CHAPTER FOUR

The problem of inscription and its clinical meaning in perversion

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Freud recommends the study of fetishism to anyone who wants to understand the enigma of the castration complex: “An investigation of fetishism is strongly recommended to anyone who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genital has some other ground…” (Freud, 1927e, p. 155). Because repression fails, at least partially, the fetishist has recourse to another defence mechanism, which differs from the neurotic one, and which allows him to replace the missing phallus with another organ (such as the foot) or with a lifeless object. In this way the fetishist finds it easier to come to terms with what is missing, castration being simultaneously acknowledged and denied.

This paper is concerned with the problem of inscription in terms of sexual differentiation, and the way in which it is conditioned by castration. Perversion is inextricably linked to this problem and therefore has a different meaning for men and women. Perversion also affects the generational process and therefore the fundamental differences on which the symbolic order and mental life are based.

In so far as it challenges the core processes of becoming a subject and becoming human, perversion is of great relevance today, in an
era that is indelibly marked by the Nazi catastrophe, radical breaks with tradition and the failure of traditional discourses. Nobody is able to gauge the terrible consequences of "biological and scientific" racism. Much like all the other discourses, science produces its own form of perversion. It was incapable of erecting a barrier against barbarism and it failed to derive ethical criteria from its own structure. These criteria always rely on singularity, the particularity of a subject, for which there is no place in science. As a result, the danger of biologism and eugenics becoming leading discourses has not completely disappeared, especially at a time when the genome can be deciphered and genetics are a central aspect of research. The only thing we are left with at the moment is memory, but we also know to what extent it can be falsified. Time and again we encounter people who have seen certain things, yet who claim at the same time that what they have seen is not there and could never have existed.

Memory and writing

In a short paper from 1925 on the "mystic writing-pad", Freud relates the necessity of writing to a distrust of our capacity to remember: "If I distrust my memory ... I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing" (Freud, 1925a, p. 227). Through writing it is possible to overcome the distortions of memory, i.e., of censorship. Yet, this is only partially successful, since writing is no less subjected to censorship. This is something an analysand may ascertain quite easily when he tries to write down his dreams in order not to forget them. What happens in this process is generally not much more than a displacement of censorship. It is not because the analysand is holding his dream on paper that it will become more transparent to him. We therefore have to take account of this close relationship between censorship and writing.

To this, Freud adds another idea, which is extremely valuable for our clinical and theoretical understanding. Depending on the surface and the instrument of writing, traces can be transient, erasable or permanent. Freud is especially interested in the "writing-surface", which, like a chalk-board, "retains its receptive capacity for an unlimited time and the notes upon which can be destroyed ... without any need for throwing away the writing-surface itself" (ibid., p. 227). In this case it is impossible to leave a permanent trace, since I need to erase what I have written if I wish to make a new note. This is not the case when I use ink and a sheet of paper, yet in this case the receptive capacity of the writing-surface is again limited and, if necessary, I need to use another blank sheet.

Thus an unlimited receptive capacity and a retention of permanent traces seem to be mutually exclusive properties in the apparatus which we use as substitutes for our memory: either the receptive surface must be destroyed or the note must be renewed. [ibid., pp. 227–228]

Our psychic apparatus includes both types of inscription: "[I]t has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent—even though not unalterable—memory-traces of them" (ibid., p. 228). After indicating what he had already elaborated in The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900a) and "Beyond the pleasure principle" (Freud, 1920g), Freud believes he has found a model for this in the "mystic writing-pad" that has recently fallen into his hands. It concerns a small contrivance that allows for both functions: unlimited receptive capacity and permanence of the traces. Even if we did not completely agree with Freud's topological conception here, which emanates from his first topography and the system Ps-p-Cs, it none the less raises an extremely important question: How does writing relate to time?

