Appendix III
The Fetish
(1979)

Translated from the Italian by Sarah Hill

Word association and the history of ideas

The term “fetish” comes from the Portuguese feitiço, which was in turn derived from the Latin factītius. In the accepted usages of its original adjectival forms, feitiço means, like the Latin term, “artificial,” and, beyond that, “false, feigned, unnatural” (cf. Vieira 1873). Turned into a noun, the term has taken on the sense of “witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, philtre, enchantment, magic” (ibid.). In Castilian, the corresponding word—hechizo—underwent a parallel evolution (Corominas 1954–57, II: 862).

It was in its substantive sense (for example, with the meaning “enchanted object”) that feitiço was adopted from the seventeenth century onwards in English and French, and was introduced into Charles de Brosses’s intellectual lexicon (1760). Yet the connection with factītius seems never to have been lost and to have survived at the preconscious level. De Brosses himself often uses fétiche as an adjective (for example in the very title of his book: Du culte des dieux fétiches) in contexts in which it inevitably evokes the notion of “fictitious.”

The history of the notion of the fetish perhaps illustrates a law of discourse: when a word assumes a meaning that is increasingly vague and extended, the concept with which it was intentionally associated disintegrates under the impact of the uncontrolled and subconscious associations that language imposes. In this case, however, language seems to reflect a real property of fetishistic phenomena and to demand that we reflect on that property.
I will explain successively four theories (those of De Brosses, Comte, Marx and Freud) that function as paradigms for the majority of the discussions on fetishism. I will then show that, notwithstanding their differences, these theories agree on a fundamental point. Finally, having explained the reasons for misunderstandings of the fetishistic phenomenon on the part of modern ethnology, I will attempt to show that objects that can be called fetishes exist and to indicate their meaning.

Four theories of fetishism

De Brosses

De Brosses’ Du culte des dieux fétiches elaborates an “anthropological” theory of religion, in opposition to the “theological” theory of the “mythologists” (like Banier). The latter, supposing an original revelation, considered idolatry, sabeism (the cult of the stars), and so on, as perversions in which objects that functioned as symbols of the divinity lose their symbolic nature and accommodate a “direct” cult (cf. De Brosses 1760: 189–90 and 278 ff.). Even while admitting, hypocritically, to an original revelation, in which God had bridged “the immense gap between divine nature and human nature” (ibid.: 207), De Brosses asserts that with the Fall, man finds himself having to begin again from nothing, that is, from his own nature. It is therefore in human nature and its evolution that we must search for the roots of humanity’s religious ideas. “It is necessary to study man not in possibilities but in man himself: it is not a question of imagining that which he could have or should have done, but of looking at what he has done” (ibid.: 285). Now, both the actual history of what man has done and the awareness of man’s nature (ibid.: 202) lead him to conclude that the “mythological” theory inverts the effective order of intellectual evolution.

In effect, the progress of humanity and its ideas corresponds to the process of abstraction: “The human spirit elevates itself by degrees from the inferior to the superior: an idea of that which is perfect is formed by means of abstractions drawn from that which is imperfect: slowly the more noble part of a human being separates from the rougher part: increasing and reinforcing the idea that it forms of that which is perfect, the human spirit applies that idea to the Divinity” (ibid.: 207). The most elevated idea of divinity can be found, therefore, not at the beginning but at the end of human history.
What, then, was the religion of primitive man? Anthropology (a term which, however, De Brosses does not use) indicates that the fundamental “affections” of humanity are fear, wonder, recognition, and reasoning. Among primitive peoples, the first two affections (or “feelings”), and in particular fear, with its correlate, hope, are dominant. We are speaking of affections related to that which is the object of human needs, or which is linked to the desire to prevail over other men.

