

SIGMUND FREUD "FETISHISM" (1927)

Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938. Vol. 5 of Collected Papers. 5 vols. London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1924-1950. 198-204.

Freud is interested in why the object-choice of some persons is determined by a fetish. No "male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals" (201). For Freud, the "fetish is a penis-substitute" (199), to be precise for the "woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego" (199). The boy refuses to accept the fact that a woman has no penis: "for if a woman can be castrated then his own penis is in danger; and against that there rebels part of his narcissism which Nature has providentially attached to this particular organ" (199). what is involved here is a process of denial: the perception of loss persists but a "very energetic action has been exerted to keep up the denial of it" (199). There is a conflict between an "unwelcome perception" (200) and the "opposite wish" (200), abutting in a "compromise . . . constructed . . . in the realm of unconscious modes of thought--by the primary processes. In the world of psychical reality the woman still has a penis in spite of all, but this penis is no longer the same as it once was. something else has taken its place" (200). The "horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute" (200). The fetish "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it" (200).

The organs or objects selected as a substitute for the penis do not always act as a symbol thereof. When the "fetish comes to life, so to speak, some process has been suddenly interrupted . . . interest has been held up at a certain point--what is possibly the last impression before the uncanny traumatic one is preserved as a fetish" (201). For example, the foot or shoe is preserved as a fetish because of the circumstances involving a little boy peering up the woman's skirt etc.

For Freud, fetishism is important in other respects. He had earlier theorised that the difference between neurosis and psychoanalysis consisted in the fact that "in neurosis the ego suppresses part of the id out of allegiance to reality, whereas in psychosis it lets itself be carried away by the id and detached from a part of reality" (202). Here, he acknowledges that some part of reality can be denied, as is the case with fetishism, without 'losing it all'. For example, in the case of the son who refused to acknowledge the fact of his father's death, it was "only one current of their mental processes that had not acknowledged the father's death; there was another which was fully aware of the fact; the one which was consistent with reality stood alongside the one which accorded with a wish" (202) whereas in psychosis the true idea which accorded with reality would have been absent.

The fetish is the "vehicle both of denying and of asseverating the fact of castration" (203). Indeed, like the denial and recognition of castration, tender and hostile treatment of the fetish is mixed in unequal degrees. For example, the impulse to cut off a lock of hair is an impulse to execute the castration which they deny.