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Troubles with Materiality: The Ghost of Fetishism in the Nineteenth Century

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The theological period of humanity could begin no otherwise than by a complete and usually very durable state of pure Fetichism [sic], which allowed free exercise to that tendency of our nature by which Man conceives of all external bodies as animated by a life analogous to his own, with differences of mere intensity.

Auguste Comte, *Cours* (1830–1842)

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. I (1867)

I. SCANDAL OF A PRACTICALLY EXTINCT THEORY

Upon hearing the standard disciplinary history of the science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*),[1] one might get the impression that, by the second half of the nineteenth century, talk of fetishism should have been all but dead. For, by then, "fetishism" as a particular type or form of religious belief and practice was supposedly no longer a viable or respectable category for use in debating the origin, evolution, or morphology of religion. Thus we read in the Victorian chapter of this history about the rise—and usually also the fall—of various theories concerning the origin of religion, such as Tylor's animism theory, Marett's pre-animism theory, Lang's or Schmidt's primitive monotheism theory, Max Müller's (and others') nature-myth theory, Durkheim's or Freud's totemism theory, and so on—but *nobody's* "fetishism theory."[2] Even by Victorian standards, we are led to believe, the notion of fetishism was already embarrassingly outmoded, something rather more reminiscent of certain older habits of thought than a critical tool of the emerging scientific discipline. So we see one of the earliest chroniclers of the comparative study of religion, Louis Henry Jordan, making the following pronouncements in 1905: "Fetishism . . . to-day is almost universally admitted to be an inadequate theory when offered in explanation of the origin of Religion . . . . One need not delay to mention a list of the leading writers who have openly espoused and defended this theory; for . . . this branch of the School of Evolutionists in Religion is now practically extinct."[3]

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As speculation on the origin and development of religion increasingly foraged through the material made available by ethnography—thereby becoming, if only vicariously, empirical to a degree—it appears that "fetishism" as a classificatory category proved no more serviceable for *Religionswissenschaft* than such flagrantly prejudicial terms as "superstition," "idolatry," or "heathenism." If we look further into the details of this disciplinary history, we will learn, for example, that in an influential two-part treatise entitled "The Worship of Animals and Plants" published in 1869 and 1870, John F. McLennan offered an entirely new perspective on the subject by suggesting that so-called fetishism was but one aspect of the real elemental form of religion, totemism, which he defined as animal (or sometimes plant) worship *plus* matrilineal exogamy.[4] Sometime thereafter, his friend and fellow Scotsman W. Robertson Smith carried this idea further and proposed that the ancient sacrificial rites of the Semites—including many that are documented in the Hebrew Bible—could be understood in light of such primitive totemism.[5] Meanwhile, Edward B. Tylor—who was destined to become the most celebrated Victorian anthropologist—shifted attention away from the fetish object to the supposed spiritual entity which, he said, the savage falsely assumed to be animating such an object; Tylor thus established the theory of animism as the most rudimentary religion.[6] These and other developments, so the story goes, effectively dashed any hope of a serious scholarly career for "fetishism."

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that talk of fetishism is in fact everywhere in the Victorian literature, in ethnography as well as in history of religions.[7] To be sure, the subject does not usually occupy a conspicuous place, nor does it always seem a particularly welcome topic even to authors, who might obligingly treat the matter as an unavoidable subject, sometimes criticizing it as a regrettably confused notion which ought to be reclassified under some other category, or which might be better controlled by means of a more stringent definition. Suffice it to say that, by the turn of the century, fetishism was not much of a theory anymore, but evidently remained a problem nonetheless. The trouble was—and there seems to have been near consensus on this point—the use of the term "fetishism" tended to be too liberally expansive and uncritically inclusive, such that just about anything could count as an instance of fetishism for the advocate of fetishism-theory, just as any piece of rubbish, trifle, or trinket was said to be a potential fetish for the practitioner of fetish-religion.

A typical Victorian account of fetishism would rehearse the etymology of the word, in the course of which we are transported back to the scene of the first encounter between Portuguese sailors and the savages[8] of the Gold Coast. At this point we would be led to examine the Portuguese word *feitiço,* meaning "charm," "amulet," or "talisman," which in turn might lead us back through medieval Christian history to a Latin term *factitius,* meaning, variously, "manufactured," "artificial," "enchanted," or "magically artful." Then the narrative

would likely go forward to 1760, when the French Enlightenment thinker and acquaintance of Voltaire, President Charles de Brosses, coined the term "fetishism" in the now celebrated monograph, *Du culte des dieux fétiches.* At the same time it would be noted how de Brosses himself prepared the way for the future abuse of the term and the erosion of its original definition, such as it was, because he chose to include in the same category not only those observances more in line with the etymological sense of the term—i.e., customs involving certain portable objects, either naturally found or "manufactured"—but also such divergent and heterogenous practices as animal worship (zoolatry), star worship (Sabeism), and the veneration of the dead.[9]

In sum, not only was there abundant discussion on the topic of fetishism during the Victorian period, there was also a standard litany for chastising this prolific and unruly discourse. In any event, talk about fetishism they did, even if in a manner that would suggest that this was a vaguely illegitimate bit of business left over from previous generations, an embarrassing remnant of humbler times when the discriminating terminology of scholarship had not been developed. In effect, "fetishism" was an obsolete piece of language that refused to fall away, despite the progressive retooling of scientific discourse.