Primitive man worries only about the “different and contrary eventualities of human life.” His lack of power makes him anxious, and sets his imagination to work—an imagination that “employs itself in forming an idea of certain powers superior to his own, which do what he cannot do, from the moment that they know and uphold the causes of which he does not have the power to determine the effects” (ibid.: 215). So, on one side fear drives man to transcend the visible, supposing the existence of invisible powers; on the other, his senses drive him to fix his attention on visible objects. He therefore finds himself caught between two contradictory tendencies (two operations that are “opposed and simultaneous,” as De Brosses calls them) which are reflected in his conception of objects that elicit his fear and hope. He associates invisible power with the visible object without distinguishing the material object from the intelligent power which he, in the rough structure of his reasoning, supposes to be contained within it. In situations in which “chance, or unforeseeable accidents” dominate, this way of thinking is accentuated: the more the object reveals the powerlessness of a man, the more he conceives of it as endowed with the power that he wants to obtain or by which he fears being oppressed. De Brosses notes that in uncontrollable situations (in games of chance, in war, at sea) man tends to become more superstitious. Not only this, but uncertainty also determines the extreme multiplication of the number of invisible powers: “Since in this way of thinking it is natural to attribute to them only a power that is limited to certain effects, albeit superhuman ones, it also becomes natural to multiply the number of them so that it corresponds to the extreme variability of events” (ibid.: 219).

Strange, abnormal, unforeseeable situations therefore tend to be the ones that are “divinized” rather than situations that are normal and therefore controllable (cf. ibid.: 20, 46–48, etc.). This anthropological deduction of the original religion is confirmed by facts furnished by history and by travellers’ tales. De Brosses takes as a
paradigm of these facts the West African cult of objects which travellers called “fetishes.”

Fetishes are “of animals or inanimate terrestrial beings” (ibid.: 61) and, more generally, any object endowed with divine qualities: oracles, amulets, talismans preservatives, and so on (ibid.: 10–11). De Brosses distinguishes between fetishism and idolatry: while the first deifies natural objects, the second yields a cult of “works of art that represent other objects, which are those to which the worshipper really devotes himself” (ibid.: 64).

Fetishism thus does not distinguish between signifier and signified, between the human world and the natural world, and, in the final analysis, between experience (defined sensualistically) and desire. Above all, fetishism is characterized by the absence of the signifying function: as soon as a natural object becomes a sign of something else, it is no longer a fetish (cf. ibid.: 147). Paradoxically, the absence of artificial or natural signs produces an artificialization of nature, which is perceived fictitiously as a humanized world. In other words, the artificial passes from the sphere of the sign, where it is absent or disregarded, to the sphere of nature.

**Comte**

According to Auguste Comte, the “fictitious” nature of fetishism is found in the entire “theological” phase of evolution, of which fetishism constitutes the first stage (1844, Italian trans.: 3). Comte thus clarifies one of the implications of De Brosses’ theory: although fetishism may be only a particular form of religion, it is the form that best reveals its essence (cf. 1830–42, Italian trans. I: 461–62).

Fetishism corresponds to man’s *spontaneous* cognitive activity and thus to that which is inscribed in his nature, independently of the reflection that is historically developed (cf. Lévy-Bruhl 1900: 48). Its spontaneity determines its three fundamental characteristics: it is a form of empirical and not generalizing knowledge; it tends to look for causes and not laws; it presupposes the only knowledge that does not derive from any other, that is, the knowledge of oneself, of one’s own activity. As a consequence, fetishes have three characteristics: they are concrete objects and not classes; they are determined by an internal causality; and this causality is akin to the human causality and for this reason is conceived as essentially affective, given the preponderance of affective life over intellectual life in spontaneous activity (cf. Comte 1851–54; 1830–42).
The preponderance of affective life renders fetishistic representations fictitious, but it makes them the inevitable point of departure for every cognitive activity (1851–54, III: 126, 89) whenever intellectual reflection cannot intervene or is incapable of furnishing a rational explanation of phenomena. Fetishism therefore offers a provisional synthesis, in expectation of a “positive synthesis” in which the relationship between intellect and affectivity—and, correlative, the relationship between man and nature—are reversed (cf. Canguilhem 1968). This in fact allows the correspondence between man and nature to be realized, attributing to natural phenomena, and particularly to inorganic ones, characteristics that are immediately known to man. Consequently, it humanizes nature. Science, by contrast, explains the human phenomena starting from natural phenomena and, in the final analysis, inorganic ones. This reversal permits the actual realization of the practical synthesis between man and nature that fetishism (that is, human desire) fictitiously anticipated. It is in fact the intellect, not the affective faculty, that allows for the mastery of nature.

The positive synthesis can never reconstitute, however, that “particular feeling of complete satisfaction” that is the characteristic of the fictitious synthesis, in which “the external world is presented naturally to the spectator in perfect harmony that can never again be found to the same degree, and that must produce in him a particular feeling of complete satisfaction, which today we are not able to describe well.... It is easy to understand how this exact, intimate correspondence between the world and man must link us profoundly to fetishism” (Comte 1830–42, Italian trans. I: 463–64).

