
Preface

Psychology of the Antiquary

“Saxa loquuntur”. Stones speak. This brief but dense Latin sentence ended the opening paragraph of Sigmund Freud’s famous essay *Über die Ätiologie der Hysterie* (1896), which aimed at establishing a comparison between the rising psychoanalytic investigation and archaeology. Freud wanted to show that the latter field, which involved unearthing, cataloguing, and studying ancient relics from the past, splendidly represented the purpose of the new science he was developing, which consisted in exploring human memory beyond the sphere of the visible and into the depths of the subconscious. From archaeology, psychology should ideally acquire the ability to descend under the surface and bring back to light faded and forgotten elements, which were, despite their invisibility, still a fundamental part of that surface where contingency took place.¹

Did the practice of unearthing relics from a buried past intend to explain the present? Did the present seek confirmation in relics unearthed from a buried past? Freud’s purpose was of course to attain a sort of “archaeology of the soul”, to expand and interpret through a scientific approach the notion of interiority, which until his time had been considered impenetrable. Thus, his psychoanalytic research drew methodological aspects directly from the field of archaeology, which focused on the collection and the elaboration of the data. Even

¹ This preface is inspired by the reading of Freud’s essays *Über die Ätiologie der Hysterie* (1896) and *Konstruktionen in der Analyse* (1937), and the critical essay on his archaeological approach in psychoanalysis Hake 1993, 146-73. These texts are combined with multiple sources directly derived from Renaissance antiquaries, which, given the nature of these pages, are not worth mentioning.

if this analysis attempted to reconstruct a full and complete image of the past itself, the fragmentary status in which the relics emerged impeded the full accomplishment of the process.

However, to obtain a somewhat reliable reconstruction of an image of the past, an additional effort in terms of classification, preservation and interpretation was required: the development of a sensitivity towards collecting, emerging from the desire to possess an immaterial meaning through the material objects. The illusion of being capable of grasping a coherent and all-encompassing image of the object examined was a direct consequence of this research. Nonetheless, after an initial excavation phase, despite an analytic approach aiming at reaching objective results, the reconstruction of the fragments was still a subjective matter.

If the aim of psychoanalysis was to reconstruct a vision of the past which created a convergence among the sporadic pieces extracted from the mine of memory in a unitary picture, the consequence was that reconstruction exposed all the fragments to potential decay, given that oblivion appeared as a sort of autogenous form of self-preservation of the object. The interplay between preservation and destruction is subtle but strong. Preservation entails ignorance, knowledge destruction. From this dichotomy, a different idea of the past could be developed, paving the way to a new awareness of its dynamics. Which was the relationship between the fragmentary relics from the past and their understanding in a unitary vision? Through which paths can ignorance be transformed into knowledge, given the impossibility of reenacting the past in the present? Which hermeneutical tools become necessary to understanding a past which, regardless of its implicit participation in the present, is also corroded by the present itself? And is it ultimately even possible to understand the past through a rational systematisation of the data collected, which is restricted to a limited body of sources that is not explicable *per se*?

Even though the Renaissance did not benefit from the same methodological approach developed by Freud at the end of the nineteenth century, the birth of the previously mentioned archaeological sensitivity dates back to the end of the fourteenth century. This can more appropriately be defined as an antiquarian approach to antiquity and its relics, considering the timeframe. It was during these centuries that a critical approach towards the past, founded in the re-discovery of sources, began emerging more systematically than ever before. The past was uncovered from dark dungeon-like crypts and fragments were gradually brought to light through archeological excavation as well as a similar type of exploration in libraries. The more underground explorations were conducted, the stronger the desire to dig into the unknown buried past became. The fragmentary past gave rise to new questions, awakening unforeseen curiosities together with the hope of reconstructing a lost time.