From the start Freud relates the status of the unconscious to the status of memory-traces and therefore to that which can be written down. Thereby, he cannot avoid probing deeper into the question of writing, formulating some hypotheses on inscription and time. At the end of his paper on the mystic writing-pad he points out the "discontinuity" in the psychic apparatus's adopted way of writing, which he derives from "the periodic non-excitability of the perceptual system" (Freud, 1925a, p. 231). Yet it is more likely for this discontinuity to be the work of censorship, which may exercise a more or less pervasive function of cutting with regard to the unconscious as well as with regard to time. Perhaps one might say that it is not the "discontinuous method of functioning of the system Ps-p-Cs", which "lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time" (ibid.,
covering up this hole in the symbolic, which is why the subject loves to engage himself with its imaginary contents. And the analyst needs to take account of this fantasmatic structure as well. In this respect, Lacan has tried to render the fantasy with an algebraic formula, in order to preserve the place from which speech retreats and in which the subject is dissolved, yet which is extremely important for the subject's libidinal economy (Lacan, 1960–1961, p. 398). For some subjects the fantasy even functions as a proper name, with which they try to compensate for an inadequate anchoring in the symbolic order. This may help us to understand why many perverts define themselves, or create a new identity for themselves, in accordance with a peculiarity of their fantasy.

The clinical relevance of inscription

The study of the other clinical structures (neurosis and psychosis) is very useful for developing our understanding of perversion. The structures differ with regard to the subject’s engagement with the fantasy, which can of course only be accessed via interpretation, much like other clinical materials.

As far as the fantasy is concerned, the neurotic stumbles over his attempts at interpretation and suffers from their idleness. The neurotic prefers to eradicate, i.e., repress, what he cannot undo, with the result that the traces of the past continue to exist as erased traces, and are actually maintained precisely because they have been erased. In paradoxical fashion, the traces have been preserved and accentuated by virtue of the fact that they have been wiped out. This process also conditions the way in which the neurotic deals with his subjective truth, which he can often approach only via a lie. This in turn leads to the subversion of his discourse, with the implication that something else is always speaking in everything he says. This is recognizable in the neurotic’s symptoms, dreams, and other formations of the unconscious.

The main difference between neurosis and psychosis is that the psychotic rarely lies. When he reaches the limits of what can be said, that is to say, when he arrives at the boundaries of his discursive possibilities, the psychotic can only have recourse to his
delusion (instead of using a metaphor). Accordingly, every change in his professional or family life that has a symbolic value for him and that touches upon his name constitutes a danger. He then tries to inscribe these events upon himself in an acute phase of his psychosis, like a form of self-mutilation. The psychosis is an attempt at reconstructing the symbolic anchoring at the level of the unconscious body-image, which offers (and also represents) a kind of "writing-surface".

Similar questions appear in each of the clinical structures. Wherein lies the originality of the perverse answer? The pervert attempts to approach the inadequacy of inscription via the visualization of traces—like flagellation, which demonstrates a close connection between the rod, the instrument of writing, and the marked body as a place of inscription (Lacan, 1991[1969–1970], p. 55)—that cannot be effaced. This can also lead to a fetishization of the letter, which gives the place of enjoyment its indication and translation, and draws it into the centre of the perverse scenario as its means and end. Is this why so many perverts are writers? This dynamic is by no means unrelated to the visualization of marks on the body that is so popular in contemporary culture. For some people it is tempting to leave behind definitive traces, which are supposed to be eternal, and which turn out to be morbid because they are opposed to time and therefore to life. The way in which the pervert deals with truth is also significant. In order to keep the truth pure, the pervert would like to eradicate the lie completely, yet in order to deal with it better, he turns the lie into a system. The pervert is capable of letting truth and falsity exist simultaneously without either being too threatened by its counterpart, similar to how he manages to give castration both a positive and a negative content. Freud explains this with reference to "the divided attitude of fetishists to the question of the castration of women": "In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself" (Freud, 1927e, p. 156).

The inscription, which is subjected to a very strict necessity and stems from a certain engagement with castration, also conditions the way in which a subject inhabits his body. The mutual influence of psyche and soma demands an interpretation, because the question of what holds our body and soul together can only be answered in the singular. Yet the point where both intersect is conditioned by the deictic (nenndende) function of the name, which is the line of continuity that runs through our lives. The name is what binds the sexes and the generations. Both the small and the large family histories affecting every human being unfold and are shaped by the name. These histories give most people a form of support and content, but they can also make people suffer and sometimes even drive someone to despair.

The purpose of interpretation, which often involves thinking around corners, is to provide a reading of this function of the name. The problem of neurosis represents a variant of this, because it is already the product of an interpretation of the paternal signifiers. This is not the case for the psychotic, who cannot but obey the paternal discourse in its entirety. It is as if the discourse has enslaved him, and every attempt at breaking out can be life threatening. In order to create an opening in this compact discourse, the psychotic can eventually go so far as to kill a family member or himself. In this way he tries to inscribe the lack, which the neurotic encounters in the Symbolic, in the Real, even if he has to pay the price of a life.

