

## Chapter Seven

### The Lyrical and the Dialectical

#### *Alzpeech II*

During the latter part of my work in Miami I sketched out a series of ideas for a medical research proposal written in the *meta*-linguistic aspect of Alzpeech.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Proposed Histopathological Study  
of the Relation Between Stress Response Mechanisms and  
Inflammation in Alzheimer's Disease

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What would be necessary to make plausible the hypothesis that the etiology of Alzheimer's disease (AD) lies in an acute, or series of acute, responses to stress taking place within the central nervous system?

Another way of asking this question would be in terms of inflammation and its relationship to the degenerative process and course of this disease.

Although the slow progress of AD is much more suggestive of a degenerative as opposed to an inflammatory disease, recent investigations show significant evidence of inflammatory processes which seem to suggest some role of inflammation in the deposition of beta-amyloid as seen in AD (Brugg, et al. 1995) and further point to the role of various immunological response factors such as cytokines in neuronal degeneration (Aisen, et al. 1994, McGreer et al. 1994, Bauer, et al. 1991).

There are at least two ways in which this conflict between AD as an inflammatory disease or non-inflammatory degenerative disease can be hypothetically resolved. First, one could consider AD as a combination of both processes, working reciprocally and affecting various areas in different ways or, second, one could view these elements as part of a progression in which one or more particular area(s), of acute inflammation lead(s) to further processes of non-inflammatory, anterograde transneuronal degeneration.

Recent studies by Behan, et al. (1995) describe dramatic reductions in the content of corticotropin releasing factor (CRF) in the brains of pathologically confirmed cases of AD. Another study by Gordon, et al. (1996) describes a relative reduction in the glucocorticoid response to stress in apoE deficient mice. Yet another study by Davis, et al. (1986), as well as other studies, show basal cortisol levels to be increased in those diagnosed with AD.

In regards to inflammatory mechanisms and how they function in cases of AD, such reductions could signal at least two separate things, both of which are important to my project as pointers:

- a) that CRF neurons may have degenerated at levels which would create such a deficit, or that decreases in CRF synthesis or increases of CRF breakdown are taking place, or
- b) that CRF may be being utilized at depletingly high levels in a working response to inflammation, and thus appear to be low.

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In support of both hypotheses we find a report by Hatzinger, et al. (1995) describing a tendency for AD patients to release significantly less ACTH and cortisol after prolonged CRF stimulation as contrasted with normal controls. We also find a histopathological study by Raadsheer, et al. (1995) which shows CRF-mRNA levels in the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus to be hyperactivated in cases of AD, which may form the basis for increased activity of CRF and its depletion, or suggest a compensatory reaction to neurons which have degenerated at some point along afferent pathways to this nucleus.

In regard to the reductions in the content of CRF reported by Behan, et al. (1995), we would also expect to find that the relative levels of growth (pro-inflammatory) factor to also be inversely higher in that glucocorticoid levels are known to exist in such an inverse relationship to growth factors. This is most likely not the case however, as we find in fact, according to Smith, et al (1994), that stress and glucocorticoid reactions negatively affect the expression of growth factors (BDNF) and Neurotrophin-3 mRNAs) in the rat hippocampus, leading to low levels of both.

A possible mechanism of this reduction of CRF would be that of stress. Through this mechanism stress would lead to an activation of pro-inflammatory (growth) factors which would support localized inflammation. This would be followed by an activation of CRF and the resulting production of a glucocorticoid response. This response of glucocorticoids would bring about a reduction in inflammatory (growth) factors which work to block CRF expression, leading to a possible greater expression of (unbound) CRF (see Behan et al., 1995, and Lightman, 1995).

This would support the second hypothesis (b) above in that under this mechanism CRF levels would actually not be reduced due to overriding levels of inflammatory (growth) factors but rather due to an unusually large expression of this CRF in response to inflammatory processes.

To investigate the role of inflammation in AD, as described above in terms of a stress response I propose a histopathological study of two areas: the hippocampus/dentate and the posterior orbitofrontal gyrus. In this study I intend to examine possible degeneration (in the form of gliosis, NFT and SP) of corticohypothalamic fiber areas and other areas which are known to be areas of afferent and efferent connections/ communications between the orbitofrontal gyri on one end and the cingulate gyrus and hippocampus on the other. The areas in which degeneration is found will then be examined for evidence of inflammatory pathology and ischemic changes, and will also be quantitatively contrasted and compared.

There are many grounds on which to investigate these areas in conjunction, beginning with the possibly significant findings of Skoog, et al. (1996) regarding blood pressure levels and possible ischemic changes in those diagnosed with AD. A 15 year longitudinal study by Skoog, et al. found that in the period between 5 and 10 years before the onset of dementia significant gradual reductions in systolic and diastolic BP occurred among those with AD as contrasted with control groups of non-demented persons and those diagnosed with vascular dementia. These reductions did not reflect the effect of anti-hypertensive medications or any other reasonable explanatory factors, leaving open the possibility that changes in cardiovascular regulating regions of the CNS may be playing a role in the pathogenesis of this disease.

