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'The relic and the work of mourning'¹

Pierre Fédida

Abstract

Following chapter 2 of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, Fédida considers the function of the relic – and remnant – in the work of mourning in terms of the psychic mechanism of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) which underlies the capacity for living a paradoxal state: acceptance of something no longer possible, no longer present, precisely because it is neither possible nor present. Above all, Fédida is concerned with the autonomy of the relic in the psychic life of mourning, the function of which is to prevent the representation of one's own death to oneself and thereby to permit continuance in time. Underwriting the relic in the work of mourning is the relation knowledge–belief and the meaning of separation, since the freezing of the process of separation can lead to a greater role of unanalyzable, potentially psychotic elements, hence the relic can enter into an economy of the psychoses.

Key words

depression • disavowal • fetish • relic • taboo • work of mourning

... mourning must fulfil a specific psychical task which consists of establishing a separation between the dead, on the one side, the memories and the hopes of the survivors on the other.

(Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 1932: 2)²

The relic is that which is preserved, from the dead person, in order to guarantee, in the name of *reality*, that the dead will not return. In other words, the ritual attached to the cult of relics – in individual myth as well as collective belief – does not misconstrue the all-powerfulness of those who have disappeared. 'We know,' says Freud (1932[1912/13]: 106), 'that the dead are powerful rulers ...' As is thus witnessed by the work of mourning, to bury one's dead is no easy thing when one assumes it alone.

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Because it receives, in the materiality of a remnant as familiar as it is derisory, the strange quality [*vertu*] of the absent body, the relic gives to reality its right of necessity and, by the ritual of the private cult that it institutes, defies, in the work of mourning, the appearances of death. If, as Freud suggests, the work of mourning must lead the ego, at the end of a rebellion, to accept the rigorous verdict of reality, the relic assumes meaning in the desire to preserve *some thing* of that from which one becomes separated without, for all that, having to renounce being separated from it. Fragment of a disappeared body in which there is received the recollection of being in its totality, the relic is a sacralized object which, in favor of a veritable derision of the everyday, prohibits the disappeared person from tarrying henceforth amongst the habituations and instead assigns as residence to that disappeared person certain poor remnants retained from him or her or previously taken from his or her appearance. ‘The dead kill,’ says Freud. The relic *realizes* the illusory compromise with which we serve ourselves in order to resist the anguish of death and, thus thereby, never to arrive at the coincidence of a representation of death with the necessity – become destiny – of a *no longer*. The anguish of death – to the extent that it is in part linked to castration anxiety – poses, in spite of its resolution, all that is involved in the question of a possible – unalterable and indestructible – remnant which becomes preserved beyond all separation. That there may be – withheld from a complete and definitive loss – a remnant which is hidden the better to be discovered *après-coup*, entails the recognition that only the memory of the dead – and memory is the relic par excellence – allows us to avoid the intolerable revelation of our own death. In this sense, Freud is right to place the emphasis on the narcissistic premium which, once the bond [*lien*] with the annihilated object is broken, reality comes to accord to the bereaved, namely, the recognized advantage of ‘remaining in life’ (Freud, 1917: 14) which is to say, to preserve oneself. Inversely, it is known that the psychotic event can occur whether due to a negation of the reality which takes care of an imaginary conservation of the lost object in a hallucinatory cathexis, or under the form of a brutal irruption of death (suicide or murder) into the life of the one who remains.³ So, even though the relic offers protection from the menace with which the dead weigh down the living, it also introduces among the living the mediation necessary to the preservation of their own life.

Neither talisman nor fetish, the relic yet responds – proof of *reality* coming to the support – that in spite of a *knowledge* [*savoir*] about separation, it is necessary to *believe* that some thing subsists. In order to do this, this relic-object succeeds in its function of mystified mourning at the price of a play of inversions of which certain of these inversions are immediately recognizable – whether, first, the interdependent relationships of the familiar with the strange, of the repugnant with the precious, of the everyday and the mysterious, or, further, the practical (or the useful) with the functionless. In the private ritual practice attached to the memory of the deceased after mourning, one can ring up this habit of preserving from the deceased a fragment of the body (hair, teeth ...), finery, or further still an object of insignificant appearance which truly belonged to the deceased.⁴ The relic is here, wholly or in part, foreign to the idea of an objective value that one would be able to discern in the object. It is, on the contrary, in the play of meaning introduced between the contraries that the relic value conferred on this object appears to be

