

## Chapter Ten

### Elective Affinities

#### *Conclusion Before the Fact*

So what then is “the cause of Alzheimer’s disease?” So far we have seen this question addressed in three senses. The first two senses are the two major strategies of the (I)nc. and the third, which I have yet scarcely dealt with, is that which the first two seek to undo. These senses are:

- (1) “The cause” or necessity of defending the roles and paradigms of the mental or the cognitive *and* of defending the semiotic and symbolic linguistic against its more mimetic and allegorical aspects (all of which I would associate with Collingwood’s first, historical, cause),
- (2) “The cause” or practical necessity of keeping a couple, family, people or any group together which “supports” those with the disease and especially those who are responsible for them (or possessed by them, as Mom would have it), (which I would associate with Collingwood’s first, historical, and second, practical, causes), and
- (3) The “cause” meaning the actual factors and occurrences which lead us *to applied knowledge of* the brain/body and toward a cure (or “a pill,” as Gabriel came to see it), (which I would associate with Collingwood’s third, theoretical, applied cause).

Being a “cultural critique” this work has been set to describe a role which ethnology can play in the cure of Alzheimer’s disease, a role in which the forces of the (I)nc. are named as “causal factors” not of the actual pathological conditions of the body/brain but of our inability to approach these conditions in a clear, materialist fashion free of the metaphysics of “relations” or “bonds” and their technological manufacture and management.

These greatest conceptual barriers to a cure of this disease, and possibly many other diseases, whether in the form of “a relationship,” kinship (fictive and “real”), an

ethnicity or a nationality, history, economic or communicative exchange, totemism, animism, and even (if not especially) fetishism, must be the foremost object (and subject) of critique. You see, the story goes, we have two things, or peoples, or places, or times, and so on, and each is in relation to another in space, in time, in nature, in the mind. Like lines connecting geometric or temporal coordinates, parts of a room, like a landscape connected by planes, their convolutions and borders, whether in the (noumenal) world or in the form of phenomena, there is a sense of connection, a bond, a relationship which is there and which can always be drawn, if *need* be.

Let us take two people, you and I. Let us examine our relationship to one another. Where do we start? Shall we start with the first sense of the cause above? If so, then you are you and I am me. I have my thoughts and you have yours. We each have our own histories, our own stories, which distinguish us from others. The best first step, for now, this being a written text, would be for me to tell you stories about myself. These stories would, hopefully, make it possible to better “determine” (which means “cause” in its weakest sense) what the relation between us may be. Is there any other way to proceed here? You probably don’t know where I am now, or what I’m doing, what I usually do at this hour, if I am healthy, or even dead. What did I have for breakfast, compared to what you did? Did I have breakfast? You probably don’t care, but maybe I can bring you to. We do share a language, however, and this brings us closer than ever, it is supposed. I write, and read, and write, and you read, and maybe write, and read, and I try to relate what I mean and you do or do not relate to what I write and so the story goes. So the *story* goes.

But who tells the story? Whose story is it? In drawing the “relation” between us don’t you want to make my story and your story “our story”? What’s the subject of this story, our story? It’s the relation between us, right? What is this relation other than a description, and what is a description other than a (kind of) story (or relation)? So the subject of the story or the description of the relation between us is itself this story or description, it seems, and so to infinite regress. In essence all relations are stories (descriptions) about stories (descriptions) and they remain so whether actively or passively construed. I’m writing this line now and you’re reading it, which is no different from the fact (the story/description) that for you the text is on paper and for me it’s on a screen. Or, it was on the screen, when I wrote it; now maybe it isn’t, while you (or I) read it.

“But the relation is really there,” one might be tempted to say, “and *that’s* what the description describes, the story tells, or the relation relates.” What does it mean, like the words on this page now being written and being read, to be there, but in two separate places at one time? “They are not,” you may say—oh but they are. The book you are now reading is the book that I am now writing, but “the relation between” us, here and now, is meant *to fix* that. By means of this book the relationship can in some way be fixed between us. It, like all signs and symbols, is a fixative vehicle. Whether you use the book for love magic, a curse, as a doorstop, or whatever, it is your doing, but not *all* your doing.

The most important thing is to realize that this book is a fetish, used to reveal relations which have heretofore remained hidden and possibly acting for or against one; that is to say, it serves the purposes of knowledge and determination [(the) cause]. But it can be more than this; it all depends on how you tell our story—how *you* tell our story. If you know what I'm up to, then go ahead and fix it, make it a vehicle, say "he wrote" or "he thinks" this or that, place our relationship, determine it historically as in Collingwood's first notion of cause. But keep in mind that when you do this you do history. Here and now I am me and you are you but, when you do this, (I)nc. am me and you are (I)nc. You can secrete the "I" in writing about me, critiquing me, but you cannot secrete the (I)nc.; for an historical or any exegetical relation such as this makes the subjective objective, makes the secreted "I" "(I)nc.," makes us complicit. This (I)nc. is your genius; this (I)nc. is your critical self. To try to be critical outside of it, as did Doctor Frankenstein, is not only ungodly, in that one rejects the very notion of the Symbol itself, but also treason in that one rejects the essence of kinship, of a language/cultural group, of a nation, of sanitation/ health and, especially, of knowledge; that is, one rejects the essence of the state, the death-essence-in-life.

This last move is that which Gabriel attempted in his solution. He did so, however, as we know, in a way which ended in his (further) incorporation. Going back to what he writes about Bataille's essay "Human Face" and the solution which he seems to have sketched from it, we see a situation in which one, in encountering an old photo, sees oneself and one's non-self simultaneously. As in exegesis, the dialectics of reading and criticism, one secretes oneself, one's "I" in the (I)nc.. To overcome this one can, as

I believe Gabriel did, enter into an act of critique, an act (and language) which rejects the very notion of the Symbol itself and attempts to reject the essence of the state, the death-essence-in-life. This *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*, this action against one state and for another one, *à la King Lear*, is, as discussed earlier, akin to the German Tragic Drama, or *Trauerspiel*. Within this *Trauerspiel* Gabriel pendels between mourning and ostentation, two sides of the same coin, while he sets about, like the exegete, to deal with the loss of the “I” which his or her writing entails. To regain one’s “I” from the state of the (I)nc., into which one has fallen in one’s complicity with the symbolic and semiotic (of which the biographical and social historical are so closely allied), one reacts with laughter and crying, but both are of a sort which seem more dreamlike than wakingly real. In a combination of ostentation and mourning one enacts (but does not “act”) a drama, a dream, a *dreama*.

Maybe it is not possible to say “I” think, or refer to “my thoughts” without saying or referring to (I)nc. simply because *outside of dialogue* the history of any group, its well-being and its progress, always works to fix relations between its “members” and between its members and the rest of the cosmos in such a way that, even though these relations only refer to relations themselves, they nevertheless appear just as *real* as those things and persons between which they subsist. Gabriel falls prey to exactly this; instead of allegorizing he historicizes. In this way he initiates what needed to be a gay science but was not such. In his solution those with the “disease” and those who care for them, including physicians, were not brought together (as they should have been) but were moved further apart. It is only in their coming together that the physicians among them

could have gained insight into a cure. It is in this breach, this failure, that Gabriel comes not to act on behalf of “his people” but rather simply to speak for them, more as a Pietist advocate and less as an Alz physician. The question for Gabriel is how to become an Alz physician (once again), how to, as Nietzsche says, become what one is.

