GRADIVA AND THE FOLD

Ioana COSMA[*]

Abstract*: This paper will discuss the aesthetics of the fold in the novel Gradiva, A Pompeiian Fancy by Wilhelm Jensen. The theoretical perspective is that of Gilles Deleuze who discussed the fold in his Le pli. Leibniz et le baroque.The main purpose of this paper is to see the connection between Gradiva and the subconscious in Modernism. What does the figure of Gradiva have to tell us about the ways in which Modernist art and literature have problematized the relations between consciousness and the subconscious, eros and thanatos? This paper concludes that Gradiva represents a figure of the repressed subconscious which appears in the foreground of Modernist aesthetics.*

Keywords*: Gradiva, fold, psychoanalysis.*

This paper is going to discuss Gradiva in several of her instantiations. We should begin by looking at what Gradiva is. Gradiva is first of all a bas-relief of a Pompeian woman caught in the act of walking or dancing. As such she is part of a procession, probably as one of the three Horae accompanying the Dyonisiac ritual. Secondly, she is one of the characters of Wilhelm Jensen's 1903 novella. Thirdly, she is the figure that intrigued Sigmund Freud into writing a text about her and psychoanalysis and dreams. Fourthly, she is a character appearing in several Modernist paintings such as the ones by Dali and Andre Masson. Gradiva's ubiquity in Modernist art and culture might earn her the title of a Modernist symbol but what interests me is her affinity with the subconscious and the way she problematizes this relationship. I will look at Gradiva's relationship with the subconscious *via* the figure of the fold (seen in Deleuzian fashion). Given the limits of this paper I will focus mostly on Jensen's text with a few references to the other texts incorporating Gradiva. Before we proceed, I will offer a summary of Jensen's novella. *Gradiva. A Pompeiian Fancy* is about a young archeologist Norbert Hanold who finds the bas-relief of Gradiva and immediately becomes obsessed with it. He subsequently decides to go to Pompeii where from the bas-relief presumably originated. While in Pompeii, the character displays several signs of social inadequacy and at the same time becomes obsessed with Gradiva's gait: the right foot placed perpendicularly to the ground and begins searching for real-life representations of this gait. In the meantime he has a dream in which Gradiva appears and dies in the Vesuvian eruption in the old city of Pompeii. After this, the hero starts having visions of Gradiva. Due to the foot position, he identifies Gradiva with a woman which he sees in the streets of Pompeii. All along and due to the woman's equivocal answers, he is convinced that it is the Pompeiian woman resurrected from the dead that he encounters. At the end however, he is forced to realize that the woman is no one else by Zoe Bertgang, his childhood friend. She heals him from his delusion and espouses him at the end of the novella.

[*] University of Pitești, c_ioana05@yahoo.com

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)

There are several layers of significance in Jensen's novella and we are going to discuss them through the figure of the fold. Gradiva brings to the fore the problem of the fold in several ways: first of all, the fold is a figure of her movement, which is particularly important in the definition of her function. Secondly, she enfolds several worlds in which she gives herself to be seen, guessed and defined. Thirdly, her instantiation problematizes the fold from the perspective of the myriad interpretations she engenders.

The fold is an important part of Gradiva's representation. It appears first as the creases made by her clothes during movement, by the garments as they are held by her hands in her movement and finally by her kerchief as it falls gently on her shoulders. This last image is perhaps one of the most striking of the bas-relief: the kerchief moves far behind her head before resting on her shoulders. The position of her kerchief seems to support the thesis that she is actually dancing rather than merely walking. But we can look at this image more metaphorically too: we could see the space created by the enfolding of her kerchief as the space that is left behind, or the subconscious which is Gradiva's domain. The image of the fold enveloping this space shows protection of this space and the necessity to carry it along even in movement. Upon an attentive inspection, we could say that Gradiva represents the inscription of the subconscious in (chronological) time. This fact has several implications. First of all it means that the repressed subconscious is no longer repressed but brought to the fore and rediscussed. The space sheltered by her kerchief directed rightwards, creates a tension in the whole picture because the rest of the representation is moving leftwards. Thus we can say that the actualization of the subconscious is happening in spite even of Gradiva or her attempts to bring about rationality and clarity. These attributes will be retaken by Zoe Bertgang but only in the moment she stops acting as Gradiva and starts walking in her own shoes. As Deleuze says, "a fold sends to other folds" (Deleuze, 1988: 12), so the sheltering of the subconscious directs our attention to several realms of the subconscious activity.