decided. Here we are in the presence of a phenomenon; the importance of which was underlined by Freud (1955[1919]), namely that concerning the malaise of the strange ('The Uncanny')⁵ as well as the reference to *taboo*.⁶ Following analogous unconscious determinations, the relic takes its meaning – at once its nature and its power – from the possibility of the reversal of the object's signification into its contrary signification. It would be better to say that the relic is the object through which is produced and to which is reported [*se rapporte*] the passage from one signification to another. So it is that an object having truly belonged to the deceased and, as such, having participated in its intimacies 'is not able' to be *thrown out*: preserved by the survivors which were linked to it, for them it institutes an *other* perception; on the condition that it is placed beyond common usage and that it loses all usefulness, it *maintains* itself and becomes immobilized in the object position of a private cult. Thus, retained in the midst of the everyday, it ceases however to communicate and to exchange, through any functional usage, with other domestic objects.

How, then, to define the relic in its reality status? A material fragment extracted from a disappeared body, the relic legitimizes a *visibility* of the hidden. In death, that which is hidden, is, at first glance [*en première évidence*], the decomposition of the cadaver, its progressive destruction. As is borne out by the questions posed by children in relation to the disappearance of the dead person,⁷ burial defines the meaning of the hidden at the level of research of a visual representation of the reverse side of things and of their subterranean conformation.⁸ With the relic, that from which the dead person becomes separated and which, through the survivors, is retained and preserved, manifests the power to maintain in visibility – undecomposed and sheltered from all annihilation – that which from the dead person must remain hidden or remain beyond all representation. The repugnance at the idea of the decomposed cadaver is, if not on a perverse mode,⁹ of the order of the intolerable. In this sense, one would be able to say, therefore, that the relic, which in itself is a derisory and repugnant remnant, places the cadaver and its putrefaction beyond all representation. As Freud recalls, 'it is the cadaver which has furnished the first notion of the bad spirit'.¹⁰ The fragment of the dead person become relic enters into the visual regime of the object and witnesses thereby to a kind of necessary limit of the representation of death. The full visibility of the relic gives assurance to belief against the anxiety of destruction. But, for this to be so, it is necessary that this reassurance of death in reality should become paired with a function of participation in its mystery [*mystère*]. If, therefore, the hidden reality of death and its radical meaning must be rejected beyond all representation, the belief which becomes attached to relics substitutes for the knowledge [*savoir*] of this reality, the secret knowledge that there is a *remnant*, the preservation of which defies appearances and the power of reality of which is not less diminished for attesting that not everything of death can be known. On the mode of disavowal, in order to escape from the sorrow [*deuil*] of separation and to remove oneself from hallucinatory desire, the survivor constitutes the relic in a kind of enlarged reality or, as it may be better put, in a *sur-reality*. One might also add that the taboo prohibitions relative to touch could, in other register – that of the implementarity of the object – usefully clarify a reality the confirmation of the indestructibility of which is made through the insistence of its visibility.

Here we are, then, on the basis of this first description and without prejudging at another level of interpretation, confronted with the question of the relation *knowledge-belief* in the signification taken by this relation in respect of reality. Precisely, though, Freud raises this question not about mourning but in his study on fetishism: the belief by which the child persists in attributing a phallus to the woman, whilst he *knows* – in a supportive reality – that she is bereft of one, institutes the existence of the *fetish*. *Verleugnung* (denial or disavowal) concerns not affect (coming under the process of repression) but the *representation* inherent to the belief simultaneously preserved (woman possesses a penis) and *abandoned*. The fetish therefore intervenes in place and in the position of a *believing* in order to substitute itself for it and in order to maintain the recognition of the loss in reality. The institution of the fetish responds well to the quest for a compromise: how to save something from what does not exist given that loss (castration) cannot be tolerated (horror of castration) and that the belief in the existence of this absent object could not be preserved save in the mode of an imaginary homosexual cathexis? Freud (1927) writes: ‘Yes, in his mind the woman has got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before’. And he adds: ‘We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it’ (p. 353). It will be deduced from this that the fetish permits the subject, in a reconstituted knowledge, to accept the ‘verdict’ of reality: *woman has no penis*. It is nevertheless the necessary vestige having taken the place of the abandoned belief and bringing knowledge to a stop upon a reality substantiated by its entire visibility. As Octave Mannoni (1969[1919]) further notes with precision: ‘The fetishist has repudiated the experience which proves to him that women have no phallus but he does not preserve the belief that they do have one, he preserves a fetish *because* they do not’ (p. 11). Finally, if this knowledge excludes that something remains hidden behind absence (if not nothing would guarantee the fetishist against the anguish of a returning ‘penis-spirit’), this is due to the effacement of the memory: ‘It seems’, says Freud (1927), ‘that when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia’ (p. 354).