“But for whom do we really speak,” I asked earlier, “for a people, a language? Or do we speak for ourselves as children?” The question still stands, but here in a different context. Was not the life of Socrates, the corrupter of youth, his spirit, the dialogue, addressing this question? Does his death, in contrast to our lives, not tell us that we are all sophists, in one way or another, for the state. “What’s your name?” “What do you do?” “I’m...” “I work in, for, at, on...” Is this not one important way in which “relationships” begin, in which relations “are determined?” Could we not ask “What is your relationship to the state?” and get stories like “(I)nc. am...” “(I)nc. work in, for, at, on...” “(I)nc. am a mother,” “(I)nc. am unemployed.” But, as an “I,” one cannot be unemployed because when he or she is so, the “( )nc.” becomes employed by the state. We call this “stigma.” The more ostentatiously one shouts or otherwise gestures “I” the more one seems to rather express “(I)nc.” Is this not the spirit of the Enlightenment itself, the response to the king, a correction of his greatest truth ‘No, your majesty, *les Etats c’est moi?*

In Alzheimer’s disease one sees “role changes;” just think of Mom’s extreme case—from beloved wife to suspicious housekeeper, or her husband—from a man who falls asleep with his wife to one who wakes up with a stranger, his wife having

disappeared. All the caregivers I knew focused on a sort of combative, childlike change in those they cared for. But is the childishness attributed to these people not a rebellion against this “( )nc.?” Do they and their caregivers not “speak for them(selves) as children” in this respect? Are they not all, like Socrates, treasonous in their hearts and minds (which we attribute to them)? O colonialism, corrupter of youth! Somehow, in speaking for ourselves as children, while pretending (as children are fond of pretending) to speak for another, we have come to make incorporate values, the very *relations* of the family, business, police, or military unit our only mode of self knowledge. They must stay a unit by resisting corruption and corruption is resisted by letting members of the family who know all, the children, tell all, but to do so in a way which pretends to speak for those outside of the family (be they minorities, the police, criminals, the army or whomever). The voice of the child is the voice of the state. In their games, rhymes and riddles one finds a whole cosmology thereof - rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.

Every state has its children. Every state needs its children. Although the child is most often defined in terms of age (as well as mental and moral capacity) this secretion of the “I,” this game of pretend, is by no means exclusive to those of a young age; rather, it is present in every story, every description of the Other. With this we may be able to understand Kant’s definition of Enlightenment from another perspective. If Enlightenment is, as Kant maintains, “the emergence of one from a self-imposed state of minority (immaturity),” then maybe it is the emergence of one from a self-imposed state of speaking for oneself as a child into a state of secreting this way of speaking. Put

differently, could Enlightenment not be the move from speaking in terms of “I” to speaking in terms of “(I)nc.?” The key here is in understanding the notion of this minority/immaturity as being “self-imposed.” The idea would be that first one said something other than “I” and then one came to say “I” only later to emerge into the (I)nc. What did one say in the beginning? One said “we,” so the story goes, but said it in the way of the animist, using “the living word.” Then came the fall, and then the “I” (“he,” “she,” and the non-animist “we”) and *then* the (I)nc. of the state. Once again, when we speak for others we really speak for ourselves as children. But this is a secret which can be secreted, but never divulged, in act or in word. To do so would be to deny the responsibility with which one, as an adult and citizen, has been vested. To do so would be a crime.

Gabriel is such a criminal, as we have seen, but a failed one. His wish (following his transformation) to return to Homo Sapienity is a wish to return to the “I” (which the (I)nc. has denied him). It was *as if* the (I)nc., in denying him the “I,” had led him in a circle back to the animist “we,” back to animality. Yet we know this scene for what it is, namely, an illusion created by the state’s use of, or complicity with, Alz primitivism. Gabriel cannot, in fact, be an animal, an ‘indecent monkey,’ for there is no going back, no return from the (progressive) fall. It is not only that the symbolic and the semiotic of Alz primitivism has led him to see himself as a symbolic and semiotic instrumental and chemical failure, as an indecent monkey languishing in some *triste tropique* but, even more importantly, that this primitivism has combined the two making him into a relation(ship) failure in general.

Gabriel should be excused, however; he should be respected for having made his attempt. He was certainly not the first and is by no means the last to seek a way out in such a way. He, like so many I came to know at the daycare center, and like so many whose stories I came to know in the support groups, was up against something much greater than he suspected, something much greater than language, or symbols, or signs, much greater than, or equal to, the magic of the state, the very essence of the state, the essence-of-death-in-life. There was gravity, the pull of the earth, forces of friction and stress; there was age which he came to know all too well; but all of physics seemed to pale next to the greater metaphysics of relations, his relations, relations of self to Other, subject to object, in space and time, in the nations, the professions and families to which, but not in which, he belonged. Other spaces, other times, other people, other lands, other “me’s,” other “you’s,” other ayes. Positivity, a yes, ah yes, e-yes, “I, I, forgot you *said* it.” You see, no matter how he tried to deal with these relations, as relations, as entities to be changed and used toward his own progress and that of mankind, he never emerged from that daycare center, never re-emerged back into the time before, in Cuba, into his Cuban self. In his science, which was a form of magic, of sorcery, against the state, he engaged in a sort of surrealist activity involving love magic or love science, which led his people and himself to their further incorporation. Whatever he did with the photo, whatever he did, eyes, ayes and a yes, ah yes, rolling back, and whatever role his colonial history and strange Alz historiography served in achieving this, whatever role his exegetical complicity played, the mourning and ostentation took him far afield, into overstatement, into a transformation beyond a child, a fetus, and back into the simian. Did he

go too far (afield), his story ending in a village in Congo, the children circling around as he stares straight ahead, under the shade of a tree, maybe dead? ‘Hey, so’o, they shout, white man, monkey!’ (giggles). No, he did not go far enough.

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The essence of the state is water, flowing, swirling, moving, lapping, trickling, gurgling, babbling. Like the sound of water relations trickle lap babble. Listen to its surface, where it meets land, over and around which it flows, swirls, encircling in an eyedrop form as it moves. You can hear spirits speak “realtionrealtionrelationrealtionrelation, tellingstellingstellingstelligs, tricklelapbabble, tricklelapbabble, tricklelapbabble, tricklelapbabble.” And if the water is still, you can see yourself and, if clear enough, also see beneath its surface at least a bit. There’s a great deal of confusion and speculation regarding what’s down there, but we suppose there’s no air, and sound doesn’t travel as it does here above, there’s much less distraction, for one thing, and more density, for another. What we find there is a different form of terrestrial physics which defies the metaphysics of relation. As in the bush, the forest, the cave and other unknown areas, stories and relations become more strange, more ungraspable, more marvelous and terrifying. These stories and relations are not like others, they are not stories of stories, relations of relations, but of something less undefined yet definite. The metaphysics of these spaces and times is not relational, as social theory has come to know it; the medium through which they are known is quite different from that in which relations are known. Here, in these spaces and times, we lose the ability to define and chart; we come to lose our faith in the power to know, come

to see the absurdity and the injustice of such knowing. We do not live in these times and spaces, we cross into them for a time and then re-emerge back into the world of relations, into the world in which the magic and science of signs and symbols, the essence-of-death-in-life, fills the air we breath, and make us feel we need it to survive; we re-emerge into a world where bodies are *a bit more* separate, the ground is a bit more firm and substantial, and things seem a bit more independent, not buried, not so surrounded, and more free to move about. This is the world we were made for, but who or what made us for it? More importantly, who or what made these two worlds distinct: Nature, evolution, God? All three share the same conviction of separating *different aspects of* these worlds, usually into one which is spiritual and another which is material, but none of the three care to separate these two worlds themselves, for both are a part of creation, actively or passively. To do so would be to acknowledge an alternative to that metaphysics which has served and still serves the purposes of knowledge so well, i.e. to the metaphysics of relations in the world, in the mind and in language, *there* to be discovered, a mechanist metaphysics which is also called materialist.