If we are to follow the idea that degenerative or dysfunctional changes in certain areas may be responsible for the gradual decline reported by Skoog, et al., we would need to look at the three major areas of the CNS which have been thought to play strong roles in vasoregulation: the nucleus of the solitary tract (NTS); the anterior, preoptic, posterior and lateral nuclei of the hypothalamus; and the afferent and efferent fibers connecting these nuclei to the orbitofrontal gyri.

Regarding these connections we know:

(A) that the activities of the hypothalamus are modified by activity along afferent pathways from the pre-frontal cortex,

(B) that stimulation of the posterior orbitofrontal cortex brings rises in BP and plasma cortisol levels (Hall and Marr, 1975),

(C) that BP and plasma cortisol levels can be regulated through the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus,

(D) that direct efferent and afferent connections exist between the lateral nuclei of the hypothalamus and the prefrontal cortex,

(E) that stimulation of the lateral and posterior nuclei of the hypothalamus produce a rise in BP (Hoff, et al., 1963),

(F) that in AD the CRF neurons of the paraventricular nucleus are hyperactivated (Raadsheer, et al., 1995) and,

(G) that the prefrontal cortex seems to be the only cortical district that sends direct projections to the hypothalamus (Fuster, 1980).

Going back to the hypothesis of stress related degeneration spelled out before, we must wonder whether or not neural degeneration may be affecting certain areas of those described above in (A) through (G) and, if so, in what way. If neurons which bring about the lowering of BP are degenerating, one may then expect to find no lowering at all as a result. If these same neurons are somehow (unlikely) being stimulated by other mechanisms this could also account for the lowering of BP. A more reasonable explanation, though none the less speculative, would be that the BPs (most often high) found among those prone to AD are somehow being maintained by CNS and/or renal mechanisms which, due to degeneration of essential neurons are unable to maintain basal levels, thus creating a drop (often back to normotensive levels).

In addition to the role it seems to play (along with the hypothalamus) in visceral regulation, another reason for focusing on the orbitofrontal area would be that it is known to have connections, both anatomically and neuropsychologically, to the hippocampus, cingulate and other areas implicated in the pathology of AD. Following the informative assessment of anatomical correlates of the distribution of pathological changes in the neocortex in AD by Pearson, et al. (1985) and considering the changes in BP described by Skoog, et al. (1996), it is not implausible that the pathogenesis of AD can be seen in the pre-frontal cortex and/or its efferent connections to areas like the hypothalamus, and the cingulate gyrus.

Could AD be seen in a prefrontal to subcortical path of deafferentation to the hypothalamus in a way not unlike Huntington's disease in which lesioned connections between this cortex and the caudate nucleus are implicated? If so, and if such changes can be linked to the possible marker suggested by Skoog, et al. (1996) and the explication of it given above, researchers would also be in a good position to look at possible ischemic insults (which this area is quite prone to) and the role they, and the response of the immune and endocrine (stress) systems to them, may play in the pathogenesis of AD.

Aisen, PS, Davis KL., 1994. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151: 1105-13

Bauer, et al., 1992. *Research in Immunology*, 143: 650-57.

Behan, et al., 1995. *Nature*, Vol.378, 16 November, pp.284-87.

Brugg, et al., 1995. *Proceedings of the Nat. Acad. Of Sci. USA*, 92: 3032-3035

Fuster, J.M., 1980. *The Prefrontal Cortex*, New York: Raven Press.

Gordon, et al. 1996. *Neuroscience Letters*, 206: 212-214.

Hall and Marr, 1975. *Brain Research*, 93: 367-371.

Hoff, et al., 1963. *Physiological Reviews*, 43: 68-114.

Lightman, G., 1995. *Nature*, 378: 233-34.

McGreer, et al., 1994. *Alzheimer's Disease and Associated Disorders*, 8: 149-58.

The ideas expressed in this meta-language display an attempt towards the accurate naming of the cause of Alzheimer's disease which I feel remains true to the various things I learned.

In this attempt one sees not only a scientific but also a very strong political statement being made. Its politics lay not *only* in what it suggested, i.e. that *stress* is what leads to this disease (a notion which I regard as social, but cannot express in this meta-language), but *more importantly* in the fact that I, a human social scientist, am making this suggestion as if I myself were an Alz person. Curiously, the Alz people, or most of them, had little objection to what I was up to, save for my speaking in an idiom (of stress and the social) which was old-fashioned and something of a dialect which they could not always follow. In general, once I began to speak the language and showed a true interest they took me in and helped me in my project, though never without a bit of the suspicion which any stranger would inspire. The real political resistance, I found, was and is, rather, to be met amongst those of my own kind, amongst those who either deny my ability to speak for the Alz people and, in "my own" language, to adopt their ways in my writing (in that I am not an Alz person). I also find, of course, that I have to contend with those who deny my right to question the most sacred, missionary pursuit of humanity itself, i.e. the colonial project of aiding the Alz people. How dare any one human, or any Alz person for that matter, stand in the way of the construction of this new global village, they say.

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Pearson, et al., 1985. *Proceedings of the Nat. Academy of Sciences USA* 82:4531-34.

Raadsheer, et al., 1995. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152:9: 1372-1376.

Skoog, et al., 1996. *The Lancet*, 347: 1141-1145.

Smith, et al., 1995. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 15 (3): 1768-1777.