Between the generations the pervert occupies the role of a plaything or a waste product. The pervert is like someone who does not acknowledge his debt and who is not prepared to take responsibility for it. He may also abdicate every involvement in generational and genealogical links or, at least, prefer not to have to justify these. His attitude towards others is conditioned by his flight into anonymity, as if he expects to be able to shed the burden of the name. In some circumstances, this may lead to a chaotic, unrestricted sexuality or, alternatively, to the abandonment of sexuality altogether. Yet, behind this façade a completely different drama is being played out: confused, the pervert tries to liberate himself from a nameless and therefore ungraspable sense of guilt. In as much as nobody ever took responsibility for it, this guilt is difficult to symbolize and therefore hardly possible to pay off.

When the pervert gives the impression that he is not tied to the deictic function of the name, then this is only because he has not encountered anyone in that place—he has not met anyone who occupied this function, even temporarily. By means of his scenario, which we designate as perverse, the pervert tries to recreate the
scene of inscription, a kind of primal scene on whose horizon stands the figure of death as the sole and unique point of temporal reference. When the pervert often gives the impression of being without guilt, then this is founded upon nothing less than a presumably very severe and inflexible Superego, which is incapable of structuring enjoyment and elicits a potentially lethal practice of enjoyment-seeking.

Traces and their erasure

One of Freud’s letters to Fließ (the letter of 6 December 1896, sometimes also designated as “Letter 52”) provides us with some very valuable indications for elaborating the problem of inscription. Freud reminds his friend of his working hypothesis: “[O]ur psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances—to a retranscription” (Masson, 1985, p. 207). The memory traces that are accessible to us are thus already the product of time, which has rearranged and retranscribed them. Yet, the question remains: where does this scansion and punctuation stem from? We also hear from Freud that various stages (at least three) are necessary for an inscription to come about:

Thus what is essentially new about my theory is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over, that is laid down in various kinds of indications … I do not know how many of these registrations there are—at least three, probably more. [Ibid., p. 207]

So how is a trace being formed and how is it inscribed? The assumption of various retranscriptions, coinciding with various periods of time, provides us with a valuable starting-point. The traces undergo changes, although they are at once endowed with a high degree of stability. They become the carriers of subjective memory, which follows a certain code and proceeds in a very selective way. All the essential features of a real event can disappear, so that only something completely trivial remains behind as a trace. Yet this trace only acquires a subjectifying function when it is in turn either erased or forged. Only in this case, in specific circumstances, is it possible for the discourse of the subject to be ignited by metaphor.

Freud notices something similar with regard to dreams. Nothing is apparently less variable and less reliable than the narrative of a dream, which we either forget instantly when we wake up or are only able to recount inadequately. Freud observes: “It is true that we distort dreams in attempting to reproduce them … But this distortion is itself no more than a part of the revision to which the dream-thoughts are regularly subjected as a result of the dream-censorship” (Freud, 1900a, p. 514). The dream-account is not the only distorting and falsifying process: the manifest dream itself is already the product of a much more fundamental distortion: “[W]e know that a much more far-reaching process of distortion, though a less obvious one, has already developed the dream out of the hidden dream-thoughts” (Ibid., p. 514). And Freud continues by pointing out that it would be a mistake to underestimate, as most pre-analytic authors have done, “the extent to which psychical events are determined. There is nothing arbitrary about them” (Ibid., p. 514).

The analysis of speechlessness (mutism) in the psychotic patient demonstrates that he is incapable, often for a long period of time, of uttering a single word because he is afraid he will betray his own thoughts, since he can only ever present part of them. In this way, the psychotic patient expresses, in his own way, that a subject is always lying, which is quite unbearable for him, and that lies appear as soon as a subject opens his mouth because it is impossible to say the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The truth is always bisected, which is something a child experiences when it learns to speak and sometimes with reference to its own body. This experience becomes all the more important when the child approaches the “nucleus of its being”, that is to say, the processes of sexuation and symbolic anchoring.