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The mechanist metaphysics of these mysterious, in-between, spiritual entities (that which Gabriel and I have referred to as Alz primitivism or Alz mechanism in our discussion of Stahl, Hoffman and Newton) depicts them in a seemingly Stoic conception, as some kind of ether or pneuma and, in the case of symbolism or semiotics, as a *Platonized* pneuma. At the end of this supposedly materialist theory and practice what we have is nothing material at all. We cannot show or demonstrate the materiality of

relations or bonds, though they are the great working notions of materialism (and “primitivist mechanism,” according to Gabriel). So we resort to history and exchange, to the archaic, the embedded, or to practices of transformation involving fetishism (all of which Gabriel in *some way* tried to use to transform himself).

In response to this “chemistrism” of relations and bonds (of which I will soon give details), and worried about this metaphysical nature, it has been the tendency of social theory and science to substitute one metaphysically materialist notion of relations and bonds for another. Whether in the forms of a statue, a hearth, a mask, a tree, a nose and so on or in the form of written words on a page (all forms of history or exchange primitivistically construed) the symbol and the sign have come to play this substitutional role. Ethnology’s cultural materialism of 1950’s and 1960’s, for example, a materialism based upon energy and chemical bonds *as* social power and social relations, was thought to be sublata by Levi-Straussian and symbolic ethnology. These two movements countered the chemical and energetic bonds and relations of cultural materialism with symbolic, semiotic, and practice oriented bonds and relations. Although their emphases varied greatly in terms of the source and nature of social relations and culture, they were able to engage in a dialectical struggle which both canceled and preserved the thesis/antithesis of ethno-theory to date. While doing away with structural functionalist, evolutionary and other theories previous to and included in cultural materialism, the most important aspects of cultural materialism, namely, the chemistrism of bonds and relations themselves, were preserved. This chemistrism, and electro-chemistrism, this Alz primitivism (miming the *colonial image* of Alz “spirit belief” i.e. the biochemical), this

mechanism of invisible guiding principles of relationality, is and has been a metaphysics shared by the most diverse theories and forms of analysis in ethnology and social science in general. Today the legacy of cultural materialism is found in this very metaphysics, at the very core of that which it shared with symbolism and semiotic anthropology, and through which it could so well enter into a productive dialogue with. Ethnology has yet to come to terms with this legacy, with the product of this dialogue, as it is unable to envision an alternative metaphysics to proceed beyond it, to go forward with valuable lessons it has taught. If ethnology is ever going to come to terms with its complicity with colonialism, it may do well for it to start here.

Ironically, the true rejection of cultural materialism entails just the opposite approach to that of semiotics and symbolism. It is the theoretical focus on energy and chemical bonds as the basis on which culture is built that needs to be appropriated and rethought, translated, deconstructed and maintained. This is to be done through a sublation of the metaphysics or chemical nature of relations and bonds by the alternative, and translatable, metaphysics or physical nature of mass and gravity as appropriate concepts of social and cultural analysis. If one cannot imagine speaking of a wedding, a fetish, a dance, kinship, or political organization in terms of mass and gravity, one must also ask oneself why speaking of these in *terms of chemistry* seems more appropriate and “natural.” In addition, one must also ask oneself why the latter conception seems to better fit the world of spirit, why it is that the ethereal nature of bonds and relations, comprising our most modern science, seem to be almost culturally universal, while our

alternative view of mass and gravitation, comprising a great deal of modern science as well, *seems to* have no presence at all.

### *Chemistrism*

It was Nietzsche who said that reality is a mobile army of metaphors, so too for the supposed machines of reality we call the brain and nervous system. In looking at a popular introductory textbook on brain anatomy used in the medical profession we read on page one:

The human brain is the most complex mass of protoplasm on earth—perhaps even in our galaxy. A product of heredity and environment, operative for many tens of millions of years, this three-pound collection of cells is still of virtually unknown potential; yet what a history of achievement and what incredible promise for the future! Certainly no other group of cells send travelers to the moon and soon beyond, creates the Declaration of Human Rights, reengineers genes, produces a Mozart sonata or a Turner landscape.

The brain, we are told is “complex,” though we do not know to what exactly this term refers—to the billions of cells, their connections, to areas, to chemistry, to its utilization of energy, to its role in singing, dancing, building a house of cards, sleeping? I suppose all of the above but, as if, they were all somehow qualitatively similar. But how can it have a “role,” how can it “utilize” as if it were an organism itself and not simply an organ?

The brain, we are told, is “a product” of heredity and environment, something “made” by relational forces of a vague and disputed nature even to biology. These relational forces, or processes, “made” it and, once again, the organism to which it belongs seems to be out of the picture.

The brain, we are told, “has potential” and “promise” as if it could actually “do” something *by itself* which would lead to great progress. This “group of cells” “sends, creates, reengineers genes, produces sonatas and landscape paintings” all by itself, it is supposed. Here we see not only metaphor but, even more, metonym in mobilization. Could we not also say then that the long arm of the law, a mass of cells weighing some 15 to 20 pounds, protects society, enforces the law, creates deterrents to crime, ensures public safety, or that a helping hand, a somewhat lighter mass of cells, provides for the sick and needy, supports social welfare and promotes altruism? Further on we learn:

The brain and its expressions are unique for every individual who has ever lived. Almost every organ of the body has the potential for being transplanted into another person. With the acceptance of each organ, the “persona” of the individual remains the same—except in the case of the brain. Transplant the brain, transplant the person, for the brain is the person. However the brain does not carry out its functions alone; it is part of a total unit, the human body. The body is the support system for the brain and the brain for the body.

The notion here that the “persona” of the individual remains the same after organ transplantation has been shown to be false by various studies, but this is not a fact worth disputing here. More important is the idea that the brain “is” the person. Admitting that the brain is part of a total unit, it nevertheless holds to the notion that the rest of the organism is “the support system for the brain” and that the brain, needing the body to keep doing its activity, to achieve its potential, also acts as a support system for it.

What we see above is the brain as fetish. Like a statue, a stick in the ground or, better, like an amulet around ones neck or atop one’s head (the brain is atop one’s neck),

the brain is a thing which has the power to act on the world and other persons as long as the support system (of material or energetic expenditure) on which it depends continues to “support” it.<sup>1</sup> If this is done, like all fetishes, it is most likely, one always hopes, that it will also continue to support that (body or person) which supports it in the proper way. The brain, like the phallus, is a fetish which partakes in both aspects of “fetishism,” being both a body part and, I intend to stress, a man-made thing.

These two aspects, of being a body part (organ) and a man-made thing are, in essence one and the same in that both are based upon, understood through, a *relational* scheme. The brain, as organ, is almost solely known through the activity of (most often ill) persons or through post mortem examination of relations between it’s parts and the historical actions of persons. But these parts between which these relations are drawn became and are parts only, again, through their relations to one another. Damage in this part, means something in that part, activity in this part means something in that part; and the parts, being recognized as parts, change and move in relation to one another and their actions. The relations are there, it is said again, we only need to discover them.

Similarly, the brain, as fetish, is known by the deeds it does, the power it wields, the things it creates in the world. Most importantly, the fetish is known by the relations (often secreted and mysterious) between itself and that person or body which offers it its

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<sup>1</sup> Note once again the notion of “support” which I insist be read as “mask.”

support, and which it, in turn sustains, and between itself, its person/body and those things and persons in the world which it affects. With any fetish, as with any evidence of genius, acquisition of fame or fortune, or any unusually strong effect on the world and/or others, it is said again, that the relations are there, we only need to discover them.

Alzheimer's disease is defined in diagnosis as a disease of the brain, a disease of the three pound mass of cells found inside the cranium, of an organ, of a body part. But it is even more defined as a disease of fetishistic power, as a loss of the faculties and abilities of this object to affect the world and others, a loss of not only relations and the parts which they define but also of certain powers of relation which include the power to define or know those relations (and *relationships*) and/or relational abilities which one has lost. A great deal of this book has concerned the more direct, social aspects of loss of fetish power of the person (brain) and the ways in which the notion of this disease as a loss of such relations, powers of relation, and knowledge thereof was inadequate and working against the well-being of those with this disease and the power of medical science to heal them. Here we move to a different concern with the loss of fetish power of the brain (person) in looking at the ways in which medical science has chosen to approach its object of study in terms of relation, i.e. in terms of understanding the bio-chemistry of relations in the brain and the parts of the brain which these relations do and do not sustain.