Fetishism therefore is not only an evolutionary phase; it is also a function that constitutes part of human nature, and that is present in everyone’s experience. The same functions are found in every evolutionary phase, but in different proportions. What allows a phase to be characterized as “fetishistic” or “polytheistic” and so forth is the dominance of one function over the other. More precisely, one can say that when an “order of fundamental notions” is extended to moral and social ideas, which constitute the most specific and complicated field of intellectual life, there is a new “mental regime” (ibid.: 454).

This, very succinctly, is the Comtian paradigm. It should be noted that even here, fetishism is, in the final analysis, characterized by “fiction.” Comte considers it a “fictitious synthesis” that does not correspond to the real laws of nature. But—unlike De Brosses—he transcends the level of representation in order to isolate that which
motivates it, and which for him remains constant in human evolution. In effect, realized in different representations, the desire for a harmonious relationship with nature is part of the very essence of man and therefore is not fictitious.

**Marx**

As has been noted, Karl Marx maintains that the quantitative equivalence between commodities that have heterogeneous use values would not be possible if a *qualitative* equivalence did not exist between them, if they were not all forms of appearance of a single substance, labor, which renders them comparable and therefore exchangeable. Exchange does not thereby create value, but manifests it ([1867] 1990). Nevertheless, and paradoxically, the form in which value manifests itself is also the condition of concealment of its true nature.

While in fact, according to Marx, the use value of a commodity is immediately perceptible in the commodity itself, its exchange value is immaterial and is perceptible only in a relationship: when one commodity stands for the equivalent of another (ibid.: 148–49). But if the value of a commodity is independent of its use value, of its corporeity (if it is something immaterial) how can it be perceived without the aid of something material that acts as a signifier for it? It is from this need for the intervention of the material as a sign of the immaterial that the “metaphysical subtleties” of a commodity are derived: the possibility of perceiving its value, but also of distorting it fetishistically (ibid.: 143).

In effect, in the value relation, the material object—that is, the use value of a commodity that acts as an equivalent (commodity B)—becomes the sign, the “figure,” of the value of the commodity that is equated with it (commodity A): “By means of the value relation . . . the natural form of commodity B becomes the value-form of commodity A, in other words the physical body of commodity B becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A” (ibid.: 144). A is the *Wertkörper* of B.

Supposing, for example, that commodity A is a certain quantity of fabric and that commodity B is a suit: “The value of the commodity linen is therefore expressed by the physical body of the commodity coat, the value of one by the use-value of the other. As a use-value, the linen is something palpably different from the coat; as a value, it is identical with the coat, and therefore looks like the coat” (ibid.: 143).
“The use value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, value” (ibid.: 148).

This also explains why exchange, which is the condition for perceiving value, should also be the cause for concealing its true nature: the form in which it manifests itself is confused with its essence (labor). Once the equivalent form of value has the corporeity of a signifier, value—which is a social relation—can be naturalized and one can believe that the materiality of the commodity that functions as an equivalent “possesses by nature a form of value.” Even the coat, for example, “seems to be endowed with its equivalent form, its property of direct exchangeability, by nature, just as much as its property of being heavy or its ability to keep us warm. Hence the mysteriousness of the equivalent form, which only impinges on the crude bourgeois vision of the political economist when it confronts him in its fully developed shape, that of money” (ibid.: 149).

If indeed the mysterious character of the form of value already exists in its simple form, it is in its generalized form that it imposes itself on consciousness. In their generalized form, all concrete labors are reduced to abstract labor, to commodity, and find a monetary expression (that is, they are all expressed by a commodity that functions as a general equivalent).

It is therefore in an economy based on the commodification of all human labor (every product of labor is exchangeable with every other), in turn based on the idea of equality (the labor of all humans has the same value [ibid.: 151]), that the common essence of the value of commodities becomes more easily perceptible, but at the same time more easily fetishizable. In fact, the universal equivalent (money) expresses the value of all other commodities, and therefore of all human labors; but this property, which is social, can be mistaken for a natural one, given the material character of the money-form. This leads to the fetishistic belief that the source of value lies in money and not work. This belief corresponds to the mode of perceiving value that is made possible by a society in which the exchange of work (“crystallized” into objects) between humans appears as an exchange between commodities: “Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. The sum total of the labour of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the
products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange” (ibid.: 165).