Only a forged trace is able to yield a subject. The successive retranscriptions of traces coincide with successive life-periods. Freud talks about “epochs of life”:

At the boundary between two such epochs a translation of the psychic material must take place. I explain the peculiarities of the
psychoneuroses by supposing that this translation has not taken place in the case of some of the material, which has certain consequences. If a later transcript is lacking, the excitation is dealt with in accordance with the psychological laws in force in the earlier psychic period and along the paths open at that time. Thus an anachronism persists: in a particular province, fueros are still in force; we are in the presence of “survivals” [Masson, 1985, p. 208].

The term “transcript” (Überschrift) is a conflation of “translation” (Übersetzung) and “transcription” (Umschrift), which are synonymous here. It is worth noting Freud’s reference to writing, i.e., to a text, here, which has existed in many different versions for a long time, yet which is only accessible in translation. The versions consist of unequal and incomplete layers of translation, each of which coincides with a particular degree of interpretation of a law. An important consequence of this is that entire regions of our psychic life and our enjoyment are still controlled by anachronistic laws, which have long since been overtaken by others. The editor of Freud’s correspondence with Fließ notes that the Spanish word fuero refers to “an ancient Spanish law still in effect in some particular city or province, guaranteeing that region’s immemorial privileges” [ibid., p. 215]. “Survivals” thus refers to remnants of ancient privileges, that is to say, to an old form of enjoyment that has not completely disappeared. Freud’s letter contains a small essay, here, on the relationship between writing and time, law and enjoyment.

However, the most trenchant idea appears in the following paragraph of the letter:

A failure of translation—this is what is known clinically as “repression.” The motive for it is always a release of the unpleasure that would be generated by a translation; it is as though this unpleasure provokes a disturbance of thought that does not permit the work of translation. [ibid., p. 208]

In Studies on Hysteria, which appeared more than one year before this letter was written, Freud had claimed that “the primary factor is defence. But I can say nothing about this” (Freud & Breuer, 1895d, p. 286). In the letter to Fließ, defence does not appear as the primary phenomenon. Instead, defence is seen as originating in something more archaic, a translation that coincides with the transcription of an unknown text. This process also creates a temporal differentiation, on which all of psychic life is based. In addition, defence remains unproblematic when it occurs within one and the same phase:

Within one and the same psychic phase, and among registrations of the same kind, a normal defence makes itself felt owing to a generation of unpleasure. But pathological defence occurs only against a memory trace from an earlier phase that has not yet been translated. [ibid., p. 208–209]

Pathological means disproportionate or ineffective here. Over time, this disproportion may harden and turn into a psychic characteristic for the neurotic. The neurotic is reminded time and again that time does not essentially change anything and definitely does not heal his wounds, but rather constantly reopens them.

Repression thus induces a more or less encompassing temporal confusion. But what is it able to preserve? The aforementioned traces are remnants of a bygone suffering and enjoyment. Indeed, the two often go together and they exercise a compulsion that the subject finds hard to escape. The traces are “survivals” of a pre-temporal Other, which cannot be emulated by anything afterwards, yet which has never had a real existence. The latter is linked to the traces of enjoyment of this mythical Other, in which both Freud’s theory of the “primal father” and Lacan’s theory of the “Other enjoyment” have their roots. In this way it becomes easier to understand why the subject likes to preserve these traces and what they transmit, even if this entails a high degree of suffering. In any case, repression opposes the erasure of traces, sometimes through devious means, so that time appears to be excluded.

Repression can thus be situated at a symbolic boundary, at the threshold of the unconscious, we may say. Repression enables the subject at once to forget and to preserve a signifier, and in this way it creates a link between two different registers, from which some kind of ideal present results—a present without a past. The subjective representation of time requires the translation of memory traces, which can hardly take place without a potentially very painful loss. Yet the one who is unable to lose or forget becomes incapable of living and sometimes delusional. It is also necessary to accept that the symbolic has a hole, which could only have come
into existence on the basis of a radical primordial loss, for an interpretation to be altogether possible and for a new meaning to emerge.

Untranslated and untranslated memory traces hold on to a certain enjoyment, which resists interpretation (metaphor). Interpretation, on the other hand, effectuates a renunciation of the drive (Trieberzicht), which first of all concerns the object of primordial enjoyment, so that the subject can be inscribed in a symbolic order. The latter will only be fundamentally acknowledged through repression, as opposed to other defence mechanisms, although repression is of course problematic in its own right. Yet, before I develop this point further, I wish to discuss briefly a clinical vignette.