Michel Foucault, in his early work *Birth of the Clinic*, correctly points out that in clinical medicine the regard toward pathological phenomena (since the early 19th

century) is essentially the regard taken towards chemical phenomena. What we see there is a study of *forms of relation* and a classification of these different forms of relations or bonds. Two main forms of relation are those of relation in space (geography) and relation in time (history). It is these two in combination, according to Foucault, which defines modern clinical practice. An essential part of diagnosis is putting these two forms of relation together in order to reveal the more particular forms of temporal/geographic relation which define different diseases. As internal relations break down they form (and are revealed in) external symptomatic relations. When it comes to diagnosis, says Foucault, “ideological decomposition can be only the repetition in the doctor’s consciousness of the decomposition raging in the patients body.” It is here that Foucault points to the strange nature of relations themselves, yet he frames the problem (the “subject”) not in terms of relation/story, per se, but rather in terms of perception or the gaze (*regard*). At the core of Foucault’s thought on this subject lies a certain phenomenology of perception moving in a strange mixture with the thought of Georges Bataille on the subject(s) of language, death and eroticism. In his use of perception (*regard*) is displayed a certain Platonism, a certain need to think in terms which resist materialism and stress a certain historical phenomenology which works as an implicit critique of historical materialism. His history which is not history is a story, or an effect of a storyteller/historian, which seeks not to convey the essence-of-life-in-death, nor the essence-of-death-in life but rather the “*perception-of -death-in-life.*” Foucault’s history effect, like the empirical effects of medical anthropology when it adopts a critical attitude, leads directly to a phenomenology which is as much pessimistic as it is idealistic and paranoiac. In his analysis, in which perception overcomes the structure of symbol

and sign, Foucault enacts a distortion of the romantic ideal in which language is not historicized in terms of eroticism *à la* Bataille, but rather is historicized in terms of eroticism *à la* the Romantic obsession with history, archaeology, nature and critique of the Enlightenment.

Foucault is, again, quite right in suggesting that geographic and historical knowledge of relations in clinical medicine always seems to end up being reduced (or, as he would say, displaced or shifted) to the chemical knowledge of relations. The problem, though Foucault does not see it, is in the nature of chemistry itself, in that, within it, one never knows whether one is dealing with a metaphor or the real thing. “A chemical” itself is merely a form of substance. The word is an adjective made into a noun, a metonym of sorts. A chemical is a set of relational properties, which is to say, something to which certain potentials are designated. These relational properties define its *tonos*, or that which keeps it together as a whole, and they also define that which can be used to eliminate this *tonos* and change its nature, to transform it. Each cell in the body is composed of bonded chemicals, albeit very complex chemicals, with large numbers of relational properties to each, and to which a great many potentials are designated as well. Within the brain the historical and geographic knowledge of relations between these cells has become more and more a knowledge of chemical relations in that *in vivo* studies of historical and geographic relations at this level have been quite limited. The greatest part of research has concerned the effects of different drugs as evaluated according to their effects on certain behaviors and these behaviors have been classified along with the drugs which produce them. Most drugs (themselves chemicals) which affect behavior and are

so classified are understood to work by affecting certain relational properties and designated potentials to transform chemical properties of cells. To be more specific, most of these drugs work to *alter relations between cells*. Most of these drugs either increase or decrease *the amount of* this or that chemical making up different parts of the cell but rarely are they seen to actually change the make-up of the cell qualitatively. Thus, in altering “the relation *between cells*” these drugs alter the designated potentials and relational properties *of cells* (i.e. the chemicals of cells). All that changes then, when drugs work, are those mysterious entities called relations. But who or what does (or does not do) the relating? The cells do not relate, or they relate differently, so the *story* goes. Although we may not be able to describe them geographically and/or historically those relations are out there, we say, and we know they are chemical (or electrochemical). This is the dead end road of utility to which chemistrism, whether in the social or medical sciences, eventually leads but, thanks to the wealth provided by symbolic and semiotic analysis, this road is very, very long.

### ***Chemistrism and Transcendentalism***

“Chemistrism is the key to colonialism as I have come to know it,” writes Gabriel in his *Journals*, but what sort of view of things, of the condition of his people, does this key unlock? Following his solution, Gabriel engages in a short series of historical meditations on what he refers to as “the history of the material notion of pneuma.” In these meditations he considers what historian of science David Knight has referred to as “the transcendental part of chemistry.” In his exposition Knight defines this transcendental part in saying that throughout the nineteenth century the thought

predominated that if atomic theory were assumed as true “then the laws of chemistry [would] follow deductively from it,” but, was the thought, “the laws [did] not entail an atomic or any other theory of matter.” The prevailing thought was, in other words, that atomic theory may explain the laws of chemistry, but matter was not necessarily constituted of or defined as being made up of atoms. Put yet another way, chemistry (the system of chemical relations) was the material world as we know it in its purest representation. These relations were not material, but ideal in a transcendental sense. They were appearances which, through empirical observation and practical rationality, come be refined into a purer conception through which they could be practically manipulated. The key figure in support of this conception was the greatest figure in nineteenth century chemistry Humphrey Davy. Of him Gabriel writes:

I often think back to Davy, for it was he who overcame mechanics by conceiving of mechanics as a science not of objects and forces but of forces arranging the matter of these objects which led to their differing properties of force. What he did, essentially, was reduce matter to the material relations which organized it by holding that forces like electricity arrange, and are therefore prior to, matter itself. In those who followed him, this way of thinking, shared by Newton, became a metaphysics in which materialism would never be the same.

It is here, in this last sentence, that I am most struck by Gabriel’s thoughts. Is not atomic physics today the heir to this metaphysics? Is it not the relations between the parts of the atom, those forces arranging matter, which are prior to and thus more fundamental than matter itself? The answer is yes, but then no, for Einsteinian physics differ a great deal from that on which chemistry is based. Although the transcendental part of chemistry, as Knight maintains, “has turned into atomic physics,” matter itself is only considered in this transcendental aspect by those who think chemically, that is, by still a great many.

“It is important to remember,” Gabriel reminds us, “that according to Newton gravity could not be inherent in matter, but was a force between objects.” He continues:

It was this observation which chemistrism saw as its theoretical basis, the idea being to somehow show that the *tonos* of the heavens described by Newton in terms of gravity and the Neoplatonic ether of Stoicism was the same as that which held chemicals together or, somehow, let them be separated from or bonded with others. Oddly, however, the field of chemistry saw itself as an “anti-theoretical,” descriptive science. Yet, within this attitude existed a theory stronger than all others, a metaphysics in which the “descriptive” and neo-platonic Stoicism went hand in hand.

Along with this Platonized Stoicism in which ether = the word (*logos*) = Divinity = reason of the world = soul of the world = law of nature = providence = destiny = order = creative fire, came, according to this last equation, a need to deal with the two problematic fluids of heat (“caloric”) and light, so important to Newton and still lingering in chemical discourse. It was the ability of electrical current from batteries, in the process of electrolysis, to separate elements of compounds which allowed Newton’s stoic ether to be understood in terms of electricity, light, magnetic attraction and repulsion, gravity and the affinity of chemicals. The idea derived from studies in electrolysis, chiefly by Davy, was that that electricity and chemical affinity were expressions of one and the same organizing principle. From this idea, and more importantly, came what was seen as a confirmative translation of Newtonian theory at the level of chemical relations. The idea that matter had its own *inherent* properties of attraction was thought to finally have given way to the ethereal, platonic reality of the relation and its powers of organization.