But, “Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relations with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it” (ibid.: 166–67).

If we follow Marx’s argument rigorously, we must conclude that, just as a simple form and a generalized form of the value relation exist, so do a simple form and a generalized form of fetishism. Marx defines the nucleus of fetishism as something that is inherent to the very expression of value, to the necessary dialectic between the material and the immaterial. The illusion of fetishism would consist in mistaking the material inasmuch as it is a signifier of an immaterial value (the social relation) with the materiality of value (ibid.: 112–13). This idea of Marx’s has its antecedent in Kant (fetishism as the confusion of the natural and the supernatural) and in Hegel (fetishism as a consequence of the necessity for thought to have “something objective” with which to think), and seems to anticipate a semiotic analysis of the commodities (Marx speaks of a “language of commodities”) (ibid.: 143).

With the generalization of the production of commodities, however, there is not a simple generalization of the confusion between signified and signifier (which can be called “fetishism of the signifier”). Between simple fetishism and generalized fetishism, in fact, an alienation of the worker from the products of his work and the means of production takes place.

The generalized fetishism of commodities is therefore something very different from its simple form: unlike the latter, not only is it part of the global ideological construction (political economy), but it corresponds to an historically determined form of production.

Nevertheless, in his argument Marx de facto reduces simple fetishism to its generalized form. It is indeed in the latter that the confusion of the signifier and the signified reveals itself for what it really is: a confusion of subject and predicate, a misrecognition of labor for its product.

In this way, however, Marx opens himself up to two criticisms. On the one hand, the argument that reduces the fetishistic ideology of
bourgeois society to a generalization of simple fetishism—in turn a mechanical reflection of the generalization of the production of commodities—is not very convincing. On the other hand, a phenomenon of more general significance than a specific form of production (the “reification” of the signified similar to Mauthner’s “fetishism of words” [1901–02, 1: 150–59]), is reduced by contrast to a generically pre-capitalist form of production. Marx thus disregards the properly cognitive character—not immediately reducible to a social determination—of the “simple” fetishism of the commodity.

These (and other) ambiguities in Marx make us sense his lack of a theory that distinguishes and adequately articulates cognitive, ideological, and economic levels. They force us to conclude that the Marxist notion of fetishism covers, in a rather confused way, different phenomena, on which Marx provides intuitions that are often brilliant and profound, but that cannot be considered a coherent “theory” of fetishism. In the same way as Comte, Marx dissolves the notion of the fetish, giving it such a vast range and such an imprecise meaning as to allow it no invariant connotation save that of “fictitious objectivation.”

Finally, it should be noted that by reducing the fetishism of the commodity to the fetishism of value, to alienation, Marx ignores those aspects of the fetishism of commodities which his analysis in terms of the signifier seems to leave open: that is, a fetishism that one might call a fetishism of “use value,” in which signifying relations based on objects present themselves as a propensity, inherent in their nature, to satisfy “needs” (cf. Baudrillard 1972).

**Freud**

Of the four paradigms of fetishism under consideration, that represented by Sigmund Freud refers to a phenomenon of an outwardly limited scope. The rigor with which it is explained, however, brings to light mechanisms of general importance that transcend the sphere of sexuality. Freud treated fetishistic perversion directly in two brief articles, one written in 1927, the other in 1938.

In the first article, he maintains that the formation of a fetish is linked to the castration anxiety that is manifested when the little boy, on first seeing the female sexual organ, discovers that “a woman has no penis” ([1927] 1959: 199). The “enormous majority” overcome this anxiety (which also needs to be associated with a real or phantasmatic threat of castration by the father in order to manifest itself
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([1938] 1959: 373–74), and accept the difference between the sexes. Those who do not overcome it remain in a neurotic condition in which belief in the phallic woman—who constitutes a guarantee against the terror of castration, but also blocks or disturbs the development of a normal sexuality—perpetuates itself.

In fetishistic perversion, the perception that belies the infantile belief in the woman’s phallus is not negated; but the belief is displaced onto an object (the fetish) that renders it invulnerable (ibid.: 374). Fetishism does not therefore involve an hallucination (as Comte, for example, believed); it does not alter the representation, but repudiates its reality.