The example of passionate love gives us some idea of the compulsion that can result from untranslated memory traces. When the trace emerges in the Real, it may awaken an old, long "forgotten" enjoyment, which the subject in most cases does not remember or does not want to know anything about. A mechanism can be triggered, then, that is difficult to control and that can drive someone to madness and even to death. Even the less extreme cases rarely occur without drama. For example, a young woman cannot resist a certain intonation of the voice and a certain movement or posture of the body, which remind her of her first love. The affair remains unconsummated and rapidly leads to a suicide attempt. Afterwards, nothing is resolved or worked through. Some time later, she finds herself in another situation that is diametrically opposed to the previous one, and on to which her earlier problem has been displaced. She claims that she wants to stay with a man, and even wants to marry him, in order to avoid that he has to go through the same event she went through a couple of years before. The situation stays like this for a while, until she refuses to have sex with him and decides to take a lover, whom she does not really love but in whose company she feels like a woman for the first time. It does not stop her from pursuing the wedding plans with her fiancé. One week before the wedding she tries to commit suicide again, but she recovers just in time to stick to the agreed time-plan. A suicide attempt is for her the only way to create a discontinuity and to oppose the compulsion associated with the realization of a certain trait, which operates as if it has been inscribed on both sides of a single sheet. However, the compulsory nature of the entire process is still somehow maintained.

A hypothesis concerning inscription

In keeping with what we have said until now, inscription may be situated alongside the problem of primal repression. Inscription is directly related to what cannot be represented, to the hole that the subject encounters in the place of the Other. The trace is what remains of that which is irrecoverably lost, although the trace (as a remnant) may not have anything in common with what has been lost, because the inscription is made elsewhere. In so far as the original object has been forever lost, that which has been inscribed of this object exists in a different place—it has been displaced. The oldest inscription is therefore not a faithful testimonial of what once was, but already the product of a distortion, which requires interpretation.

If the hole in the Symbolic coincides with a radical non-knowing, then its letter becomes the carrier of a completely different type of knowledge, which we call the unconscious. The subject is thus confronted with the failure of any guarantee at a central place, against which he constantly has to adopt a position. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Western world has developed two fundamentally different answers to this problem. First, mathematics and science, two distinct modalities of writing, have tried to erect a dam against this bottomless insecurity. The dam was held firmly in place until it was put into perspective by the arrival of the new mathematics of infinity and the transfinite. The second answer comes from so-called Holy Writ and the oral (Talmudic) transmission with which it is connected. In both cases, access to the writing system is so severely hindered by technical difficulties that it remains for most people completely beyond their reach, like the Law in Kafka’s story. We are confronted here with a certain protective measure against the abyssal depth of nothingness, which is revealed to anyone who is preoccupied with the interpretation of the letter. Psychoanalysis is concerned with exactly the same thing.

The letter is like a last vestige at the edge of a ravine. It is inscribed at the edge of an erogenous zone, such as an opening in
the body. The necessary condition for this inscription is that an opening in the body offer itself, or that a locus of the body let itself be negativized, which cannot be represented in any representational system. This process elicits a division and hierarchization of the erogenous zones. It is thus necessary for a point to be established through which the symbolic can be inscribed on the body, and the body itself can be inscribed. We are concerned, here, with a point of articulation between the letter and the unconscious image of the body, which contributes to both its fragmentation and its unity. This topological model outlines the condition of hysteria and elevates it to the rank of a paradigm for the other clinical structures. At least so much can be inferred from the work of psychoanalysis, which can deservedly be conceived as a hysterization of discourse.

Hystericization may also be understood as a process of feminization, which the paranoiac desperately tries to keep at bay. The paranoiac singles out dispersed statements about femininity, feminization, and homosexuality in the discourse of the Other as assertions concerning himself. Heterosexual relationships constitute a massive danger for the paranoiac because they carry the meaning of a real castration and thus question the unity of his body. The paranoiac often tries to conjure this situation, alleviating the anxiety it brings about, by doing something to himself. In each case he tries to restore the lost unity, for example in the mirror, which becomes the imaginary carrier of that which has not found a solid foundation in the Symbolic. Some paranoiaics succeed in circumventing this boundary condition by radically avoiding all contact with the other sex. Yet, love can also lead to this kind of reaction, because it mobilizes the name, i.e., the inscription in the Symbolic. Instead of the negativity of the letter, the paranoiac encounters the complete fullness of an inerasable trace that carries too much meaning. And he experiences this trace as a threat coming from the outside—as in a persecutory delusion—which can turn into a threat coming from the inside; for example, in the form of self-reproaches. Hence, there is a significant structural similarity between paranoia and melancholia, and they have both found a common somatic denominator in the term hypochondria.