In yet another respect, I also find that I gain little sympathy from those who share my inclination regarding stress and the social in that they see my project as a sort of primitivist attempt to form bonds with natives who no longer exist, with an era which has gone the way of the rubber boom and vanished. The bridge cannot be built, they say. Discourse and its power/knowledge have confounded the Alz language, and our own language, and we are left with a decaying Tower of Babble, winding a forum of moneychangers, where such hope and rebellion once lived and worked.

If this is true, I ask then ‘What is language?’ Does “language” even matter anymore? Is it not an outmoded way of discussing power relationships? The task of the translator, he or she who transgresses against the other with every word, has come to be seen as something inherently political, suspiciously critical and inevitably destructive of those values which humanity has come to hold most dear. We are told that in the meta-linguistic aspect of Alzpeech, for example, we see a power dynamic which has divorced these people from themselves, which has broken the tie between its own symbols and its own cultural referents, substituting meta-Alz symbols in their stead. These substitute symbols, we are told, form a structure or system of power and control which has succeeded in alienating all peoples from their original state of sovereignty—a sin for which we (as their lords?) must pay. But it seems there is no turning back (*à la* Romanticism) and no turning away from the power/knowledge which these symbols, in their *dialogics*, maintain, save for a continuous project of recasting that knowledge

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through the desymbolization of the modern world in the practice of taboo, and its resymbolization in the form of positive mental images.

So where is language, where has it gone, has it retreated into inner experience from which it came, like the linguistic aspect of Alzpeech, or has it become the property of state lexicographers and state sophists as Pietist forces would see its meta-linguistic aspect become? Here I, along with Walter Benjamin and countless others who would be translators, guilty in their evil transgressions against the once-and-future authentic, feel a certain need to answer 'yes' to the latter.

### *Manifestations*

The critique begun in the last chapter and continued in this one is not a positive critique of image and possession but a negative critique based upon the points on which it failed both Gabriel and I in dealing with Alzheimer's disease as we found it. Looking back at the sketch of ideas for a medical research proposal I constructed while doing my research I see myself in an attempt to work within a certain fetishism of locations, relations and functions given to me within the current knowledge and research in neuropathology. What I had found (earlier) in the daycare center, the diagnostic clinics and in other times spent with those with this disease and those who cared for them did not jibe with either the fetishized images and localization of faculties of neuroscience or that of its (positive) medical anthropological critique. The problem I had was the problem encountered in all symbolic determination, i.e. that of context or meaning in context. The context I was working in at the daycare center, in the support groups and often in the

clinics was one of violence and melancholia. In the first part of my stay in Miami, proceeding in the direction of symbolic medical anthropology I was thinking, I suppose, that there was some authentic core to be found in those with the disease which was not available within medical science. Before long, as I observed Gabriel going further and further into this idea, hanging his hopes on a star, I came to suspect any and all such pursuits and those who devoted their lives to them.

Above all other concerns I began to approach this problem, these people, with a great degree of sensitivity and caution regarding my own power to reify the relations between myself and them. From a careful reading of Barbara Meyerhoff's *Number Our Days* I came to appreciate (and fear) both the power of the very old (or almost any) Other to inspire such reification and, equally, the power of narrative to convey a sense of context in which such reification could be overcome. There were so many parallels between myself and Meyerhoff's task to both search for some authentic cultural core and at the same time, like Gabriel, to lament its loss. What was I thinking? What were my dreams of this place Miami Beach? My head and my heart, like Meyerhoff's were full of sentiments of tradition, holocaust, a time and mind-state of war, anguish, and irreconcilable loss—she having lost and in search of her own ancestral in the Other, and I in search of the very notion of the ancestral other his or herself. I, like the self she portrayed, sought to make sense of this loss, to find its, to *give it*, context (within modernity or wherever it lay). I sought, for the good of the tribe, to give a purer meaning to the words death, loss, and exchange. We both explored otherness as a children, through the narratives of the old. But where Meyerhoff found meaning I myself found

none; where she found that which was lost in herself, I found (I)nc.; where she found individuals in community, I found the state.

The contexts of which Myerhoff sought and found meaning were those of rites and performances, the initiation, stratification and the acquisition of competency. In her narrations of context meaning was found in the analysis of ‘goings on.’ The relations she describes are active, moving, and thereby, according to symbolic anthropology, avoiding the reification of relations. But what are these active, moving relations *in themselves*, for symbolic anthropology certainly believes they have such an existence? Strangely, however, this ‘in itself’ existence is not noumenal but phenomenal or, rather, *phenomenological*. “As people express their lives, so they are...” says symbolic anthropology; active, moving relations in themselves are found in the ways in which people express their lives, i.e. *in the details of ritual or performative contexts*.

I must admit that I too shared such a sentiment at the outset of my work in Miami; I too somehow seemed to think that such an *active* view of relations could escape the reification of relations. What I didn’t appreciate (and am also failing to appreciate at this very moment as I write) was (is) the power of narrative, the power of exegesis, that is, the power of writing, that is, the power of the (I)nc.. All I can say, at this time, is that I saw relations as tellings, and tellings as relations. This was the first, last and only definition or understanding of “relation” which I would allow myself. The problem, as I have since come to see it, is how to understand “tellings.”