In fact, it is not correct to say that the little boy, after having observed a woman, has maintained his belief in the woman’s phallus with no modification. He has maintained it, but he has also abandoned it (aufgegeben); in the conflict between the weight of an undesired perception and the force of his counter-desire he has arrived at a compromise, something that is possible only under the dominion of unconscious thought, of primary processes. Certainly, in the psyche the woman nevertheless has the penis, but this penis is no longer the one it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been designated its substitute, so to speak, and has now become heir to the interest that was directed towards it previously. Furthermore this interest increases extraordinarily, because, in the creation of this substitute the terror of castration has erected a memorial of itself. The estrangement (Entfremdung) from the real genital organs of the woman, which is always found in the fetishist, remains as an indelible stigma of the removal that was produced.

It can now be seen that the fetish is “a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it; it also saves the fetishist from being a homosexual by endowing women with the attribute which makes them acceptable as sexual objects” ([1927] 1959: 200).

The fetish is therefore a substitute for the phallus, but it is not always its iconic reproduction. Often the object of the impression that precedes the traumatizing experience becomes a fetish. This explains why shoes, feet, underwear, and so on, which the gaze of the little boy encounters from below, before the traumatic discovery of the female sexual organ, function as fetishes. In all cases, the fetish—sometimes in its very making—reflects at one and the same time denial and affirmation of the woman’s castration. This corresponds to the coexistence of two opposite attitudes (tenderness and hostility) as regards the fetish
(cf. Smirnoff 1970: 44), in turn a manifestation of a splitting of the “ego” (*Ichspaltung*) that Freud discusses in his incomplete article of 1938.

The nucleus of a splitting of the “ego” occurs when “a conflict between the demand of the instinct and the command of reality” is produced in the little boy ([1938] 1959: 372). The boy chooses neither the one nor the other, or rather chooses both. “On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognizes the dangers of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear” ([1938] 1959: 373).

The formation of the synthetic function of the “ego” is therefore disturbed. Freud illustrates these mechanisms with a clinical case. A three or four-year old little boy becomes aware of the female genital organs by being seduced by an older girl. After the end of their relations, he prolongs his sexual stimulation through masturbation. His governess catches him in the act and threatens him with castration by his father. The threat reactivates the unease provoked by the moment of discovering that the phallus is absent in the little girl. “The little boy now thinks he understands why the girl’s genitals showed no sign of a penis and no longer ventures to doubt that his own genitals may meet with the same fate. Thenceforth he cannot help believing in the reality of the danger of castration” ([1938] 1959: 374).

The usual consequence (the one that is considered socially “normal”) of castration anxiety is that the boy gives in to the threat and thus renounces either totally or partially the satisfaction of impulse; he no longer touches his genital organs. In the clinical case considered by Freud, however, the patient extricated himself from these difficulties differently. “He created a substitute for the penis which he missed in women, that is to say, a fetish. In so doing, it is true that he had given lie to reality, but he had saved his own penis. So long as he was not obliged to acknowledge that women have lost their penis, there was no need for him to believe the threat that had been made against him: he need have no fears for his own penis, so he could proceed with his masturbation undisturbed” ([1938] 1959: 374).

But this “sly” way of dealing with reality carries with it a contradictory tendency: on one side the boy continues his masturbation as if he were not putting his own penis in danger; on the other he displays a symptom that demonstrates that despite everything he does believe in
this danger. Thus, simultaneous with the creation of the fetish, a strong castration anxiety appears, that the boy can only compensate for with a total mobilization of his masculinity.

The fundamental characteristic of fetishism is therefore that it permits the recognition and the disregarding of reality at one and the same time. For this reason it is differentiated from psychosis, which is a pure and simple repudiation of reality (Khan 1970: 99–103). The price that the fetishist pays, however, is a splitting of his ego. In fact, on the one hand the fetish serves to save his ego by creating a defence against the recognition of infantile traumas and the threats of disintegration of his personality that derive from this recognition. On the other hand, this threatens even the loss of the ego because it submits it totally to the object (the fetish). In effect, “thanks to a tour de force of psychic functioning, the fetishist creates in his infancy a unitary imago which dates from experiences and characters that belong to two different personalities: the ‘self’ and the object.” (ibid.: 102; cf. Smirnoff 1970: 47).