A somatic illness may contribute to the improvement of a psychotic condition, because it situates the negativization in the real of the body. This brings us to a renewed examination of the interaction between psyche and soma, and of the meaning of the so-called psychosomatic phenomena. These phenomena correspond to a striving for autonomy in a certain locus of the body, which tries to break free from the very strict libidinal or erotic control either by freeing itself from the libidinal net or by stretching out over a part of the body. In both cases the limitation of the original zone disappears, as a result of which the zone cannot be clearly delineated any more and thus is no longer inscribed. Somatic illnesses oppose this process because they leave behind permanent traces, which give content to an overwhelming expression of the drives. Somatic phenomena thus have the paradoxical meaning of healing attempts, and, in general, they follow a subject's refusal to accept the primacy of the phallus. It is, then, as if this point needs to be placed elsewhere, temporally as well as spatially. The sick part of the body succeeds, in the best of cases only temporarily, to hold the sceptre and to subjugate entire parts of the bodily realm in order to impose upon them another libidinal economy. In this case we might refer to a tyranny of the illness, in so far as it attempts to impose its own law and to transcend the symbolic order. Of course, it is impossible to decide what was first, the erogenous reorganization or the somatic illness, because both manifest and inscribe themselves simultaneously at two different levels, without a translation of one into the other. The classic law of cause and effect is therefore made inoperative. And in this lies, no doubt, the greatest difficulty for our understanding of the so-called psychosomatic phenomena. Only with hindsight does it become possible, by means of an interpretation, to introduce a temporal discontinuity, which also enables the re-introduction of the law of cause and effect.

Let us return to the issue of hysteria. Here, too, it might be the case that an erogenous zone breaks free from the others, i.e., extracts itself from the primacy of the phallus. Yet the neurotic can rely on a fairly large somatic plasticity. The symbolic inscription remains solid, here, so that the isolation of a locus of the body, however much it may lead to bodily fragmentation, always maintains bodily unity. We only start discovering this paradox when we succeed in elucidating the relationship between writing and narcissism. For narcissism not only concerns that which is conspicuous, but also that which remains hidden and which cannot be
recognized in the mirror, and which involves recognition by a third party. For the neurotic, the letter occupies the place of what cannot be represented, and on this basis his symbolic inscription becomes possible. Yet, inscription requires, on the other hand, also metaphor, which at different moments or on certain occasions gives rise to a translation or a different version. Metaphor is essentially metaphor of the body, and it regulates the subject’s sexual behaviour. In the case of an inadequate translation, a residual enjoyment stemming from an earlier psychic phase remains operative, which may also have deleterious effects for the neurotic. It represents a point of fixation in his life, which may excessively control his abilities and which may lead to a form of paralysis. None the less, the neurotic rarely agrees to get rid of this fixation, because it also gives him a kind of certainty.

In the case of perversion, this fixation acquires another meaning and another outlook, because it makes up the foundation of the pervert’s scenario; that is to say, of his enjoyment. The pervert desperately tries to eradicate loss and transient life. In particular, he does not want to relinquish an earlier, infantile enjoyment, despite the oedipal sanction. Only in so far as the pervert has observed this sanction is he also able to disavow it. The pervert does not retreat into a pre-oedipal position; instead he reacts to the primacy of the phallus with an attitude of obnoxiousness and provocation. Both are characteristic of the pervert’s behaviour and they are all the more persistent as the primacy of the phallus is insecure and has not been safely anchored. It is as if the pervert believes he needs to provoke something in order to drive it out. Yet, because he can never be sure of its effect, he starts a search for a solid or fixed point of departure, which he ultimately believes to find in death. Death provides the pervert with a central outlook, which gives him the hope of fulfilling an absolute measure of time. In Mishima’s work, this issue gradually acquires more significance, so much so that, from a certain point onwards, he concentrates almost exclusively on the preparation of a unique, replicatable scenario. Mishima wants to erect a monument for inscription through the enactment of a spectacular suicidal scenario. However, it is not an exaggeration to talk in this context about a lethal metaphor. This also applies to the pervasive scenario in general, which singles out death as the most appropriate temporal framework, whether or not this is explicitly formulated.