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So there I am, caught-up in the idea that relations are tellings and tellings relations and that tellings and goings-on are somehow the same. Like a good symbolic anthropologist I am thinking, I guess, that as people express their lives, so they are; that telling equals reality, the ‘in-itself’, and that there was a sort of dialogic in place in which their telling combined with my telling told of more than either one of our tellings alone. For us, these tellings were (situation specific) words and/or acts; for them they were “reality.” To get at their meaning we must get into those specific situations and contexts and become actively involved (if only as a listener) in order to understand these tellings as *active goings-on*. This is what I urged the reader to do above in the small situations I described (not to mention in the interviews earlier on) and in imagining my involvement in them which I narrate.

I feel I must note, however, that the notion of “active goings-on” can be a bit misleading if not taken in the present tense as I intend it. In contrast to symbolic anthropology I do not mean “acts” or “deeds” no matter how actively or *intentionally* they were done. If they were deeds, I thought, they were done, and were no longer active goings-on, but more like events-taken-place. In the notion of “active goings-on,” as I now realize, I wanted to somehow capture the essence contained in stories, relations or tellings which begin in the spirit of “So there I am...” or, as Willie Mae puts it, ‘a way of talking that ain’t livin in the past but real.’ But how could I get inside this state of mind, this reality; how could I describe it, convey it? I didn’t realize, though, that it wasn’t I who was to get into their experience, but rather they who were to get into mine. In fact,

as Gabriel and I have both pointed out, I was already in their experience, in their *dreama*, in their space, in their context. I came and went, transformed and disappeared, like one who is met in dreams. It was Harwood who first tried to set me straight. If I wanted to learn about him and his people, I had to learn to draw them out, to gain some knowledge which I could “apply.” In his dementia, a term which I still feel very unsure of regarding what it actually denotes, I hoped he would point to a way out, to a path which led him and his people out. But he did no such thing. Rather, he pointed to paths which led further in, paths which led *him* further in and beckoned me to follow. His point was not to find a way out, for there was no way out, but to find a way further in. I spent so long sitting and talking, playing or being characters in some great *dreama* which I did not understand; a multitude of questions and answers falling in endless absurdity. Like Kafka’s imitating ape I mimed and transformed, I gave up my identity, continually, in search of a way out but remained, ever orbiting, never reaching the escape velocity I needed. In my mimesis and transformations I was being led towards a phenomenological location, of nothingness, of absurdity, which I eventually reached (mask within a mask). There was no linguistic or cognitive essence, nothing, as Gabriel thought, having to do with the phenomenology of time and space, no telling past of this disease, or of the premorbid behavior of those with it. There was nothing which made them unique, nothing in these situations with them from which I was to derive any meaning which did not reflect directly upon myself and my own ways of approaching them. “So there I am...” became “So there (I)nc. am....”

In the end the sketch of ideas for a research proposal I wrote above shows perhaps the greatest failure of all. In it I thought that I could follow paths and fibers in the brain in a way similar to the way one follows trails of symbols and contexts in symbolic anthropology. Perhaps the greatest lesson, in learning that there was no authentic core, in reaching the phenomenological location of nothingness, of mask within mask, was that in seeing the problem of brain function in this symbolic way I was seeing it anthropomorphically when I need to see cosmomorphically. Following paths and fibers in the nervous system, I found, was much more akin to following paths and fibers of materialist *logos*, in not too dissimilar of a way to that through which the Stoics understood the practices of etymology and divination, or to the way in which Georges Bataille understood language as transgression or, perhaps most appropriately, to the way in which Walter Benjamin and Paul Valéry understood language mimetically and *ur*-historically.

### *Socrates, the Mask and Material Spirit of the Dialogue*

Listening to Harwood and others, as we should, makes manifest the truth that no matter how we try to deny, through this or that form of mentalism, that the “cause of” Alzheimer’s disease is not linguistic in nature we are nevertheless faced with the task of dealing with it and those afflicted with it through the linguistic.<sup>1</sup> In the end, it is our notions of language themselves which are perhaps the greatest barriers to naming the cause. These barriers, as much social and cultural as they are conceptual, are exactly that which Walter

Benjamin's "dialectical" and mimetic theory of language is directed against.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, hereafter referred to as simply "*Origin*," Benjamin restates and illustrates this "dialectical" and mimetic theory of language which was first articulated in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man."

In 1934, six years after the publication of *Origin*, Benjamin prepared a piece which

he called "a collective abstract" on contributions to contemporary linguistic theory which he thought particularly relevant to social theory. He began this piece entitled "*Probleme der*

*Sprachsoziologie*" with writing:

The cardinal problems of linguistics as well as sociology touch upon one another in the question concerning the origin [*Ursprung*] of language. And regardless of the methodological reservations which will in many cases be raised against it, a great many of their most important investigations converge on this point.<sup>2</sup>

In a tone which in some ways resembles but differs significantly from the philosophical and theological tone of his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man,"<sup>3</sup> we see in this quote a statement of ideas which also found earlier expression in his 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator,"<sup>4</sup> his 1927 *Origin*, the 1933

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<sup>1</sup> A major "symptom" of Alzheimer's disease is the presence of certain forms of aphasia.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter "*Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*" in *Gesammelte Werke*

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Walter *Reflections* pp.314-332.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter *Illuminations* pp.69-82.

essay "The Doctrine of the Similar,"<sup>1</sup> and the 1933 re-write of "On the Mimetic Faculty"<sup>2</sup> (among others).