In this light, Freud's metaphor that explained psychoanalysis through archaeology could be repurposed, attempting to explain the new antiquarian sensitivity born during the Renaissance. What could the acts of extracting antiquities from underground digs and ancient manuscripts from forgotten libraries tell us about the psychology of those who participated in this practice? How could this research reunite the fragments of a lost soul which, despite many lacunae, was still perceived as a whole? It appears that the evidence of the past, which was embodied by the relics, generated a genuine attraction towards the past itself. The materiality of sources possessed a tangible reality capable of actualising the past in the present, reorienting the comprehension of the present itself, fostering the idea of re-birth in a diachronic continuum.

If on the one hand humanists proclaimed the novelty of their intellectual movement by evoking, through the imagery of rediscovery, the victory of the light of knowledge over the darkness of ignorance, on the other hand ancient relics were much more visible and pervasive in the present than humanists would have us believe in their accounts. This means that part of the antiquarian experience was mediated by its literary narration, acquiring significance through humanistic rhetoric.

From an indeterminate attraction to the past, a strong fascination towards the relics of antiquity took place. This fascination created new hermeneutical approaches, by attempting to reconstruct their fragmentary status through specific techniques, which could not be accomplished without further progress in the method. In fact, an actual discernment of the past was possible only thanks to an investigation of the material dimension of the fragments, which could unfold the complex processes of cause and effect that produced them. Therefore, the past acquired the characteristics of a body subject to fixed mechanisms, the dynamics of which could be unveiled thanks to the study of its peculiar evolution in time – that is to say, the history of tradition.

If the investigation into the past took place below the surface, as perfectly represented by the practice of the archaeological dig, this actual underground journey finds a meaningful convergence with the descent into the underworld known as *katabasis*. *Katabasis* was usually undertaken to recover something lost, but still alive in the imagination of those attempting to retrieve it. In this case, a past that was dead and situated in an afterlife dimension, but which still possessed a marvellous vitality in the present.

Nevertheless, recovering the soul of lost civilisations was triggered by the inescapable incompleteness of its bequest. Incompleteness was the true catalyst for the reception of the past: the unknown became an opportunity to challenge the boundaries of its representation based on the extant sources, boundaries that could shift ac-

ording to advancements in the fields which participated to its understanding. This meant that the past could be idealised if the fragments, through which it was transmitted, allowed for a rational (and hence credible) reconstruction. But it also meant that the rationalisation of the past must not drift away from its idealised reconstruction, because idealisation and rationalisation were premised on one another.

This ostensible aporia became an essential doorway for the development of the Renaissance's relationship with the past. While at first the fragments provided an idealised and almost oneiric image of the past, which was not measurable and hence not comprehensible through rational parameters, a corresponding need to understand the materiality of the fragment that procured the image emerged. This was the critical spark which allowed antiquaries to establish an immediate dialogue with the real object, to understand the projection of the image derived from it. Paradoxically, it was the vision of the present that remained immutable, subject as it was to fate, while the past could instead change according to what was gradually rediscovered from beneath the surface of memory. To return to Freud, the opening quotation of his *Die Traumdeutung* (1900) hints very well to this process: "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo" (Verg. *Aen.* 7.312).

The chapters that follow are arranged thanks to the data collected in *ATRA - Atlas of Renaissance Antiquarianism* (www.unive.it/atra), a digital system that maps the circulation of antiquarian learning in Renaissance Europe. Its purpose is to contribute to the promotion of new knowledge on antiquarian studies in the Renaissance and demonstrate how the antiquarian approach – that based the growth of thought on documented sources and empirical evidence – played a primary role in the evolution of the entire cultural/intellectual life of Early Modern times. The *ATRA* database collects, confronts and interconnects published and unpublished letters of humanists and scholars who participated in spreading the antiquarian method. The content of each letter is recorded and studied; issues and debates of the time investigated and reconstructed. The materials studied so far are written in Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German and English and collected from all over Europe. The assortment provides in-depth coverage of all aspects of Renaissance antiquarian learning and fills the present gaps with a complete analysis on the subject, given that antiquarian erudition is by nature a crossroad of disciplines and, as such, manifold are the fields of study involved.

The book in its final form intends to combine the itineraries emerging from *ATRA*, showing how, even in different disciplines, the common denominator is the antiquarian method.