It is important to realize what is being said and assumed here in these ideas and changes which Gabriel describes. What we have in this century, among these thinkers, is the birth of a functional, utilitarian science and theory of matter in which *the chemical*, a noun designating matter as many of us know it, a *thing* derived from an adjective for “chemical *relation(s)*,” came to be seen as the very nature of matter itself. There was, according to this conception, no energy or power *in* objects, but only *between* them. Whatever the reality of material objects consisted in, all force and power which they

possessed was thought to be *between* their parts. Since relations and the parts related were inseparable, it was thought, why not consider them to be equally subsumed under the more easily quantified and utilitarian category of “relation”? The opposing side which, according to Gabriel, was losing (due to its lack of utility and quantitative results), thought that since relations and parts were interdependent, both should be subsumed under the category of “parts.” “In the opposition to this latter view, and in response to Davy’s refutation of it,” writes Gabriel, “the idea came about that Newtonian physics was not only able to illuminate chemical relations, but that chemical relations could in turn illuminate the relations with which Newtonian physics concerned itself. In short, the idea was that both sciences could in this way be unified .” He continues:

It was the principle of the conservation of energy which seemed to offer the possibility of unifying the sciences. By the turn of the century, in an effort to maintain the essential relationality of matter (i.e. chemistrism), Wilhelm Ostwald and others were arguing that matter was bounded force and not based on atoms or other minute material objects. Quoting David Knight, these chemistrists held that: “The chemical elements are simply regions in which the energy is at a minimum; usually to transform one to another requires the crossing of a high potential-energy barrier.” With some elements, like uranium, these barriers were thought to be so low as to allow for spontaneous disintegration, but with most it was not.

At the very heart of all of this was the elevation of the term “energy” to the most prominent position in the unification of the sciences. But this term, though defined in terms of physical relation, was also defined in *vitalistic* terms. Knight tells us that: “The words ‘energy’ and ‘power’ in the early nineteenth century carried anthropomorphic connotations; ‘energy’ was used of living, rather than inanimate things, and ‘power’ of cosmic forces like St. Paul’s ‘principalities and powers’, or of human potentiality, rather than in mechanics, as in ‘horse power.’”

It is here, we may suppose, that the mobile army of metaphors which support chemistrism is seen marching into the industrial age. Energy is today defined in physical terms as “the capacity of a body for doing work.” “Work” is a manifestation of energy

defined as movement against a force. “Force” is defined as that, when acting on a body which is free to move, produces an acceleration in the motion of the body, measured by rate of change of momentum of the body. But these define only the minor uses of these terms in social thought.

If, as Gabriel and others maintain, Davy and those who followed him had really set the scene for the triumph of chemistrism in nineteenth century materialism, it should come as no surprise that the vitalist philosophy they enacted was in essence an imitation of that of Newton and one which resembled that of Stahl, Hoffman, and the movement of nosology in many sciences which followed them. Davy was in fact, like Newton, a great admirer of the Cambridge Platonists More and Cudworth and his writings reflect a great influence of these two upon his ideas. This link between Newton and Davy *via* More and Cudworth, i.e. *via* a shared Neoplatonist Stoicism, is for Gabriel the key element in the history of chemistrist, humanist colonialism directed against his people. He writes:

How crucial this link [between Newton and Davy via the Cambridge Platonists] is to that metaphysics posing as physics, that sense of the physical that is actually metaphysical, which we are still today subject to. ‘Energy,’ ‘power,’ the supposed keys to the individual and social organism, the organizing principles of great divisions within the mobile colonial army of chemistrism, have come to work equally within the psychological as within the physiological, within the social as well as the celestial and terrestrial; the body electric is sung from pole to pole. This army has allowed us to shake the bonds of spirit(s) (animal or otherwise) in the individual and the social while at the same time preserving these bonds in the calculations of energy, power and expenditure, measured in terms of work (against a force), which we call economics. The key to this energetic economics is contained in the notion of conservation, i.e. the conservation of energy in which the total energy of an isolated system is constant. Energy and power require isolated systems as does its economics. What more are classes, peoples, nations or globes if not isolated systems of energy and power? Power, in its physical definition, is the rate of doing work, but it was never predominantly so. Power, like ‘force,’ transcends the physical through the chemical and, in doing so, secretes its physical nature, secretes the violence through which it

exists. When power and force become essentially relational, Leviathan rises, the war of all against all ceases, and one, in the form of “relationships” comes to face the greatest monster of isolated systems.

Gabriel is most concerned about this hegemonic presence in modern bio-medicine itself as he has come to know and practice it. He knows that it is this presence that he wishes to somehow struggle against in his solution, but he fails in his attempt to do so. One against an army is never a match, yet one mobile army of metaphors against another is another story. It is this latter fact which he did not consider. The only way to overcome secreted force and power is through other forms of secreted force and power themselves. Colonialism is a state of being subject to forces which one has, in dealing with those forces the way one has, brought a state of subjection or minority upon oneself. Enlightenment, or the emergence from this state of colonization (as much as one can within a dialectic), would require not only the translation, rewriting, and the changes in relations which this writing seeks to bring about but, more importantly, and necessarily, would require a move forward in which these new symbols and signs are abandoned, in which this army or metaphors is deserted, and in which its economy is bankrupted for the pursuit of an alternative. In the present text it is not Gabriel but rather his story, as allegory, which points the way out of the forest of symbols in which we, as colonial subjects, look for the semiotic garden of Eden.

### *Symbolic Anthropology*

“As people express their lives, so they are...,” so goes the title of the introduction (which is a sort of manifesto) to a reader in symbolic anthropology published in 1977. It begins thus:

The anthropological study of culture, of systems of symbols and meanings, is the science of the basic terms with which we view ourselves as people and members of society, and of how these basic terms are used by people to build for themselves a mode of life. Anthropology poses, and attempts to answer, questions like: “What is a human family?” or “Are we violent?” or “What is human nature?” And by so doing, anthropology implies the existence of ways of acting and being in the world which are alternatives to those habits and institutions which we have historically taken to be the most “natural”: our own.<sup>1</sup>

What are these “terms” of self viewing (*regard?*), we may ask. If people “build” with them, are they parts, are they material? What is this “mode of life” which is built with these terms (parts)? In a form strongly resembling Collingwood’s first sense of “cause” we are told:

People everywhere act on the basis of knowledge and belief—about the world, about themselves, about action itself. Beliefs form, among every people, a system.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean here, assuming that action can be explained in terms of knowledge and belief as is here assumed, that “Beliefs *form*” something (a system)? Are these *beliefs*, then, the “basic terms,” the objects out of which a mode of life is built, or are the relations between them these objects? It seems to be both. This system formed by beliefs, we are told:

[C]an be seen as a group of *sets of propositions* about the world, which, on further examination, reveal themselves to be *ordered* in their relationships to one another.<sup>1</sup>

Propositions can be either strictly relational or non-specifically attributive. To say that (250 lb.) “John is big,” which may imply, but does not say that “John is bigger than (120 lb.) Larry,” is and is not relational. To say that John lives next to and is bigger than

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<sup>1</sup> Dolgin, Janet L., Kemnitzer, David S. and Schneider, David M. (Eds.) *Symbolic Anthropology*, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.3.

