

§ 2

*Amuleto*

Good evening dear listeners, and welcome again to §ympo§ium.

Today's lecture could be a tango—a tango about misfortune, and the intricate efforts that lead humans to search for palliatives in the form of little conceptual objects, humble or precious, visible or invisible. Amulets, talismans and charms are among those conceptual objects. Nothing distinguishes an amuletic stone from an ordinary one, only the narratives bringing it into someone's hand or pocket. It is not a matter of color or shape, and in fact I am right now looking at a small cubic pyrite stone, with an irregular triangle carved out of one of its sides, that is sitting on my windowsill. It is almost yellow, almost colorless, a metal. I keep it as an amulet of thought that I use to protect myself from superstition.

I have often times wondered whether criticism is but the systematic oblivion of the fetishist norm, and I've also wondered if superstition is not the very threshold of philosophy, and philosophy its replacement, or its *Aufhebung*, to put it in Hegelian terms. Is there a more sophisticated technique of “self-management of misfortune”? I am using Eric Edwards's phrase, as his will be our guest voice this evening. His lecture “The Self-Management of Misfortune by Use of Amulets and Charms” was given at the University of Oxford's Ethnicity and Identity Seminar on February 3rd, 2012. Mr. Edwards, a scholar from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, has kindly given us permission to broadcast his lecture on our program tonight. Our transmission is made thanks to Oxford University's Podcasting Service, that I would also like to acknowledge. As usual at §ympo§ium, we provide access to things hidden in plain sight, and critical mediation to archival overabundance. We run against time and the times.

Besides, and since we are fond of all sorts of intermissions, we will listen to Eric Edwards's originally seamless talk in two parts. Mr. Edwards's paper is itself composed of four sections, the first two focusing on general aspects of amulets and charms and their status as objects, and the following sections addressing the use and circulation of those objects in ancient and medieval Europe, and in the modern times, the city and museums of London.

Listening to this evening's lecture, you will notice the presence of a slide show somewhere near the keynote speaker. You may take the words as slides, for the capricious amulets to glitter in front of you.

[“*The Self-Management of Misfortune by Use of Amulets and Charms,*” part 1]

Eric Edwards makes us familiar with a definition of the amulet as an “object of solace” that “confers protection by its sole presence.” Believers in amulets embrace “the belief that the external world can be changed by man's subjective attitude to it,” and they externalize this attitude in objects such as stones, medallions, and the like.

Similarity and contagion are the principles of sympathetic magic, says Eric Edwards as he quotes Sir James George Fraser. The amuletic properties appear to belong to objects that bear similarities with the forms, or the imagined forms of the afflictions they are

meant to prevent or heal, or with the forms of bodily organs, or symbols of veneration, such as crosses, stars, spheres, or natural beings. At some point in the lecture, later on, we are reminded of some notable cases of amuletic prophylaxis and homeopathic magic, with such curious examples as the stolen potato carried in the pocket as a cure for rheumatism. I imagine that if each one of us became ready to steal a potato from the supermarket as to protect oneself against, say, joint pain, a total revolution will be only a few steps away... Maybe George Bataille would have approved of such an unorthodox rebellion, but, dear listeners, don't take the example as an invitation.

Fraser's law of contagion explains that amulets need proximity for the production of their expected effects. Hanging from a little chain, carried in one pocket or played with by an anxious hand, placed upon the belly of the sickly, or under the bed, or on your car's windshield—a bumper sticker, a feather, a dry branch, a holy stone, witch stone, snake stone, even a sucking stone. Whether Molloy's sucking stones were amuletic or not still remains a mystery for me. Stones in the forms of gazes, fears, and even hunger. The textures of those touch pieces narrate the vicissitudes of luck which, needless to say, remain impenetrable.

Let's listen now to the second half of Eric Edwards's lecture, notably crowded with examples of homeopathic magic. It seems that stones are especially suitable to become amulets in rainy countries surrounded by dark salt water... I also admire the way Eric Edwards draws the path between popular superstitions and museum interests, explaining the residual concern, manifest in times of grief and crisis, of all sorts of individuals for the hypothetical power of charms and talismans. A tolerance, an obedience, so pervasive that at some point it reached to secure a place for those objects into the collector's home, and finally into the museum.