The relation which maintains in commonality the anxiety of death and castration anxiety would find here a new confirmation. If the fetish is in no way a relic, anymore than the relic is a fetish, one cannot fail to be struck by the homology of two processes which lead, through different arguments (in the one instance death and in the other castration), to substitutive formations marked by compromise. These formations become designated differentially as relic and as fetish. In a certain way, we have said, the relic also has, in mourning, a function of *stoppage*: but in sacralizing the memory of the disappeared person, in another fashion it thereby permits forgetfulness. If, however, the psychopathological regime of the relic is that of obsessional neurosis, the regime of the fetish can only be designated as perversion after the comprehension of the meaning of *Verleugnung* in terms of the splitting of the ego. Citing the case of two young people in relation to the problem of differentiating neurosis and psychosis, Freud (1927) says:

In the analysis of two young men I learned that each ... had failed to take cognizance of the death of his beloved father – had ‘scotomized’ it [and yet

neither of them had developed a psychosis]. Thus a piece of reality which was undoubtedly important had been disavowed by the ego, just as the unwelcome fact of women's castration is disavowed in fetishists. (p. 355)¹¹

And in the follow-up to this observation, Freud shows how the splitting between two attitudes (not to recognize this death: affirmation of desire; to be completely cognizant of it: affirmation of reality) was, in one of the cases 'the basis of an obsessional neurosis'. In the same way with the fetishist 'in very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself' (p. 356). The comparison introduced by Freud on the subject of splitting in relation to obsessional neurosis and fetishistic perversion licenses us to think that if in the two cases it is a matter of a *letting go* or of a *hanging on* the opposition of which is resolved by a compromise-stoppage to the advantage of a veritable transvaluation of reality, then the relic is not exclusively a concern of the clinical dimension of the neuroses but is suitable for repositioning, at another level, the question of what, along with the fetish, it designates at the heart of psychosis.

Constituted as value in itself, the relic seems to interdict money unless it represents the psychoanalytic paradigm engaged in the status of anality. Not being able to be either bought or sold, the relic can only be transmitted or stolen. Its preservation – understood in the sense where it is abstracted from commercial exchange and where it resists all destruction – is therefore guaranteed by the fact that in no fashion can it be minted. And if it must one day be evaluated, the money which would give the value [*prix*] in return would find its quality in the dismissive glance of the ordinary. There we have yet one more reason to preserve it! The often accumulative preservation of relic-objects by neurotics clearly establishes the psychological signification which it is reasonable to ascribe them: objects of all kinds which no longer are good for anything, but, put aside from the practice of exchange, they are exempt from rejection and destruction, they sustain moreover bonds of affective dependence which correspond with the archaic image of a disappeared body.¹² The status of anality that psychoanalysis can recognize in the relic specifies its signification as much in relation to mourning as in the light of analysis melancholic processes.

Notes

1. 'La Relique et le travail du deuil', first published in *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* II Autumn 1970, issue devoted to 'Objets du fétichisme'; then in Fédida (1978: 53–59).
2. Translator's note: the Standard Edition translation reads, more briskly: 'Mourning has a quite specific psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivors' memories and hopes from the dead', *Pelican Freud*, pp. 13, 122.
3. Gisela Pankow (1969: 14–20) cites from the narrative of Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges la Morte*, where the murder of Jane by the hero, Hugues, is recounted. Jane has seized the long hair once belonging to a now dead woman which her husband has preserved as a relic:

For a number of years, he dared not touch this thing which was dead since it belonged to the dead. And all this cult for the relic conducted with such tears dissolving, roughening the crystal each day in order that at last it should serve as a toy for a woman who scoffs at it.