Larry is strictly relational. The material of anthropology involves both as secrets to be uncovered. And however curious it may be to say that they “reveal themselves,” it is even more curious to say that they are secretly “*ordered* in their relationships *to one another*,” for in what *other* way could they be ordered (in their relationships *to themselves*?). But, this manifesto acknowledges:

To say that culture is a system of beliefs may be a bit misleading, if only by implication. So too, the description of belief systems as sets of propositions and propositions about propositions may mislead. Because we know that *culture is not available to us in propositional form*, any more than personality is, we cannot express our own culture, our own mode of life, our own beliefs, in such a way without stripping them of much of their richness, their ambiguity, their living power to direct our lives and give them meaning: and we cannot understand the fullness of the culture of another people by reducing their beliefs to a syllogism.<sup>2</sup> What we have here, in essence, is a state of self-imposed immaturity which the

symbolic anthropologist imposes upon his or herself in which he or she becomes (once again) unable to appreciate the richness of ambiguity and in which he or she denies his or herself the “living power to direct [their] lives and give them meaning.” One having come of age in ones own culture does not necessarily imply ones having come of age in another, we are told:

Of course, every culture—our own included—has a way to express itself in a simplified, propositional format, which is used principally to *explain* the culture, mainly to children, but also to strangers (including anthropologists). And, indeed, anthropological data gathering *is* a lot like the data gathering of a child. Both try to build a cognizable pattern of action out of the information they gather. Both use their own observations and relationships with others to supplement the didactic culture they are consciously taught...[but] while children *concretize* what they learn as their own orientations to action in the world, anthropologists *abstract* a general pattern from what they learn.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp.3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.4.

The most crucial difference, we are told, between that which drives the child's effort and that which drives the anthropologist is that the former is "largely unself-conscious and natural, shaped by the developmental process and by the child's drives and needs as a whole person," while the latter is driven by "a feature of the anthropologist's own culture: the need to understand belief and meaning, and the theory which guides that effort."

Although 'a drive to understand belief and meaning' is, we are told, what ethnology is all about, this is only the beginning. The theory comes in when we continue from here to consider the form in which belief and meaning exist, i.e. sign and symbol. Symbolic anthropology concerns itself with this meaning in the form of "the elements (objects, persons, relations, acts) through which people understand, communicate about, and act within their worlds and the constitution and interrelation of these elements."

How raw and material this description sounds: "elements, objects, persons, relations, acts," how concrete. But this concreteness is, again, only the first, childlike, step in the analysis. It is not the elements, objects, persons, relations, or acts *per se*, which keep our attention but rather the relations between them. Here concrete and abstract merge, one becoming the other, like the slave boy in Plato's *Meno* who, in knowing the concrete, can be brought without fail into the abstract or ideal. As in chemistry, the concrete knowledge of elements, objects, relations or acts is overcome by the *relations of* these elements, objects, relations or acts. Not being satisfied defining itself as a study of such relations, symbolic anthropology emphasizes that concreteness

which it has supposedly overcome. Though it may be no longer childlike in its approach, it cannot carry out its business but in a state of self-imposed childhood; one which is concretely abstract but, in the end, neither concrete nor abstract, and therefore irrational. The key here is that this self-imposed state of childhood is *not* “irrational” as defined by psychology and/or linguistics (the main shareholders in this approach), but *rather* in terms of that which it admits is its social impetus, namely, ‘a feature of the anthropologist’s own culture: the need to understand belief and meaning and the theory which guides that effort.’ This feature, this need, I argue, is *to understand relationality in a certain way, a need to understand our relationship to divinity through understanding the relations between things which are seen as expressing or possessing this divinity*. In other words, the symbolic anthropologist is driven by a need to understand the relationship between his or herself and the divinity of his or her own through the understanding of those persons, objects, elements, relations or acts which stand in for his or her divinity, *and then* through understanding their relations to one another. The first move is seen as fetishism, racism or colonialism and the second, involving history, semiotics, political economy or exchange, and so on, is seen as their critique. In fact, they are one and the same.

Though it may be unaware of this (relationship to) divinity (which can be thought of in terms of the gift), symbolic anthropology, as in the first dream of Ebenezer Scrooge, is haunted by a spectre of the past. He appears early on in the sixth page of the above related manifesto in the form of Marvin Harris. To understand the historical perspective of symbolic anthropology it seems necessary to understand its dialectical engagement

with the theory of cultural materialism outlined by Harris in his 1968 work *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. Here it is in opposition to the particular way in which Harris combines the concrete and the abstract that symbolic anthropology reflectively defines itself. On the subject of history, one of those ‘features’ of “the anthropologist’s own culture” which expresses a “need to understand belief and meaning, and the theory which guides that effort” (i.e. its *origins*) says this manifesto:

[W]e take a position which contrasts with the dominant view of the origins of anthropology; that view, as expressed, for example, by Marvin Harris..., is that anthropology is a refinement of the impulse and the need to understand the many “strange” and “foreign” people with whom Europeans began to come into contact during and after the Renaissance, that, specifically, anthropology derives from the Enlightenment attempt to find a rational basis for human diversity.<sup>1</sup>

In seeing anthropology, historically, as “*a refinement of the impulse and the need to understand*” the Other, Harris is guilty of depicting its quest for knowledge as not only childlike but as a continual process of overcoming this way of being (i.e. as the Enlightenment). The main difference between Harris and symbolic anthropology here, it seems, is how to define “childlike” or, more importantly, the *relations between the grown-up and the child*. To symbolic anthropology these relations are relations between two rational systems or world views (*à la* Piaget, et al.)—the two being different but equal—and denying the notion that development is equal to improvement. To Harris, one could say, these relations between parent and child are relations between two separate, unequal, ways of needing and acquiring the same things. These rational systems or world views,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.6.

according to Harris, are forever unequal and conflicted in their difference, and the notion that development (in global capitalism) is equal to improvement is a necessary reality as much as growing-up is. The greatest difference between these two theoretical orientations may be, however, that symbolic anthropology defines itself through a very Kantian and developmental psychological set of frames and the cultural materialism of Harris does not. In doing so, I argue, symbolic anthropology both *sees* difference as having significance and, in its ethnographic description and analysis, *fixes* this difference as the Symbol has done for so many centuries of European history. It is the inability to see these two operations as one and the same which is one of its major problems. This can be seen in how the manifesto defines and refines its relationship to Harris:

While Harris suggests that the impetus to anthropology lies in the brute facts of human diversity, we argue that the impetus to the anthropological enterprise is motivated by problems in our own society which gave significance to human diversity for our forebears. The conflict between Harris' view and the analysis we are about to offer stands as an example of the basic lesson of this book. In general, we feel that the influence of any kind of "external" facts on human actions is easily overemphasized; in particular, human groups have always been aware of human differences and have developed ways to understand them and have acted on them in different ways. But no culture other than our own—for, indeed, anthropology is an inextricable artifact of Western European culture—has produced an inquiry of the scale or the nature of anthropology. And that is because difference, at a certain point in European history, took on a great deal of significance.<sup>1</sup>

A major question at hand, and one with which symbolic anthropology still busies itself, is what those above mentioned "problems in our own society which gave significance to human diversity for our forefathers" actually were (are). Gabriel frames this historically in terms of relationality, chemistrism and the symbol. Harris frames this

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.6.

historically, as we saw above, in terms of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and European contact with radically other peoples.

Symbolic anthropology, on the other hand, depicts these problems in our society “which gave significance to human diversity” in terms of *a reaction against* the Renaissance and Enlightenment in their emphases on finding a natural and/or law governed order for the social and cultural. At the end of the eighteenth century, we are told, “Society began to be recognized, not as the product of immutable laws, but of the actions of people.”

They go on to tell us, as always, in opposition to Harris:

This critical foundation of anthropology has not continued unabated, and the work of scholars like Harris, who argues for a natural, law-governed determination of social and cultural forms, represents an attempt to return to the old naturalistic form of explaining social facts.<sup>1</sup>

The origin, and therefore legitimate course, of anthropological thought, we are told here, is not in nature and law (or any practical or applied form of determination or causality), but rather in “meaning” (i.e. in the *historical* notion of cause given by Collingwood). What counts, we are told, are human actions and, more importantly, following this notion of historical cause, that which affords the individual a motive for these actions. According to the authors of this manifesto, the course of Western philosophy has been a series of reflections upon the notion of motive (i.e. of held knowledge or belief linked to causality). In a short Western philosophical summary from “classical Greek philosophy” (whatever this refers to) to the 1960’s we are told that motives (held knowledge or belief), like histories, are

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.7.

multiple and relative, and thus, so is “truth” historical and otherwise. In the old, pre-meaning, philosophies (and their archaic revivals like that of Harris), we are told: “The problem of *motives* was conceived of as the study of the passions, which were thought to be the “baser” elements of the spirit, and this problem was considered to be separate from the more authentic and important problem of what the truth *was*: one studied motives, passions, only to discover why people didn’t know (or couldn’t be convinced of) the Truth.”