The key question which the ideas of the above quote make manifest, and which must be based on the above sources as well, is on what basis the more mature Benjamin designates the question of "origin" as one crucial to a correct and workable sociology of language. The German word for origin used by Benjamin, *Ursprung*, is defined as "source, origin, inception, provenance, starting-point, beginning, or cause." Notable in the exposition of *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* is not only a long-running theme in Benjamin's thought: that the origin (*Ursprung*) of all creation and origin of language are coterminous; but also a new one: that the key problems of linguistics and sociology are found in the "ur-history" of language; a pursuit in which a great deal of both of these areas of study can be subsumed.

A word of clarification is, however, called for here. In his use of the notion of *ur-history* as the source of the key problems of linguistics *and* sociology, Benjamin, a contemporary of Ferdinand de Saussure, does not remain tied to, and is not working within, the tradition of historical or neo-grammarians linguistics which preceded de

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter "Lehre von Aehnlichen" in *Allegorien kultureller Erfahrung*, pp.125-130.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter *Reflections*, pp.333-336.

Saussure's inauguration of a new descriptive linguistics. In his theory, dependent on this notion of *ur*-history, Benjamin offers another, quite unique, anti-descriptive and anti-phenomenological approach to language and the social which *rivals* that of de Saussure.

To begin we must first understand that a concern with *ur*-history is not a concern with history as we know it. Benjamin acknowledges how absurd it would be to concern ourselves with origin (*Ursprung*) in the sense of the historical origin of language itself; such an origin being naturally outside of linguistic evidence and therefore *extra*-historical. Rather, the "origin" of language which Benjamin addresses is one which is considered *experientially*, in a general sense of *origin in experience*. The "history" of this origin in experience is not an individual/personal history and not a social history, but *both at once*.

To back up a bit let us consider the points which I have just made in more detail. What exactly does it mean to say that Benjamin considered the origin of language to be *ur*-historical? What exactly is this oft quoted, but little understood notion of *ur*-history *vis-à-vis* language? In this context, and following his 1916 "On Language as Such," we would say that *ur*-history means the description of creation, in a biblical sense. In the beginning of creation was the Word. Benjamin refers to this as "the living word." He likens this "word" to an animist way of looking at the world and being in touch with nature, a problematic, yet compelling idea (especially in Romanticism) in which nature

communicates directly with man.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of man creation became a *fallen state*; man fell

by gaining *knowledge*, and nature, as the living word, fell along with man. Another way of putting this would be that as a result of the fall, *man and nature were divorced*, and this divorce is maintained through taboo and/or “the knowledge of good and evil” (the bane of existence among the Romantics) which are themselves, as Bataille reminds us, maintained through their transgression.

From the first expression of this idea on we begin to see that a dialectical fusion of social and individual/personal histories (the *ur*-historical) begins to permeate Benjamin's thought, coming into fruition in *Origin* (which George Steiner perceptively refers to as "lyrical"), “One Way Street” (with its lost love Asja Lacis and other themes) and "A Berlin Chronicle" (among other works). Even more important in this regard is his later work on Kafka (in which this notion is *key*) and his arcades era obsessions with Baudelaire, Aragon, Paris and Arcades. During this time we see the development of Benjamin's own conceptions of “dialectical” and “materialism” taking form. Reflecting upon this time he wrote the following to Swiss journalist and essayist Max Rychner in a letter dated March 7, 1931:

My book *Origin of German Tragic Drama...* was certainly not materialistic, even if it was dialectical. But what I did not know at the time I wrote it, *soon thereafter became increasingly clear to me*: namely, there is a bridge to the way

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<sup>1</sup> Note in what follows the striking similarities between Benjamin's views on “origin” and language and that of the Stoics discussed in various places above. These convergences are found not only in Benjamin's *ur*-history and in the Stoic etymological approach to truth, but also in both of their non-Platonic, materialist understandings of mimesis and *logos*.

dialectical materialism looks at things from the perspective of my particular stance on the philosophy of language, however strained and problematical that bridge may be [my italics].<sup>1</sup>

Having said this, however, these facts do not help us with the more important and, indeed, crucial questions to which this quote gives rise, namely: (a) in what way does Benjamin regard his *Origin* work as "dialectical," and (b) what is this "strained and problematical" bridge between the non-materialist outlook on language found in the *Origin* work and the materialist outlook of dialectical materialism?<sup>2</sup>

In pursuit of these questions let us return to the same letter to Rychner from which the quote was taken. In this letter Benjamin is on the defensive regarding what Rychner suggests may be a tendency in Benjamin's work to assume a materialist outlook which may in fact be idealist at heart. Striking back Benjamin writes that his materialism has developed not from the positive pedagogy of "Communist brochures" but rather from an on-going negative critique of "'representative" works that emanated from the bourgeois side over the last twenty years in my field of expertise, literary history and criticism." Benjamin tells Rychner that he himself did not need Marxism to arrive at an outlook

