

DIVISION | REVIEW

A QUARTERLY PSYCHOANALYTIC FORUM

NO.16 SPRING 2017

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Identity and Murder in Kansas David Lichtenstein

That irrational choices, conflicting desires, and inexplicable judgments bedevil the political realm has never been in doubt. It follows that psychoanalysis as the science of parapraxis might be a good source of insight into why people have so much trouble getting it right. More than ever, politics seem to be a stage where the players represent the range of human folly and failure. Ideals are proclaimed and immediately

betrayed. Do we psychoanalysts have anything to offer the world for the mitigation of what looks like an inexorable march toward destruction resulting from our collective political failures?

If errors in political judgment are not simply the inevitable expressions of the flawed human character, but instead symptoms shaped by the social experience of the human subject, symptoms that can

be the portal to insight and new possibilities, might the recognition and treatment of these symptoms have a salutary effect not only on the individual subject but the body politic itself? That this quaintly utopian dream survives the dystopian history we are witnessing may either be admirable resilience or naïve optimism. Time will tell.

In February 2017, there was a shooting in a bar in Olathe, Kansas. Srinivas



Talk to Me Bettina MATHES

A delight to receive the book in the mail: the muted yet bright red color, the handsome format (17 x 24 cm) and the velvety softness of the hard (but not too

Sigmund Freud's Desk: An Anecdoted Guide

By Ro Spankie

Freud Museum, London, 2015;

ISBN 978-0-948-687-36-5.

hard) cover appeal to the touch and the eye. Pleasure! The clean modernist design and the high quality photographic reproductions appeal to the art historian in me. Satisfaction! I am grateful that the Freud Museum reconsidered its initial offer to send a pdf of the book for review. That much is certain; Ro Spankie's book is a beautiful object to place on my desk.

This book about one of the most famous desks of the 20th century and the 65 individual objects placed on it immediately arouses interest—not only among psychoanalysts. *Freud's Desk* offers spectacular close-ups of the items most visitors to the Freud Museum at 20 Maresfield Gardens, London, UK have only seen in passing, or from afar: the family of antique figurines (39 of them), his ashtrays, matchholder, nail file, toothbrush, magnifying glass, pen, penbox, notepad, and spectacles. Each object occupies a double page spread with the right page featuring a photograph of the object against a white backdrop and the left page offering cataloguing information (size, material, age) and a map indicating the object's location on the desk as well as anecdotes about the object's provenance and usage. In this, *Freud's Desk* is an art catalogue like any other, advertising the Freud Museum's possession of valuable objects.

But Spankie, who is a designer and researcher at the University of Westminster in London, aims for more. Her book is intended as "a guide" helping us "to disentangle the dreamlike montage of associations and ideas that Freud surrounded himself with as he wrote" (p.11), and as a collection of stories: "the objects, though silent, have *stories to tell*," the author repeatedly states in the introduction. "Each object [has] a *story to tell*—both about the character they assume and about Freud, his life and his work. *This guide tells their story*" (back cover; emphasis mine). Referring to Freud's topographical method, where "one idea is explained in relation to another" (p.10), Spankie suggests that "the arrangement of the pieces might evoke *alternative narratives to the individual stories*" (p.12; emphasis mine) as well as "associations and characteristics often multiple and interconnected" (p.11).

A book filled with stories told by objects! I am thrilled. But I am also skeptical.

The isolation of each object, locked into an otherwise empty white page, frozen in time, presented from one angle only, dissociated from the objects that surround it on the desk (the equivalent of the white cube in any western museum); the emphasis on facts and documentation; and the lack of a narrative structure seem to subvert the stated aim to both present the pieces as story-tellers and to tell their stories. An impression that my perusal of the book confirms. The figurines do not speak, and they certainly don't tell stories. Spankie herself does not give stories to us either. The stories the author announces in the introduction—almost as if the promise of a story could substitute for it—are not told. There is a plethora of very short anecdotes gleaned from letters, Freud's writings, and those of his patients (the poet H.D., of course) and illustrious contemporaries (Virginia Woolf). Marilyn Monroe makes a brief appearance as well. Not because she came into contact with Freud or the objects on his desk, but because she was in analysis with Marianne Rie, who was Ernst Kris' wife and a childhood friend of Anna Freud.

As interesting as these anecdotes may be, we have to distinguish between an anecdote and a story. What is this difference? The anecdote is something I place vis-a-vis the object—to describe it, to make it seem interesting, to create a context or a situation that may (or may not) explain something about the object. In its juxtaposition to the object (say the Osiris figurine), the anecdote (H.D. recalling Freud putting it in her hands) can function as an invitation to tell a story (true or invented), but in itself this juxtaposition is not the (or a) story of Osiris as he sits on Freud's desk. Stories have to be told; they require a storyteller, a mind and a body that make meaning and create movement in time. Stories have a beginning and an end (though not necessarily in that order). The storyteller creates connections and causal relationships. Objects may stir up a story in me; they may move me to tell a story. But the object itself, speechless, immobile unless I move it, cannot tell its story (if it has one).

The book's predicament points to a deeper problem: what about this wish that a still and silent object on a desk could tell *its story* all by itself? What is the relationship between language and the object world? And what is the relationship between the stillness of an object and the time-based flow of a story? These are difficult questions to answer, for sure. Which is why they should not be raised casually, especially not in a book about psychoanalysis. Despite the many differences among psychoanalytic

schools, I believe that most analysts would agree that part of what we do with the patient is trying to put words to wounds, to use a phrase by Adam Phillips, all the while paying attention to the ways in which the words create stories about who we are in relation to objects (internal and external ones). A book that promises to make famous and fetishized objects talk to us, but does not make an attempt to explore the relationship between objects and words, ultimately disappoints.

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Perhaps someday someone will have the courage, the imagination, and the freedom to write down the stories of the objects on Freud's desk. In the meantime, an excerpt from Gertrude Stein's fearless masterpiece *Tender Buttons* may remind us that at the heart of the modernist project, of which Freud's work forms an important part, lies a double commitment: to consider the object world from more than one perspective simultaneously (the relational and dynamic aspect of our experience of reality) and to take seriously the dilemma that defines us as speaking beings—that the language that connects us also separates us. I can never say exactly what I want to say. My words (the words that have been given to me) are an approximation, an ongoing and sometimes painful struggle towards meaning. A struggle that the objects on Freud's desk know nothing of—unless I make them tell me about it. ■

A BOX.

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again. (Stein, 1914/1997, p.4)

REFERENCES

- Spankie, R. (2015). *Sigmund Freud's desk: An anecdoted guide*. London, UK: Freud Museum.
Stein, G. (1997). *Tender buttons: Objects, food, rooms*. New York, NY: Dover Publications. (Original work published 1914)