On the basis of this constellation, and with a view to preserving and consolidating some traditional values—like country and family, throne and altar—the pervert may orchestrate a widely cast social provocation and thereby end up in circumstances that lead to his death. Yet he might equally well use these values or agencies as excuses for his dissident and revolutionary behaviours, especially when his plans are supported by a collective movement. In this way he realizes a scenario that has been transferred onto the social or political level, which stands in the service of his lethal enjoyment and which explains it as generally in accordance with the law. This is precisely what Sade (1990) demands in his seminal text “Français, encore un effort, si vous voulez être républicains”, included in Philosophy in the Bedroom. The same issue has also been adumbrated by Jean Genet. After having spent most of his life challenging every possible agency and authority, he manages to re-connect with the crucial issue of the existence of the state of Israel during the last phase of his life. In this way, he also provides the key to an understanding of his political commitment: his challenge is primarily directed against what the name Israel represents, that is to say the law, the Torah. This example demonstrates that the provocation is essentially part of the mechanism of disavowal, as its positive aspect, because it seeks to bring forward that which it simultaneously disavows.

Freud mentions throne and altar in his paper on fetishism, and uses both terms with reference to the boy’s reaction to the woman’s castration:

No, that could not be true: for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ. In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger, and similar illogical consequences will ensue. [Freud, 1927e, p. 153]

On the basis of what we have experienced concerning narcissism in cases of neurosis, we can now understand how one of the main functions of the fetish consists in rescuing the imaginary unity of the body. Freud forges a fundamental link between narcissism and the castration of the mother (of women). Yet what is
maintained at the level of the imaginary is therefore not inscribed symbolically. The fragmentation of the body is unbearable for the fetishist to the extent that he remains excluded from the inadequacy, the splitting of the Other, at the level of the symbolic. His relationship with the body and with everything related to it is therefore governed by relentless and innumerable attempts at restoration. The search for a perfect body offers him an escape, yet he is only intermittently concerned with it. The confrontation with Otherness and strangeness represents a major threat to him, which in some circumstances may provide his xenophobia with a welcome justification and a rich source of nourishment.

The fetishist’s enjoyment is devoted to the fulfilment of the Other, to whose completion he is keen to contribute. It is not difficult to see how the structure of numerous religious practices is conditioned by this principle. The fetish takes the place of inscription, with the result that the letter becomes fetishized in itself. As we pointed out earlier, this process may prompt the fetishist to become a writer, which is likely to give him an excess of enjoyment. Yet the fetishist prefers the body of the Other as a writing-surface, on which he leaves a visible mark in order to increase its libidinal value. In his scenario he tries to bring forward, in a positive way, as a stigma indelebile, that which remains invisible for the neurotic (Freud, 1927e, p. 154). In another context, Freud argued that “neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions” (Freud, 1905d, p. 165). We can, therefore, also regard tattooing (and many other visible markings of the body) as part of the fetishism of writing in a broad sense.

The pervert seems compelled to repeat what is problematic about inscription, in order to transcribe it into another register. As already mentioned, his scenario has the meaning of a primal scene in which he needs to act out the “nucleus of his being”, which remains radically unconscious for him. The pervert, strictly speaking, does not exceed “anatomical boundaries”, as is often assumed, because the latter do not really exist for him. In transgressing boundaries, the pervert gives them first of all consistency, and in this way he also consolidates the body that carries these boundaries. The latter must then take the place of an inconsistent, untrustworthy Other. Yet the inscription of the traces that have been left behind there can only convince the pervert on the basis of the anxiety, horror, and pain he reads in the eyes of the other. Indeed, he seems mainly concerned with triggering this kind of reaction, because he believes it is the only indication capable of validating the inscribed trace in an authentic way. In order to achieve this, the pervert is sometimes capable or compelled to go very far, too far, in the hope of obtaining some kind of guarantee.

The pervert is, more than anyone else, confronted with the fact that there is nobody beyond the Other who can provide him with a guarantee for the Symbolic and the law. The pervert’s problem is similar to that of every modern person who observes with anxiety that the place from which the law has derived its legitimacy until now is actually empty and has always been like that. Yet this observation is completely unbearable for the pervert and he tries to formulate a specific answer to it. In so far as he himself becomes the object of the Other’s enjoyment, he belongs to those few contemporaries who are able to give to the Other a long lost state of completion.

References

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