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter *Briefe*

<sup>2</sup> In his theorization of language Benjamin continually flirts with but never adopts a dialectical materialist theory of language like those circulating in his day. In a certain sense Benjamin's understanding of materialism *vis-à-vis* language often lent itself to that akin to contemporary understandings of the magical, coming mainly from eighteenth and nineteenth century literature from E.T.A. Hoffman and Goethe, to Baudelaire or the French Romantics.

which is compatible with dialectical materialism, attributing this fact to "the basic metaphysical tendency" of his research.<sup>1</sup>

We find this "basic metaphysical tendency" perhaps most explicitly stated in Benjamin's treatment of tragedy. In his discussion of the relationship between Socratic dialogue and tragedy in *Origin* Benjamin places a special importance on the death of Socrates. Socrates, says Benjamin, considers his own death allegorically but in a non-symbolic fashion. He regards his own death as "something alien, beyond which, in immortality, he expects to return to himself."<sup>1</sup> The tragic end of Socrates, says Benjamin, displays the birth of a new form of tragic expression altogether; a form which replaces the symbolic form of allegorizing tragic death (in terms of disease, decay, guilt and other signs, i.e. as an idealized destructive force) with one which views such death socially (in terms of *life* change and passage, in and through which one leaves and returns to truth, essence and creation). This second form of allegorizing tragic death, says Benjamin, is seen in the Socratic dialogue (which is the truth, essence and creation of the man Socrates) and is also seen in the baroque language of the 16th century German "tragic drama" [*Trauerspiel*] or, literally, "mourning or sadness play."

This "metaphysical tendency" and "dialectic" which (says Benjamin) plays a key link between his own notion of language and dialectical materialism, is in the form of *an epistemology which is dialectical in the sense of the Socratic dialogue* contra *an epistemology which is dialectical or analytical in the sense of "eternal ideas" and*

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<sup>1</sup> By which he means his tendency toward a metaphysics which combined mimesis with his notion of *ur-history*.

"timeless values" (*à la* Plato and Kant). In saying this, however, we must realize that by "Socratic" we do not refer so much to Plato's performative, dialogic, historical character named Socrates (whom in many places equals Plato), but rather to Paul Valéry's *ur*-historical figure of (the dead, yet living spirit of) *Socrates-the-dialogue*. This Socrates of Valéry is not a myth nor is his existence *mythological*.<sup>2</sup> He is not a *mythological figure* but a *form* of (the) dialogue. He is not *dialogical*, a method, but a (the) spirit of the dialogue and, therefore, a mask which secretes its own materiality. This spirit of *Socrates-the-dialogue*, this mask, as individual/personal history, as a record of a man's thoughts, is fused with the spirit (or mask) of *Socrates-the-dialogue* as social history, as a conversation between different persons. This fusion is *ur*-history as a written or told account and *ur*-history as experience. Such a fusion is at the core of Benjamin's theory of language and his own unique version of "dialectical materialism;" a fusion which Benjamin tried in so many ways to emulate *via* written criticism.

### *De-instru-mentia, or Meta-Dancing*

At the heart of Benjamin's theory of language, as at the heart of his critique of romantic epistemology outlined the second chapter of this book, we find the notion of allegory. "Allegory," says Benjamin, "is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just a writing is." In calling allegory a form of expression Benjamin means to in a certain sense naturalize language, to put it in a category which is in no way *instrumental*. The idea that we "use" or

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Note that in a youthful essay entitled "Socrates" in *Selected Writings*, vol. I, p.52, Benjamin explicitly states that "The Socratic dialogue needs to be studied in relation to myth." Later Benjamin may have seen in the appropriation of Socrates by Valéry a form of Socratic dialogue and dialectic which avoided this

“communicate *through*” language is due, like all theories of symbolism, to a Romantic distortion, to a tendency to think poetically and writerly, to regard language as second nature, a possession, an ability to sell and so on.

Literally speaking, “allegory” means “other speech,” a speech which is not only different from everyday speech, and thus other, but also a speech which speaks and affects us, and which we *experience*, in different ways than everyday speech. Amongst the Alz people, especially in its linguistic aspect, but also in its meta-linguistic aspect, one finds a lack of everyday speech and an abundance of other speech in its place. If one speaks its linguistic form (which may lead one to be labeled “aphasic”), but cannot speak its meta-linguistic form, one is said to be “demented.” Indeed a great deal of talk in its meta-linguistic form is devoted to the difference between those of their own kind who speak its meta form and those who do not. It was very difficult for me at first, and it remains difficult still, to think of the relative status of either group as not being based solely upon a language deficit.<sup>1</sup>

In his critique of instrumentality Benjamin borrows from psychologist Kurt Goldstein. On the subject of aphasia, one of the major symptoms and one of the great

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anti-Platonist critical need *via* post-symbolist dialogic poetry .

<sup>1</sup> In a certain sense what we see here could also be described in terms of the two forms of Stoic *logos*, i.e. interior *logos*, or thought, and exterior *logos*, or speech. In everyday life we may feel we know these two distinct realms, but in *dreama* the case may be altogether different. Could it be that the linguistic form of Alz speech is akin to interior *logos*, but in which one speaks and acts (but not *acts*) one’s thoughts; this being a transgressive space against the speech, waking reality and taboo of the meta- or exterior *logos*?

