is absolute void and, on the other, not thinking it through to the end. These are two acts that never cease to astonish me - and they have nothing to do with the sidelining of death, as is sometimes said about modern and particularly Western societies. I really felt this minoration from the moment my father died. It also was a long grief. Anthropology helped me to ease the emotion of my father's absence, but it also revealed his definitive absence: this was at a time when it had become acceptable to me…

A grieving process is never truly ended, as the desire of this article attests.

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