In this historical view one best sees the denial involved in the point made above concerning motives for anthropological inquiry itself. In ‘the feature of his or her own culture: the need to understand belief and meaning and the theory which guides that effort’ one sees *denied* the pursuit of his or her need to understand divinity, a pursuit which a good deal of classical and medieval philosophy identified with the pursuit of Truth or the Good. In this denial he or she fetishizes, racializes (ethnicizes) and colonizes the Truths and Goods of others, and then historicizes, semiotizes, and re-politicizes and economizes these truths and goods in the name of critique. The most crucial part of this process is when, as they inevitably do, the Goods of Others become the goods of others, become strange entities with an ontological status somewhere between fetishes and documents of worth. In a telling example of how symbolic anthropology sees this process and its justification for denying its own search for divinity (not to mention denying others this search in the Other) we are told:

What these [pre-meaning, passionate] philosophies have in common is the notion that, in some essential way, the Truth, or the Good, which is supposed to be the foundation of human cooperation and society, is a *discoverable* thing, it *exists* and can be *found*. This view stands in dramatic contrast to the contemporary

truism that there exist a multiplicity of “truths” and “goods”; and that these are *made by* various peoples. [my brackets]<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned above, the philosophical orientation of symbolic anthropology returns to Kantianism in one way or another, be it through references to child development, language and cognition (or to Emile Durkheim). In a somewhat detailed layout of the relationship between Kant and Durkheim we are told how both thinkers deal with the ideal notion of forms by naming them as the very basis of both mental and social structure.

For Kant, the senses and the data provided by them to the intellect were a kind of *energy* which was shaped by the forms and gave them direction. Society is likewise, for Durkheim, a *form* : a “system of constraints” which gives shape to the innate drives of people, which in their turn animate the social form with energy.<sup>1</sup>

The key, however, is that these forms are objects, parts, but also relations and bonds (parts and their relations being inseparable). They are not social atoms but rather social chemicals the bonding and dissolution of which creates energy. In outlining Durkheim on organic and mechanical solidarity and then contrasting Weber’s disinterest in the cognitive and logical nature of social motivation *à la* Durkheim, and in combining these two systems of Weberian interpretation and Durkeheimian classificatory order, the thesis of symbolic anthropology situates itself relative to a study of meaning in terms of classified objects. In appropriating Marx it then situates itself historically, political economically and semiotically in terms of a critique in which the phenomenological ‘mode of life’ becomes linked to the political economic ‘mode of production.’

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.8.

With this, symbolic anthropology enters into another realm of self-awareness in which it correctly realizes, first, that the goods and truths its works with are not objects but rather relations, and then, wrongly, concludes that the concreteness which it so despises in cultural materialism is somehow overcome by this first realization. “Basic categories of analysis,” we are told, “are not (and do not refer to) things, *per se*, but relations—the relations between things, events, acts, people—conceived and enacted by people.” Feeling they have shed the yoke of concreteness and have helped anthropology emerge from its self-imposed state of immaturity, they conclude: “*Symbolic action is part of a total mode of production and expression of creative human energy.*” Here it is as if by renaming the “energy” and relationality (chemistry) of cultural materialism, by invoking phenomenology, intuitionism, practice, or Jean Paul Sartre, that they could somehow do away with that which made it so inadequate to a sensitive and critical social analysis.

It is a great mistake to assume that any such renaming offers a challenge to such a mobile regiment of metaphors as found around the notions of “energy” and “relation.” How scientific, yet humanistic they can be and, within symbolic anthropology, how well they can be both at the same time. How well they are things, objects of study, yet, at the same time, potentials or other between states. How well they connect us to nature, yet to that which is most social (nurtured). But do we understand our relationship to divinity through understanding the relations between things which are seen as expressing or possessing this divinity? According to symbolic anthropology both energy and relation

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.12.

are such things. A sort of worship of or devotion to these two things, along with a worship of or devotion to the Other seems to be a sort of open secret on which symbolic anthropology thrives. Secreting elements of a populist Romanticism of (mystical and magical) nature, relationality, personal/spiritual energy, and the Other this form of thought both denies itself and lives upon popular conceptions and imaginings of race, ethnicity, gender, fetishism and colonialism. Those, mostly non-professionals, (populist, new agist, moralist, and others) who circle around its symbolic base of knowledge are not as much guilty of an ignorance, as many professionals attribute to them and distance themselves from, as they are of an indiscretion in making this open secret more “apparent” and voiceable.

Is this too much? Have I gone too far? Let me quote again the words of the manifesto: “[N]o culture other than our own—for, indeed, anthropology is an inextricable artifact of Western European culture—has produced an inquiry of the scale or the nature of anthropology.” This *may* only be true *if* we admit the countless number of new agist, tourist and other amateur anthropologists in Western, European cultures into the equation but, even if we do this, there is still a reservation to its validity. In one way, the countless shamen, possessed spirit mediums, healers, spiritists, priests, missionaries, white witches, cultists and others who actively engage in cross cultural, inter-cultural and indigenous symbolic ethnological practices in societies around the world make one doubt the majority or professional hegemony of Euro-American anthropologists. In another way, it may be that this hegemony relies, like the hegemony of all masters, on the maintenance of the secret of its dependence upon those “amateurs” whom it does not recognize. What

*seems* to be certain is that the professional symbolic anthropologist seems to less understand his or her relation to divinity through understanding the relations between things which are seen as expressing and possessing this divinity, that is, his or her amateur counterpart. With the secret in place, however, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine this understanding in terms of professional symbolic anthropology. Could it be, as I wish to suggest, but not without a certain feeling of defying some prohibition, that *both* amateur and professional are in conflict with divinity, and that both are, in not too dissimilar ways, trying to work this conflict out? How would I define this divinity, or that relation, to which this conflict is due? I would define it as “*the Other*” and “*energy*” in combination. What must we do to shake this dialectic at a standstill out of its confused *dreama*? We must recreate its dialectical motion with a new form of negativity. To undertake both tasks we return first, in the next section, to the Other and energy as found within cultural materialism itself, and then, in the next chapter, toward a recasting (negation) of both notions in physical terms.

### ***Energetic Materialism***

Energy, what a familiar term. It was, if you will remember from Gabriel’s history of chemistry, due to the work of a certain Wilhelm Ostwald and those around him near the turn of the last century that “the term ‘energy’ was elevated to the most prominent position in the unification of the sciences.” Gabriel goes on to describe the great change, or expansion, of both ‘energy’ and ‘power’ that took place over the course of the nineteenth century. ‘Energy,’ we are told, was originally applied to living (and not

inanimate) things, and ‘power’ referred to cosmic forces or “human potentiality.” One would like to think that the uses anthropological theory has made of these would distinguish between these terms as physically defined and these terms as spiritually defined; this, however, is seldom the case. Slippage, whether conscious or unconscious has been and continues to be the rule.

Although I have pointed out the area of such slippage in regards to symbolic anthropology above, it is no less apparent in the cultural materialism on which it dialectically depends. In an essay entitled “Evolutionism and Anti-Evolutionism,” Leslie White, the godfather of cultural materialism, often refers to “harnessing energy” and “putting it to work” as if it were a living thing. “Living material systems,” he tells us, “capture free energy from the outside and incorporate it within themselves.” “All life is a struggle for free energy,” he tells us, “In the competitive struggle between cultural systems, the more powerful win; the weaker lose. And power here is defined in terms of energy.”