Comparison of the paradigms
The differences between De Brosses, Comte, Marx and Freud are too evident for it to be necessary to underline them, but they share something less evident: all of them—in particular Freud and Marx—conceive of the fetish as an object made up of a contradictory relationship with reality, as a fictitious representation (of the neurotic or of society) that however also makes possible (or bearable) a true representation.

The contradictory character of the fetish is particularly underlined by Freud, but it can also be found in Marx’s theory. For the latter, the fetishism of the commodity allows the reality of value to be simultaneously recognized and misapprehended. It recognizes in fact the existence of a single value-substance that renders commodities comparable, but it misapprehends the fact that this substance is human labor. It can therefore be at the same time socially efficacious and mystifying. The reality of value is not denied; that which is denied by means of the creation of a fetish (money etc.)—which protects it from any negation to which experience could lay it open—is the social relation that subtends that reality.

Even for Comte fetishism contains at one and the same time a false judgement (the world is guided by human motivations) and a true judgement (nature is characterized by activity). The “fetishistic synthe-
sis,” although false in itself, anticipates a true relation between man and nature, and above all, constitutes an initial conceptual frame that makes the gathering and classification of positive observations possible. Furthermore, fetischistic ideas allow for the functioning of a first embryo of society, because they constitute common notions that allow men to understand and associate with one another.

For De Brosses (as for Kant) fetishism is based on a confusion between natural and supernatural. Unlike the other authors discussed, he does not however recognize in fetishism the perception of any reality save that of uncontrollable situations.

All four of the authors considered have in common the relatively simple idea that fetishism brings with it the confusion of something human with something non-human, or even something animate with something inanimate. Freud’s position, however, is more complex: there is fetishism when amorous over-valuation is concentrated on certain attributes of the person who is loved which are detached from that person to become the only objects of sexual desire (cf. Smirnoff 1970: 42–52). In this way a rupture in the love-object is produced which is correlated with the rupture of the subject.

For Freud, as for Marx, the genesis of fetishism resides definitively in the “fictitious” separation of the part from the whole. For Marx, the value of a commodity is nothing but an attribute of the human labor that produced it and that encompasses it. The attribute, separated from its human substance, becomes a fetis h. For Freud, the fetishist fictitiously separates the attribute of the person loved from the totality of that person.

But there is also a fundamental difference between Marx and Freud: the totality to which Freud refers is always the person, while for Marx the totality is the species (Gattungswesen): the abstract labor that constitutes the essence—the species of man. If it can be said that the capitalist is socially “perverse” because he over-values in the other only the attribute that can be detached and appropriated, that is, his labor-power, can it not also be said that there is something perverse in the Marxist idea that abstract labor (perceptible only through that which is detachable from the worker, the commodity) is the essence of man? And, more generally, is there not always something fundamentally perverse when, in human relations, a “human essence” is separated from the concrete totality of the person? The normative model of “health,” for an individual as for society, is constituted by the integrity of the other, the condition of the integrity of the self.
The system and the fetish

In his *Gifford Lectures* (1889; 1892), Max Müller noted that the word fetishism—"whatever that may mean" (1876: ix)—had taken on such disparate and even contradictory meanings as to render its elimination from the science of religions necessary. A true "superstition" of fetishism had developed among travellers, missionaries, and anthropologists, who, ignorant of the languages and systems of ideas of the populations they were describing, or moved by apologetic motivations, "were fetishizing" any religious phenomenon that they did not approve or understand. For this reason Müller proposed to reject the notion of "fetishistic religion." With a certain delay, anthropologists have accepted his point of view and have put a professional taboo on the term "fetishism." Such radical conversions are suspect however: both the censure of fetishism and its immoderate use betray perhaps a denial of the same kind.

J. B. Pontalis (1970: 13) has in fact astutely noted that the attitude of ethnologists as regards fetishism is analogous to the mechanism of the *Verleugnung* that lies at the basis of fetishism. That is, it takes the form of a judgement of this type: "it is not true, and yet..." They thus begin by saying that fetishism is a pseudo-concept to leave to missionaries and colonial administrators ("it is not true"), but end by admitting, like Alfred Adler (1970) that nevertheless there do perhaps exist in a culture objects that function like fetishes (in the Freudian sense).