After Jane had fallen, strangled by the hair tightened in tresses around her neck, Rodenbach continues:

She was dead, having failed to divine the Mystery and that here was a thing that absolutely was not to be touched at the risk of sacrilege. She had brought her hand, this woman, upon the vindictive hair, this hair which – for those of pure heart in communion with the mystery – immediately let it be understood that the moment it be desecrated there it would become upon the instant the *instrument of death*. (emphasis added)

Among the very many things to be learned from this text, let us pay attention to two of them: on the one hand, in being taken out of its casket to become an object of play (derision), the relic loses its sacrality and ceases to be an object of veneration in mourning – the relic under the glass is of the order of *Vorhandenheit* (presence-at-hand); it acquires a pseudo-instrumentality (in the mode of *Zuhandenheit* – readiness-to-hand) by which it becomes constituted as a quasi-*fetish*. For Hugues, on the other hand, the hair of the dead woman preserved as a relic, positively has the function of stoppage in the mourning of widowhood. ‘She was still this hair?’ The process of mourning, then, cannot be resolved since the relic eliminates all *work* from it. Precisely, the use by Hugues of the relic to strangle the woman who uses it to amuse herself assumes the value of a psychotic act of accomplishment and the resolution of mourning. It is with the murder of Jane, by means of the relic become an instrument of death, that Hugues becomes liberated from the death of his wife. With psychotics, murder or suicide can be precisely the form assumed, in the case mentioned, by the reunion, in the same instant, of the accomplishment of mourning and its resolution. The relic retains [in itself] the power [*puissance*] of murder.

4. The notion of belonging (or appurtenance) associated with that of property (or ownership) is of great importance here. To preserve something from the dead person that once belonged to him or her is to establish a relationship between genealogical appurtenance (ancestors) and ownership of bodies. In the same way we should find here a supplementary confirmation of the anal status of the relic. Consider Abraham (1948[1924]):

Psycho-analytic experience has shown beyond a doubt that in the middle stage of his libidinal development the individual regards the person who is the object of his desire as something over which he exercises ownership, and that he consequently treats that person in the same way as he does his earliest piece of private property, i.e. the contents of his body, his faeces. (pp. 425–6)

Let’s not forget (*pace* Freud, Jones, Abraham) the well-known association present in anal erotism: having children = producing faeces.

5. Consider the role of obsessional compulsion in the malaise of the strange.
6. In *Totem and Taboo*, in the chapter which he dedicates to ‘Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence’, Freud (1932[1912/13]) writes: ‘The meaning of “taboo”, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, “sacred”, “consecrated”, and on the other “uncanny”, “dangerous”, “forbidden”, “unclean”’ (p. 71). He notes, moreover, that the contrary of *taboo* in Polynesian is ‘*noa* = common, ordinary’.
7. From this point of view, the observations of Melanie Klein would be rich in insights; cf., especially, Klein (1975[1921]).
8. Jones has closely linked this curiosity for the reverse side of things with anal erotism (cf. Jones, 1977[1948]: 423). In the same sense, he notes the interests for underground passages, canals, tunnels ... Abraham brings to attention that this trait can be put in relation to forgetfulness of debts and inversely, from the point of view of *symmetry*, with the desire *to be quit/have done*.

9. A complete study of the significations of the relic in psychopathology could not ignore a reprise of the problem at the level of perversions such as necrophilia and coprophilia. In the same way, Krafft-Ebing (1886) cites numerous observations where morsels of the body (fingernails, hair, etc.) are objects of perverse fetishization.
10. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1932[1912/13]) studies the transformation of the dead person into a demon; in like manner, consider what he says of projection as defence mechanism. It would be necessary, finally, to devote a more exact study to the problem, noted by Abraham (1948[1924]), of the 'all-powerfulness' attached to defecation.
11. Translator's note: the passage in square brackets gives the clause omitted in Fédida's quotation. On the attempt to differentiate psychosis and neurosis, cf. Freud (1924: 19) and Freud (1979)
12. Translator's note: the etymologies of relic, relict, relinquish – playing upon what is left behind, left over, balance – are the bases of Fédida's exploration of the relation – or non-relation – between money and value in the relic (cf. Skeat, 1988).

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