In an essay entitled “The Energy Theory of Cultural Development” he defends these ideas by referring to none other than the chemist Ostwald himself. He writes:

The great German chemist, Wilhelm Ostwald (1853-1932), winner of the Nobel prize, developed an elaborate and comprehensive theory of “energetics” which included an energy theory of cultural development. The “history of civilization,” he says, “becomes the history of man’s advancing control over energy ... the objective characteristic of [cultural] progress consists in improved methods for seizing and utilizing the raw energies of nature for human purposes.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> White, Leslie A. *Ethnological Essays*, p.218.

In White's theory the great motivating force behind man's link to energy is not simply energy *per se* but rather the Second Law of Thermodynamics in which, says White, "energy is becoming more dispersed throughout the cosmos; matter more randomly arranged." "In short," he says, "the universe is both breaking down and running down. The process that we call life is working in the opposite direction; it is building up, becoming more highly organized, moving towards greater concentrations of energy."

It is crucial to understand White's purpose in all of this. His main goal, as he himself describes it, is an applied science, to "apply physical concepts to gain new insights and understanding of sociocultural systems." His goal is *not*, he tells us, using the work of sociologist Leon Winarski as an example, "to present social systems as analogous to physical systems, to describe them in the language of physics." In other words, White wants to say that the ways in which social systems capture and utilize energy are *not* akin to those ways in which physical systems, like planets, oceans or what have you, deal with energy. He means, rather, that by applying concepts like energy to social systems, we come to see two sides to such concepts—one living, and the other inanimate. What this gives us is, essentially, a reinvention of vitalism which can be applied to individuals and the groups which they make up and are made up by.

White makes this his main goal for the simple reason (à la Ostwald) of unifying the social, the physical and the biological sciences; a practice in which he believes energy to be the key concept. Of this key terms he writes:

The concept of energy is probably the most fundamental concept in all science. It is as applicable to cultural and to biological systems as it is to physical phenomena. Reality is one and science is one though many-sided. It is the concept of energy that relates the science of culture to the biological and physical sciences. The basic function of cultural and biological systems is revealed in the concept of energy: capturing, harnessing, and utilizing energy. It is the concept of energy that illuminates the structure and the behavior of cultural systems, and shows us how they evolve.<sup>1</sup>

Again, however, one must not forget that although he mentions “the physical sciences” as one in his unified triad, he is against any unification involving these sciences which does not involve the concept of energy as its main player. It is White’s need of this concept which is most telling. Why does he cling to it so? Why does it make so much sense? Why does it fit and supposedly translate between the sciences so easily? A key to these questions is found in the reason that, to him, the biological (life) sciences need to play a key, mediating, role between the physical and the social. Again, it is the vitalism inherent in the biological sciences which makes this translation so easy. Energy, being harnessed and utilized by living organisms, had anthropomorphically, that is to say, metaphorically, become the key player in the *technological*; it, like the “life” in machines, being in all “mechanisms,” being made human and human-made.

This strange, vital mechanism, which constitutes the modern divide between the biological and the physical sciences, can be seen, as we learned from Gabriel, in the work of Stahl, Hoffman and the nosological revolution which followed them. In this divide, this key player ‘energy’ was, as Gabriel showed us in his discussion of transcendental chemistrism, not physical as we today know it, but rather wholly relational, that is,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.220.

chemically relational, that is, chemical. Essentially, when White speaks of energy, he speaks of chemical energy and, in particular, biochemical energy.

When he speaks of energetics, as did Ostwald, White seems to speak of the harnessing of physical (i.e. chemically relational) energy in all forms, from the use of a fulcrum to combustion, to digestion and metabolism. The problem in White's approach is, again, his vitalism. By 'harnessing and utilizing energy' White does not focus on the chemical relationality of energy *per se*, but rather on that of *the human activity* of its harnessing and utilization. In other words, he seems to assume that energy has all to do with its harnessing and utilization, with its making, breaking, weakening or sustaining of bonds and relations, and nothing to do with the inanimate physical world in which it is also found. The laws with which White concerns himself are not the laws of physical nature, like the Second Law of Thermodynamics, but rather the laws of growth and life maintenance which supposedly act *against* them, defining life itself. In an essay entitled "Sociology, Physics and Chemistry" White makes his aversion to physics and his close relationship to chemistry and, in particular, biochemistry an issue. His greatest problem with physics is its mathematical nature and how this seems to lend itself so well to the type of analogizing between natural science and positivist social science which he so despises. Thus it is quite curious that when symbolic anthropology opposes the naturalist, law-governed approach of cultural materialism to society in favor of "the actions of people," it is actually opposing the application not of physical laws, but of vitalist, and biological naturalist laws of human activity in the harnessing and utilization of energy. Put another way, both approaches do not differ in their basic notion that the

study of human activity is the rightful basis of anthropology; they differ mostly in their estimation of the relevance of biology in defining this activity or human “modes of life.”

Most important here is a key conception which both cultural materialism and symbolic anthropology share, i.e. the symbol. In an essay entitled “Symboling: A Kind of Behavior” White begins:

There is a fundamental difference between the mind of man and the minds, or *mindings*, of all other species: this difference is one of kind, not merely one of degree. Only man has the ability to originate and bestow meanings upon things and events and to comprehend such meanings bestowed by others.<sup>1</sup>

The symbol is defined by White as “a thing or event, an act or an object, upon which meaning has been bestowed by human beings; holy water, a fetish, a ritual, a word. A symbol is, therefore, a composite of (1) a meaning, and (2) a physical structure.”

Here, in this notion of the symbol, but more particularly that activity which White refers to as “symboling,” he names that human activity which is the harnessing and utilizing of energy. According to this theory it is symboling which makes the use of all tools used in the harnessing and utilization of energy an enduring part of culture and, thereby, sustains culture. A song, a wise saying, a prayer, all are examples of symboling equal to the proper use of a scythe, a hoe, or a cattle whip.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.273.

Strangely enough, both symbolic anthropology and cultural materialism set their theories of human activity in reaction against other scientific theories of nature; the former against the vitalist and biological, and the latter against the physical. It is also of interest that both theories are wholly relational in their approaches, the former linguistically, narratively or practically (i.e. chemically relational), and the latter chemically and biologically. What we see most remarkably in the dialectic between these two is a progression away from physics into chemistry and then into language, narrative and praxis; a thesis, anti-thesis, and their synthesis which is at a standstill. In denying the physical and in denying the chemical nature of its conception of relationality the synthetic movement of (symbolic) anthropology as an area of truth-oriented inquiry has ceased.

It was Goethe who, in his famous novel *Elective Affinities*, first confronted this particular dialectic at a standstill. Though many people in his day read this work as saying that human relations were based upon chemical relations (causing a great moral uproar), Goethe himself insisted that his pairing of active human and chemical relations (reactions) within his narrative was rather to point, literarily, to the actual historical pairing and anthropomorphizing within alchemy of both forms, the chemical form being based on the human. Could this not be similar to the dialectical opposition in which we today find cultural materialism and symbolic anthropology? Could it be that symbolic anthropology thinks that cultural materialism is arguing that active human relations are based upon chemistry, and that cultural materialism, wrapped up in biology and vitalism, doesn't know what it thinks, thus sustaining this view of itself? Is the answer to this

dialectic-at-a-standstill then, as Goethe suggests, to make evident the fact that the pairing of these two theories is done in the actual historical pairing and anthropomorphizing within social theory of both forms (*à la* Stahl, Hoffman or Ostwald), cultural materialism being based on an *inanimate* notion of energy? If this is so, then whence the human activity and symboling which the two hold so dear? Does the meaning of human activity, as in Goethe's novel, collapse into narrative? Here the Symbol reappears in its true historical form as that which describes and prescribes human activity. The meaning and the symbol merge in the (I)nc. The most straightforward question "What do you do?" is answered with "I am a ..." and the realization that there is something more to this dialectic comes to the fore.