Let us leave to Pontalis the task of psychoanalyzing the ethnologists: what explains, on the purely conceptual level, their ambivalent, if not contradictory, attitude towards fetishism, which consists in negating its existence a priori, but, meanwhile, having to recognize it as a strongly rooted ethnographic residue?

In order to understand fetishism, it is necessary to take account of the dialectic between two points of view on religious phenomena that have been in a state of encounter and interpenetration since the eighteenth century. The first constitutes a tradition that—if we leave aside its antecedents—begins with Fontenelle and culminates in Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. According to this tradition, religion accounts for regularity. The second point of view—introduced by David Hume and Adam Smith—maintains instead that religion does not explain that which, being regular, seems to carry on by itself without needing to be justified, but rather explains irregular, singular, phenomena resulting from chance.
This viewpoint was taken up in De Brosses’ and Comte’s theories (cf. Canguilhem 1968: 89–94; Lévy-Bruhl 1900: 49), though they exhausted it by extending it too far. Above all, the Comtian theory of fetishistic religion postulates a phase of the history of consciousness in which all phenomena appear unique, in which regularity does not exist.

The reaction to Comte was relatively minor, and with the growing popularity of theories on religion that considered the latter as an explanation of the natural and social order, “irregular,” “exceptional” phenomena, and along with them “fetishes,” were relegated to a subordinate position. Thus Müller—who contributed more than anyone else to destroying the idea of a “fetishistic religion”—thinks that the notion of the fetish might be preserved to designate “objects of fortuitous origin that possess miraculous powers” (1889: 160). E. B. Tylor considers fetishism a subordinate stratum of animistic religion “or rather the doctrine of spirits incorporated in material objects, or attached to them, or acting through them” and he looks for their origin in a turn of mind similar to that which “makes Englishmen collect rare stamps or sticks from bizarre landscapes.” (1871, Italian trans.: 144–45).

According to Herbert Spencer ([1873] 1877), it is the unusual and irregular nature of certain objects that makes them into fetishes: the notion that a ghost, which inhabits the object, corresponds to this strangeness is a derived, not a primary one.

The Durkheimian school deprives the notion of fetishism of the limited space that the English school had left it. To Müller, Tylor, and Spencer who associate fetishism with the chance object that is striking for its strangeness and its exceptional character, Mauss opposes another point of view: “The object that functions as a fetish is never, whatever may be said about it, just any object, chosen arbitrarily, but is always defined by the code of magic and religion” ([1908] 1969: 217).

But if the fetish-object is no longer paradoxical in any way, if it is a function of the code of magic and religion, then there is no reason to distinguish it from other signifying objects. “Fetishism” no longer designates either the totality of religion or a particular residual dimension of it. It is only “an immense misunderstanding” (ibid.: 245).

Mauss and his successors, influenced by Saussure, substitute the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign for the arbitrariness of the fetish-object ([1929] 1969: 470): the signifying relation is never motivated by events that transcend the code.
The problem of fetishism has therefore been excluded from ethno-
yology on the one hand because fetishism was defined as a thought
that gives meaning to that which is irregular, and on the other hand
because a theory was imposed for which there is no meaning outside
of a “code” and because therefore no objects exist whose meaning is
“unique.” Fetishism is thus dissolved by the semiological model.

In more recent years, however, and significantly in Great Britain
where the tradition initiated by Hume continues underground, some
anthropologists (for example Turner 1969; Douglas 1966, 1975) have
attempted to confront the problem of paradoxical and marginal phe-
nomena that seem to transcend the code. Since these phenomena
elude a model (like that of the French sociological school) based on
inclusion among classes, the British theorists explain them in terms of
intersections among classes and maintain that they are associated with
“diffuse powers” that would be reutilized by the system (for example,
in the form of sanctions against violations of order). But such an ap-
proach, however interesting, does not explain the irreducible paradox
that certain objects and events represent. It limits itself, in fact, to con-
sidering irregularities at the level of the species. But a fetish object,
even when its membership in a species is recognized, is always sacral-
ized as individual, as much as it is linked to an unrepeatable event.
The stamps that are cancelled the day after their release are identical
to those that are cancelled the day after that, but only the first are the
objects of a fetishistic behavior. The copy of a painting by Titian can
be perfect or even better than the original, but the value of the latter is
not aesthetic, but rather consists in being unique, in the fact that it is
the real residue, not the mere symbol, of the unrepeatable situation in
which Titian produced it.