The first frame, the first fold: Hanold Norbert says he has found a bas-relief which has much appealed to him: "On a visit to one of the great antique collections of Rome, Norbert Hanold had discovered a bas-relief which was exceptionally attractive to him, so he was much pleased, after his return to Germany, to be able to get a splendid plaster-cast of it." (Jensen, 2014: n.p.). Louis Marin wrote about this capacity of works of art to arrest our attention; it is a movement by which, he says, we are so to speak, chosen by the work which beholds us by the same token as we behold it. There is much to discuss here as concerns Gradiva. The bas-relief and the archetype has attracted the attention of many readers and interpreters and we can say that she represents a Modernist symbol. In this first fold, we discover the power of *admiratio* which has affinities with the omnivident icon in that it sees me at the same time as I see it. Gradiva is not simply seen, she leaves an imprint behind, she wounds, she asks to be arrested by the same movement with which she seems to be serenely escaping away. This no doubt is the reason why she has made her appearance in so many of the Modernist works of art. But why Modernism of all literary trends? Because Modernism had a direct engagement with Antiquity, it was openly preoccupied with rediscussing categories of the classic Antiquity. Moreover, Modernism had its own explorations of the areas of consciousness and subconscious so Gradiva played, at least subconsciously, the role of guide towards the illumination of the area of the unconscious.

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)

As Deleuze showed, the fold has to do with the psyche: "On peut dire que ' les échos, reflets, traces, déformations prismatiques, perspectives, seuils, plis' sont les préhensions qui anticipent en quelque manière la vie psychique" (Deleuze, 1988: 106). As part of the psyche it puts into play several layers of significance: the problem of consciousness and unconsciousness, the Apollinic and the Dionysiac, Eros and Thanatos and individuation and chaos.

The question of consciousness and unconsciousness is one of the primary axes of significance in Jensen's novella. The passage from consciousness and unconsciousness is made via a dream in which Norbert Hanold first encounters the character of Gradiva:

> As he stood thus at the edge of the Forum near the Jupiter temple, he suddenly saw Gradiva a short distance in front of him. Until then no thought of her presence there had moved him, but now suddenly it seemed natural to him, as she was, of course, a Pompeiian girl, that she was living in her native city and, without his having any suspicion of it, was his contemporary. He recognized her at first glance; the stone model of her was splendidly striking in every detail, even to her gait; involuntarily he designated this as "lente festinans." (Jensen, 2014: n.p.)

Hanold Norbert dreams he is in Pompeii in 79 when the Vesuvius explosion had occurred. There he encounters Gradiva, a girl who finds her death in the eruption. Interestingly enough, Hanold Norbert witnesses Gradiva's death in the dream:

> hastening quickly after her, however, he found his way to the place where she had disappeared from his view, and there she lay, protected by the projecting roof, stretched out on the broad step, as if for sleep, but no longer breathing, apparently stifled by the sulphur fumes. From Vesuvius the red glow flared over her countenance, which, with closed eyes, was exactly like that of a beautiful statue. No fear nor distortion was apparent, but a strange equanimity, calmly submitting to the inevitable, was manifest in her features. (Jensen, 2014: n.p)

The same calm countenance is bourn by Gradiva in the bas-relief Hanold had acquired. Here we see how elements of reality make their way in the dream and how, in this way, reality is contaminated by the oneiric. The somewhat morbid image of Gradiva could make us think of the relationship between Eros and Thanatos, erotic desire and death. There is something profoundly erotic in the obsession with Gradiva's right foot and Norbert Hanold's research in the various types of walking is a plunging in a world of erotic desire. His attraction to a woman seemingly resurrected from the dead is equally morbid and the flowers he brings to their meetings attest to this morbidity. In the dream, Gradiva is seen killed by the sulphur fumes emanating from the volcano. This imagery reminds us of the Inferno and of Gradiva's relation to this realm. In this respect, Gradiva shares some features with Persephone who is forced to spend part of her time in the Inferno with her husband. This idea also becomes apparent in the couple Hanold Norbert sees preserved as it had died. Moreover, Norbert Hanold identifies Gradiva as Greek at one point in the narrative:

> Thus the picture stood vividly before Norbert Hanold's eyes, but from daily contemplation of her head, another new conjecture had gradually arisen. The cut of her

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)

features seemed to him, more and more, not Roman or Latin, but Greek, so that her Hellenic ancestry gradually became for him a certainty. The ancient settlement of all southern Italy by Greeks offered sufficient ground for that, and more ideas pleasantly associated with the settlers developed. Then the young "domina" had perhaps spoken Greek in her parental home, and had grown up fostered by Greek culture. Upon closer consideration he found this also confirmed by the expression of the face, for quite decidedly wisdom and a delicate spirituality lay hidden beneath her modesty. (Jensen, 2014: n.p.)