So, let's go back to "The Self-Management of Misfortune by Use of Amulets and Charms." You may notice again the presence of the imaginary slide show, and also, that of a hand playing with a small medallion near the voice recorder.

[*"The Self-Management of Misfortune by Use of Amulets and Charms," part 2*]

It doesn't seem accidental that one of the main amulet collectors Mr. Edwards speaks about was also a bank cashier. Is the collector of amulets aiming to seize luck? We may think his intention is as fetishistic as it is analytical. In a way, the collection imprisons the amulet inside the crystal of its own fable, mummifying its powers. The withholding gesture of the collector is one of emergency, for everything is disappearing as fast as everything multiplies. I recently heard the story of an Italian collector that was incapable of detaching a painting from his lounge wall, by fear of the house collapsing as soon as the object was removed.

Can anything become an amulet? The reply is yes. Can an amulet also forget its own history, and go back to the secular life? Of course.

Of course, this is all quite ironic. The demise of superstition may be proven by the fact that no museum robbery has the purpose of appropriating magical objects for their supernatural powers. However, that does not make the power of ancient, and even modern art works, less metaphysical. We may even say with some humor that they are as metaphysical as they are *metafiscal*.

However, the amulet seems to supplement the power of money over life. The desires placed on amulets and charms are attempts to patch the gap separating human powers—or the wealth to buy them—from the intrinsic human frailties. In this sense, precious and humble amulets are equal in scope and power. Material does not make them different, it is a matter of origin, of belonging. Precious or humble, their dignity does not pertain to the realm of the merchandise, although it may appear as a projection of it. Amulets are in fact the aristocracy of things without value—that is their abstract feature. In that sense we started saying that they are conceptual objects.

The amulet originates in existential poverty, in lack, and thus appears in the world of merchandise as an ambassador of the land of things without value. Amulets may be found anywhere, but their homeland is lack and barbaric poverty. Lucky those who saw the birth of an amulet, as Edwards narrates it, the metamorphosis of pebble into medallion. Amulets don't originate in the world of merchandise, but somewhere behind the projection screen of poverty and barbarism. Lost amongst merchandise, amulets are always found; they are residual. We welcome them as positive manifestations of the uncanny thingness of merchandise that market value fails to define. They are carriers of that thingness—receptacles of our nostalgia for the world of things unmediated, one that we pair with the animist vision, and our phantasms about the wild soul, the primitive, and the barbaric. In between those two poles, we discover the liminal role of the rural world and more exactly the rural lower classes.

Meanwhile, unaware of genealogy, the hand holds the amulet as a key or a compass in her unfruitful journey toward destiny and the real. The existence of the amulet is mapped onto a metaphysical scheme, far from which the amulet is a mere stone. This said, the fetishism of merchandise [commodity fetishism] and the fetishism of amulets are not opposed, and even less they are incompatible. What Pier Paolo Pasolini called the anarchy of power, *l'anarchia del potere*—manifest to us as the anarchy of capitalism—and the anarchy of animism mirror each other. The amulet speaks allegorically of both the lost world of things and the unfulfilled promises of the merchandise [the commodity as a fetish]. But I will not forget that Eric Edwards finishes his lecture with a reference to the “tension between modernity and the display of magical objects in a museum,” those are his words, pointing obliquely at the museum space as the repository of modern culture. It does not seem an accident that amulets, art works and historical relics coexist in museums, for amulets, art works and relics are equally instrumental in the perpetual re-elaboration of the myth of value. That's why they seem to matter so much. And so, while we take part in that endless re-elaboration, and as we visit one museum after the other in order to scrutinize their forms and importance, those mysterious objects readily act at the service of their sponsors.

By now, you may be wondering whether this program is not just an odd prologue to Luis Buñuel's film *Viridiana*. I am not sure myself.

Thank you once again for listening, and remember that radio is the perfect hideout from the evil eye.

M. C.

July 2013