The fetishes of “primitive” society are characterized by the same
integral individuality and irreducibility that ethnologists cannot fail to
recognize. So, among the Nuer and the Dinka, fetishes are objects
acquired individually and serve individual ends. They are amoral in
their actions, because manipulable at will: they allow for revenge, for
the acquisition of power and wealth independent of morality (Evans-

Even in the Ashanti religion fetishes (suman) have an individual
character and serve individual ends (Rattray 1927: 9–24). Their power
derives from the fact that they are made up of the remains of impure
things (cadavers, menstrual blood, etc.). They therefore concern
everything that does not enter into the moral order of the world,
everything that cannot be fit into the system, and that constitutes its residues. Far from being reintegrated into this order, these fetishes represent an irreducible conceptual and moral paradox that it would be mystified to want to ignore and reduce. They are considered paradoxes, or limits, blind spots in the order, by indigenous ideology.

It is therefore important to underline two properties that the objects called “fetishes” by ethnographers seem to possess (although not all of them enter into our definition [cf. Forde 1964: 254–83]; and, reciprocally, objects that are not called “fetishes” in ethnographic literature ought to be considered as such according to our definition). One concerns the material aspect of these objects and indicates their conceptual status; the other concerns their moral significance. As regards the latter, it must be noted that fetishes—residual and unique objects—are associated with that which in the system has a residual status on the moral level: the desire for power, the thirst for revenge, the success of one who violates the social order and should therefore have to encounter failure, and so on.

In their material aspect, fetishes seem by definition to elude every characterization and in fact to link themselves to the objet trouvé. But something relatively uniform is evident in the way they are preserved and treated: they are very often packaged up, wrapped up in material, hidden (cf. Pontalis 1970). Among the Dinka, for example, fetishes are made up of bundles that contain pieces of wood, roots, and other residues (Leinhardt 1961: 65, 68, 222). An essential feature of every fetish is however that the gaze is in some way at least impeded, that they are surrounded by taboo, by complex rituals of manipulations, by openings and closings, and so forth. The modern incarnation of the fetishist, the collectionist, will indeed show his treasures, but only to a few: it is essential that they not be accessible to all, that they only be kept in a secure place, that they be taken out only with thousands of precautions, and so on.

The value of the fetish consists in this contradictory coexistence of its accessibility and its inaccessibility. Inasmuch as it is a material object, the fetish is accessible; it can be found by chance, acquired, it is not a prerogative, it is immediately at its possessor’s disposal and for this reason gives him the impression of total dominion that is expressed by the uniqueness of the possession. But the fetish is also inaccessible (as the taboos, the material that envelopes it, the ritual precautions without which its power dissolves, all symbolize). This inaccessibility is paradoxically revealed by the need that the fetishist
sometimes feels to show his fetish to someone else, to make him test
his power, to discover in the other a sense of an exclusion, of an inac-
cessibility, that he finds in himself, but whose reality he wants to ne-
gate, projecting it onto another. The fetish is therefore the paradoxical
object that manifests a lack, an irreducible limit—ideological and prac-
tical—of a collective or individual “system,” rendering it as an absolute
denseness of meaning, as a unique and unrepeatable power. Thus in
capitalist society money is presented as absolute meaning, absolute
power, but its fetishization, the mystic belief in its power, hides the
limit that bourgeois ideology encounters in explaining and accepting
the mystery of its value.

The accessibility, the sense of power that the fetish offers to the
perverse, hide his incapacity to accept the reality of an essence and
the trauma that fragments the ego.

More generally, and more simply, in many if not all societies, the
objects “without meaning”—associated with that which is unique, for-
tuitous, unpredictable, bizarre—are sacralized as such. Their unique-
ness, which challenges the laws of the system and reveals its limits,
seems to offer the one who makes himself owner of it a guarantee of
absolute power, a reserve of meaning that transcends the unaccept-
able limits of the universe of codified signs and classifications.

No one has defined the feeling of power felt by the fetishist better
than an African of the seventeenth century: “We make and break our
gods daily, and consequentially are the masters and inventors of what
we sacrifice to” (Bosman [1704] 1967: 368).

In conclusion, we can define fetishes as the disguises assumed by
the residues of a system: they constitute at one and the same time the
recognition of their existence and the refusal to recognize their nature.