There are several infernal images in the novella: the flies that haunt Norbert and appear in the most delicate moments, such as one of the last meetings with Gradiva/Zoe. Yet they are the ones which bring about reality: in attempting to kill a fly that had posed itself on Zoe's arm, Norbert has the proof that she is no spook, no creature of air and illusion as he had thought.

We can see from the beginning that Gradiva possesses several layers of interpretation and signification and it will be best to consider them one by one if we are to make any sense of her figure. Her world, marked from the beginnings of her artistic existence by the utopic mark of the neuter, is thus clearly delimited from other worlds: from that of the other characters in the novella, from our world as readers but also from her original narrative and myth. What is the true story of Gradiva after all?

If her image leaves us to wonder, her name is much more telling and like all proper names, are rigid designators, so they refer precisely to the person named and consecrate her. Gradiva means she who walks/advances and her name is adopted from that of Mars Gradivus, the Roman god of war who advances into battle. So she is, at least by name, associated with Roman mythology. As for her appearance, she is holding her garments as though to dance and, as I have already mentioned, her right foot displays a clear dancing position. It is thus easy to imagine her as part of a procession.

Therefore, Gradiva stands for several symbols at once: an image of a Dionysian procession and all the implications related to this ritual, as the figure of a mysterious woman/maiden that fascinates Jensen's character, as a fabulous being able to incarnate herself and come to life in the present from a distant past (although this possibility is precluded by the revelation that it was in fact Norbert Hanold's childhood friend whom he had been seeing), the symbol who fascinated artists and philosophers. Moreover, she is part of the Pompeian repertoire with all the implications of erasure of history and crystallization of traces.

The first time that Norbert Hanold sees Gradiva, it is through a fold: "Her head, whose crown was entwined with a scarf which fell to her neck, inclined forward a little;" (Jensen, 2014: n.p). This slight inclination of the head suggests a certain (symbolical) burden that is carried by the character. It could be an indication of the conscious giving way to the unconscious. In fact, Hanold Norbert exclaims upon seeing her: "Quite indubitably it was she!". Leaving aside all doubts and reasonable defiance, Norbert Hanold identifies the character he sees with the figure on his plaster cast. But what made him identify Gradiva this time? Was it the position of her right foot or something else? Indeed the text does not say that he has identified her by a particular something but that she has entranced him, that he became attracted to her as soon as she saw her and he knew that it was her. His state of lucid dreaming, if we can borrow the term from contemporary psychology, is spelled out by

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)

the text: "With open eyes he gazed along the street, yet it seemed to him as if he were doing it in a dream." (Jensen, 2014: n.p.) This is where the delusion and dream fold begins to unravel and it will take Norbert Hanold up to the moment of paroxysm, when he is humiliated for his eccentric behavior by Zoe Bertgang, only to be reawakened to reality afterwards. This is another way the eros and thanatos motifs are playing out in the text: the hero has to be killed symbolically (and socially) in the text to be reborn afterwards as a new, balanced individual who is able to have a socially viable life.

Apart from the dream and delusion and the Eros and Thanatos folds of the (subconscious) text we have the Apollinic and the Dionysiac fold which is played out almost entirely in the Gradiva/Zoe persona. As Gradiva, the character is Dionysiac; as Zoe, she becomes Apollinic. Mary Bergstein noted the Apollinic features of Gradiva: "Freud may have unconsciously overlooked one of his own motivations for equating Zoe-Gradiva's facility in snaring lizards with her capabilities as a psychoanalyst, namely his personal identification with Asklepios, the 'blameless physician' of Greek antiquity. (…) In the world of Greek mythology, the lizard-slayer, or Sauroktonos, is a version of the prophetic (seeing) Apollo and the curative, serpent-slaying physician, Apollo. The lizard symbolizes Apollo's powers of divination as well as his role as a sun-God, Helios, both of which are appropriate to the story of Gradiva, where the Mediterranean noonday sun produces foretelling hallucinations, the same circumstances that once brought Jensen to an 'almost visionary' state in Pompeii" (Bergstein, 2010: 124).