Beyond this, it is also possible that these particular Alz people have *not* lost their ability to think, remember short term, figure, and so on (thus the term de-mentia), but have rather lost their ability to speak *via* exterior *logos* about it. Is this, then, at least in one sense, what is meant by the subaltern not being able to speak, in that both history and speech of the subaltern are thought to depend upon a notion of language akin to an exterior, wakenly real, taboo-laden *logos*, instead of an interior, *dreamatic*, and transgressive *logos* which would threaten not only Eurocentric histories and colonial hegemony, but the notions of linguistic and cultural integrity on which they see themselves resting?

landmarks in determining dementia, Goldstein, describing his experience with those afflicted with aphasia, writes that in such cases:

One could find no better example to show how wrong it is to define language as an instrument. What we have seen is the emergence of language in these cases in which it functions solely as an instrument. Even with normal persons it is found that language is being used just as an instrument... But this instrumental function is due to the fact that in reality language represents something altogether different just as it formerly did for the ill persons before their illness... As soon as the individual makes use of language to create a living relationship between himself and people like himself language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but rather a manifestation, a revelation, of our most inner essence and of the psychic bonds which bond us to ourselves and our own kind. It is this insight which stands, explicitly or implicitly at the beginning of the sociology of language. [my brackets]<sup>1</sup>

Note what Goldstein is saying here. In cases of aphasia language becomes an instrument because it comes to be regarded *not linguistically*, as language, but *meta-linguistically* as language. In certain cases, in certain forms of regard, language inevitably comes to be regarded in this way. But when we are not *regarding* language, which is most always, but rather just *speaking* it, it is not an instrument any more than dancing is *when dancing*. In regarding we have a thing, in speaking and dancing we experience. In regarding we have a meaning, in speaking and dancing we create. In regarding we have a relationship, in speaking and dancing there is “a revelation... of psychic bonds which bond us to ourselves and our own kind.” But what kind of regard is “linguistic” as opposed to “meta-linguistic?” Is it not, as Goldstein seems to say, the regard itself which makes the linguistic the meta-linguistic? No, it is not the regard alone but the *symbolic* regard which does this.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter *Probleme der Sprachziologie*

On the issue of instrumentality, it seems only sensible that those who speak its meta-linguistic aspect can *think instru-mentally*. Meta-linguistics, as seen here, is fundamentally an instrumental approach in that it describes and judges the content and form of the ability to use language. It is never denied by those who can speak the meta-linguistic aspect of Alzpech that those who cannot do not “mentate.” It is never a question of thinking or not thinking, but rather of whether or not they can think in an instrumental and practical fashion. This being the case, the label of “*deinstrumentia*” would be more descriptive here.

Having said this, however, instrumental linguistic ability (determined meta-linguistically) is only part of what is tested in the determination of dementia. A whole other, and equally important, side concerns itself with the way these people *behave* instrumentally, which abilities they possess to do everyday tasks. It is here that we begin an attempt to understand both how pervasive, inaccurate and short sighted instrumental (meta-linguistic) thinking is and, more importantly, how this thing/system called “language” seems to ever be linked to a determination of “*deinstrumentia*” and to mentation itself.

On the subject of mentation and behavior in *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* Benjamin considers J.B. Watson’s behaviorist theory of language. In resting on the notion of thought as silent inner speech (or “inner dialogue”), says Benjamin, Watson’s behaviorist position fails to account for the crucial phonetic elements of speech. If it

were to have done so, it would have had to consider the minute particulars of human interaction themselves as particular forms (and situation specific instances) of behavior.

A non-behaviorist approach which *does* labor such minute particulars, says Benjamin, is found in the work of Richard Paget. In laboring these particulars, Paget comes to hold language as "a gesticulation of the instruments of speech." "The *gestus* is primary here," writes Benjamin, "and not the sound alone." "Also," he writes, "the former is not altered with reinforcements of the latter. According to Paget the phonetic element is founded upon "the mimic-gestic."” This idea of Paget, says Benjamin, has affinities with the work of Jesuit father Marcel Jousse who writes: “The characteristic sound [found in speech] is not necessarily onomatopoeic in form as has been all too often maintained. The role of sound is, rather, first to perfect the meaning of a certain mimical gesture. But it is merely a side-effect, [an] acoustic support of an optical gestural speech [i.e. hand or face gestures, etc.], which is comprehensible within itself.” Then, turning this into an issue of proto-history, says Benjamin, Jousse writes: “Gradually each characteristic gesture received its own corresponding sound. And if such gesticulation, conveyed through the mouth and throat, was less expressive, then it was also less strenuous and demanded less energy as the gesture of the body or even the hand itself. In this way it eventually achieved predominance.”<sup>1</sup>

This idea of Jousse, says Benjamin, is connected to and is expanded upon by the research of Karl Bühler which supposedly shows an ontogenetic correlation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Note here what is not an *ur*-historical approach, *à la* Benjamin, but rather a natural historical approach.

phylogenetic or natural historical process described by Jousse in which gestures develop into corresponding sounds or words, e.g. a gesture towards desired food becoming "yum yum." The key to this view of language, says Benjamin, is in seeing that "articulation, as *gestus* of the speech apparatus, connects to the larger realm of bodily expression. Its phonetic element is the carrier of a communication whose original foundation was an expressive gesture."