Gradiva, on the other hand, emerges as a Dionysiac inducer of *hubris*. She entertains Norbert's delusion and feeds it. She seduces and entrances. She appears as mysteriously as she disappears. She is equivocal. She maintains ambiguity and she does not care that the hero is thrown into a mental state verging on madness. She comes and goes among temples dedicated to Roman gods, either Apollo or Jupiter, but she is also supposed to have a more tenebrous home to which she presumably returns after she meets Hanold. This ambiguity of the heroine hesitating between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is central to Jensen's novella and constitutes another fold open in the realm of the unconscious which the author is thoroughly exploring in his text.

All these encounters plunge the hero in a state of mental turbulence; he does not understand why Gradiva should know his name even after having had the certainty that she is a creature of flesh and bones. Due to Gradiva's double role as Apollinian and Dionysian, we can understand Hanold's experience as a ritual of initiation in the process of individuation. Along the way, there is always the danger of succumbing to chaos and madness but, due to Apollo's beneficial influence, order is instituted and a more congenial man appears instead of the grumpy archeologist. This closes the hermeneutic arc of the repressed subconscious Gradiva was enfolding. That our hero was repressing both his sexuality and his sociability or his persona is clear from the sullen reflections he had been making on the blissful couples he was encountering in Italy. The fold follows Jensen's Gradiva after-life and we can encounter it in Dali's *Gala Gradiva* paintings and sculptures, in Segantini's *Vanity* and in Masson's Gradiva.

In Dali's *Gradiva Finds the Anthropomorphic Ruins* we encounter the fold both in Gradiva's and the man's depictions. Of particular interest is the man's face, a double fold sheltering and absence. The heartless and faceless man is an image of the subconscious

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)

taking over the conscious. Gradiva's body, on the other hand, has become one with the folds of her garments. So, while the feminine character has identified perhaps too much with her social persona, the male character has been devastated by the subconscious. In Segantini's *Vanity* the fold from the woman's hair, which she produces by holding it with her hand, mirrors the coils of the serpent lying in the lake. In this way we have another identification of Gradiva with the unconscious and with more telluric rather than solar creatures. Finally, in Masson's *Gradiva* the fold is epitomized by the position of her left hand which is a counterpoint to her right foot. Through this gesture we can understand that Gradiva is sheltering the red space symbolizing the subconscious.

Bibliography

Agamben, G, "À propos de la science sans nom d'Aby Warburg". *La puissance de la pensée, Essais et conferences*. Paris, Bibliothèque Rivages, 1975.

---. *Ninfe*, Torino, Bollati Borlinghieri, 2007.

Bergstein, Mary, *Mirrors of Memory: Freud, Photography and the History of Art*, Cornell University Press, 2010.

Calasso, Roberto and Manganaro, Jean-Paul, "La folie qui vient des nymphes". *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 26 (Toamna, 1994), pp. 125-133. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20166909?seq=1. Consultat in 5 mai 2012.

Chadwick¸ Whitney, *Masson's Gradiva: The Metamorphosis of a Surrealist Myth*. *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Dec., 1970), pp. 415-422, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3048768. Consultat in mai 26 2012.

Deleuze, Gilles, *Le pli. Leibniz et le baroque*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1988.

Didi Huberman, Georges, "Aby Warburg et l'archive des intensités", *Études photographiques*, http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/index268.html, Consultat in april 17 2012.

---.,*Ninfa moderna. Essai sur le drapé tombé*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001.

--- *L'image survivante, Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002.

Freud, Sigmund, *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva, A Pompeiian Fancy*, Kessinger Publishing, 2005.

Garcia Fons, Tristan, "Le voile de Gradiva". http://www.cairn.info/revue-lettre-de-l-enfance-et-de-l-adolescence-2010-1-page-47.htm
23.08.2012.

Gunthert, André, "Le complexe de Gradiva", *Études photographiques* no. 2, May 1997. http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/index289.html. Consultat in 20 Martie 2012.

Jensen, Wilhelm, Gradiva, a Pompeiian Fancy, Project Gutenberg, 2014, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44917/44917-h/44917-h.htm, consultat in 16.07.2017

Jung, Carl Gustav, *Aion. Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self.*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.

--- *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Trans by R. F. C. Hull. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959.

Maggini, Carlo, "Bad Little Girls". *ACTA BIOMED* 2008; 79: 42-51. http://www.actabiomedica.it/data/2008/1_2008/maggini.pdf. Consultat in 5 mai 2012.

Mahieu Eduardo, « Aby Warburg: l'art de la fuite », *Essaim*, 2008/2 no. 21, pp. 73-89. http://www.cairn.info/revue-essaim-2008-2-page-73.htm,consultat in 7 mai 2012.

BDD-A29889 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:32 UTC)