"With the contributions of Paget and Jousse," writes Benjamin, "the antiquated theory of onomanopoesis, which may be described as mimetic in a narrow sense, confronts one which is mimetic in a much broader sense" (a confrontation which Benjamin supports). Then, quoting Paget again, Benjamin writes, displaying his own thought as well: "Wherein then consists the true nature of spoken language? [It] is only a form of fundamental animal instinct; of the instinct of mimetic movements of expression by means of the body."

To illustrate this particular point, which seems very important to him, Benjamin gives us a quote of Mallarmé which, he says, no doubt lays at the foundation of Valéry's "Dance and the Soul," a modern Socratic dialogue in which the characters contemplate a dancer *in performance*:

"The lady dancer," says Mallarmé, "is not a woman, but rather a metaphor which can bring an aspect to expression out of the elementary forms of our being: sword, cup, flower, or other things."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

"In such a notion, which beholds the roots of linguistic and dance-like expression in one and the same mimetic ability," writes Benjamin, with an ever critical eye on Romanticism, "the threshold of a physiognomy of language is crossed which, as much in its significance as its scientific dignity, goes far beyond the primitive attempts of the onomatopoeicians."

Along with his enthusiasm with this view of language, however, Benjamin expresses a serious point of reservation. A problem arises for him in what he sees as a tendency inherent within this physiognomic view of language to (again) think instrumentally, or metalinguistically in an instrumental fashion, regarding its expressive and mimetic nature. It is crucially important, he thinks, that we somehow maintain this mimetic, expressive view of language while denying instrumental thinking a place within it. We must consider language metalinguistically not as spoken words, signs or symbols but metalinguistically as we consider dancing. If one talks about dancing, tries to communicate dancing through speech, one inevitably fails unless one realizes that the only real meta-language of dance is a meta-language which construes "language" as dancing and not as "a (or the) dance."

In Valéry's "Dance and the Soul"<sup>1</sup> we see a perfect expression of what Benjamin says about Mallarmé's lady dancer taking us "far beyond the primitive attempts of the onomatopoeicians," combined with the sentiments of Goldstein on the power of the regard. In this work we find a dialogue between Socrates, Phaedrus (the lover of the

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<sup>1</sup> Valéry, Paul *Dialogues*, pp.27-62.

sensuous and, one could say, the fetishist) and the main antagonist named Eryximachus (a physician with in-depth knowledge of the body and its instrumental nature, and a fetishist of a different sort.)

Here the woman who dances is “life,” (allegorically) and though she may, as she dances, like Mallarmé's lady dancer, become a flower, a cup, a snowflake or whatever, she likewise continually transforms into herself. Life itself is mimesis.

As the dialogue progresses on the subject of this woman as she dances, on the subject of (her and/or life's) movement (*kinesis*) which itself becomes indiscernible from (her and/or life's) being (*on*), Valéry, on one very important level, lyrically expresses the struggle between his own non-representational poetics and theory of language and that of Mallarmé. Contra Mallarmé's Cartesianism, the soul of man, we learn, like all ideas, is *born of language*, which is itself due, echoing Goldstein, to "physically adequate means of action." This physical action (of the dance and their dialogue at once), this *Eros*, is adequate to dialectically create an idea of the soul which is not representationally similar, not historical, not fetishistic, and does not involve knowledge, yet is still physiognomic and mimetic. This take on language, this impression, is not that of the dancer, of the native, but of meta-dancing, beyond symbolic inscription.

***Theresa, Mi Amor (A Fieldnote)***

The soul and life, the first creating and the second created, like a small angel or flame dances between you the reader and I the writer in the here and now, as it has in the

past and will in the future. As I sit in the adult daycare center where I am spending great deal of time these days I am talking with Theresa, a forty two year old dispossessed and institutionalized mother of two who developed aphasia and lost her children to the state after an automobile crash some five years before. She likes to talk but cannot ask questions so I always do. What does she think of this or that? "Oh, its a big one I guess," she says. One of the few answers she comes out with time and time again. We smile a lot. When she thinks something is stupid or she doesn't like it its either "yucky" or she says "It's all jibbersh and numbers." I don't give up. "That's a cat" or "that one's a kitty" she says, and we get on usually, never imagining animals. Most of our conversations resemble extended greetings and weather conversations in that they are mainly "getting on," i.e. "physically adequate means of action." Together in this medical setting of brain trauma and impairment of the speech apparatus, memories of profound loss, and shock, she is to my thought what Goldstein is to Benjamin's. Valéry's dancer, aphasic and demented, cries out (from a tangled mass of metal, shattered glass, awakened in a strange room from a cold, morbid sleep):

Refuge, refuge, O my refuge, O whirlwind! I was in thee, O movement—outside of all things...

Like the refuge and the whirlwind of a flame we are possessed by the notion of language as it flitters before us. Our words batter this refuge about as we speak but it remains, like history itself, between us. But then, with a "that's a big kitty!," a sputter, and our laughter as I nod, I notice that it is no longer burning, and later that day when I feel an urge in some particular situation to respond to someone with "that's a big cat!" I

realize a truth. It is in these moments that I understand how language is physiognomic and mimetic.