Indeed, "fetishism" remained a regular nuisance for many decades after the science of religion had soundly denounced it. Thus we find, as late as 1948, in a popular survey text, the following disclaimer:

> The magic charm takes innumerable forms. . . . One word that has been applied to charms is *fetish,* and no term has proved more troublesome than this and its companion, *fetishism.* The derivation is from the Portuguese *feitiço,* "something made," and was used by the early Portuguese to denote the charms and images of African peoples. These terms are mentioned here because they are encountered so often in the literature, as when it is said that "fetishism is the religion of Africa." When used at all, they should be employed in the sense of "charm" and "magic"; but they are far better omitted from any discussion of the means whereby man controls the supernatural.[10]

Here, again, is the familiar mantra of *Religionswissenschaft* dispelling the evil of the confounding fetishism discourse. A somewhat abbreviated formula this may be, but all the essential ingredients are there: the Portuguese etymology, the historical African connection, the subsequent proliferation of the term's indiscriminate use, and finally the blanket statement about its general uselessness. Yet, the very repetition of the same mantra, intended to disenchant the powerful discourse, testifies to just how ineffectual such disciplinary pronouncements really were against the rampant circulation of this made-up term. Like bad money, it was going around faster than any theoretical categories from more creditable mints.

II. F. MAX MÜLLER ON FETISHISM

The problematic status of fetish-discourse during the Victorian era is well attested by the inaugural series of the Hibbert Lectures, delivered in 1878 at West-

minster Abbey by F. Max Müller.[11] Already anointed as the patriarch of *Religionswissenschaft,* Müller addressed himself in the second of his seven lectures specifically to the topic: "Is Fetishism a Primitive Form of Religion?" In a word, Müller's answer to this question was "no," and there was not much ambiguity about it. To put it in a few more words, Müller's position was the following. Fetishism is not a form of religion, nor a stage of religious development, let alone the original stage, but a mere tendency, a certain inferior disposition or weakness to which anyone at any place or any time is, in principle, susceptible. We humans have a proclivity for developing a fetishistic attachment to what Müller calls "casual objects," clutching whatever is thrown upon our path by happenstance, because flesh is weak, because our intellectual conceptions often require a tangible reminder or a material abode which can provide the intangible idea with solace and safe haven. A fetish is that which even our most sublime spiritual ideas seek, and from time to time find, to lean on: In effect, it's a prop. As such, this secondary object has no essential place in the origin and development of religion. It is always incidental, always dispensable.

This definitive opinion, pronounced from so exalted a position by so eminent a scholar, ultimately did nothing to quiet the talk of fetishism. On the contrary, Müller's high-profile performance immediately elicited a pointedly critical response from Andrew Lang, another Victorian mythologue-folklorist-historian of religion, who was rising in prominence. Lang singled out the fetishism lecture to mount a wholesale attack on Müller's theory of religion, his method, and his authoritative and privileged access to, and reliance on, the *Rig Veda* as a preeminent source of ancient history.[12] This objection and other criticisms led Müller to qualify his position on the issue of original religion vs. secondary corruption, and—at least according to Goblet d'Alviella, who himself rose to the podium as the 1891 appointee of the Hibbert Lectures[13]—Müller presented a revised expression of his views at another prestigious lecture series that he inaugurated, the Gifford Lectures of 1888, 1889, 1890, and 1891.[14] Whether or not his stance was modified in any significant way, Müller was to continue to address, if only incidentally and obliquely, the problem of fetishism for another two decades, which is tantamount to saying until he died. What is more, a number of his successors at the Hibbert and the Gifford Lectures, as well as other writers who appropriated "history of religion" as their topic or their book title—Goblet d'Alviella being but one example—kept on referring to fetishism, sometimes dismissing, other times seeking to improve upon, the notion. This explicit discussion of fetishism continued well into the 1920s and 1930s among European and American scholars of utmost respectability.[15]

In marked contrast to this state of affairs, the conventional wisdom perpetrated and reproduced by today's disciplinary historians of religious studies holds that the idea of fetishism, though undoubtedly originating in the exploration of primitive religion and thus having provenance in the history of religion, lost much of its efficacy by the middle of the nineteenth century. Sup-

posedly, fetishism gave way to other, newer, and supposedly more exact concepts, or various new "isms"; meanwhile, fetishism's principal arena of operation shifted to other emergent discursive domains—above all, Marxist political economy, the scientific sexology of Binet, and Freudian psychoanalysis, where it thrives to this day.[16] Yet, if we were to observe this history from the vantage point of Müller's lecture in 1878, it would appear that fetishism had been dominating the debate on the origin of religion for a century[17], and, far from undergoing the quiet death of obsolescence, it was to live on for at least another half century.

The questions I should like to entertain in light of this incongruity are the following. If Müller was right in the first place when he claimed that primitive fetishism had been, and was still, "dominating" the debate on the origin of religion, then what was the mode of this domination? How do we explain the alleged predominance of fetishism theory when relatively few treatises on the origin and development of religion explicitly upheld the position—as had earlier writers from de Brosses to Auguste Comte—that fetishism was the original form of religion? Secondly, how do we account for the easy dismissal of the fetishism discourse by historians of the study of religions (as early as Jordan in 1905), despite the palpable fact that a good many people kept on mentioning fetishism, especially in association with the savage, the primitive, and the "degenerate races"? Combining the two questions, we may arrive at the following formulation: Given that the theory of primitive fetishism reputedly had already lost much of its credibility—or, perhaps more to the point, its respectability—by the 1870s, what was doing the "dominating" in the name of "fetishism"? Why did it continue to be useful or necessary to mention fetishism, and why did fetishism continue to be consistently associated with the rudimentary, the degraded, or the lowest, despite—or possibly because of—the devaluation of the concept itself? Is the general disrepute of "fetishism" among the ethnologists and *Religionswissenschaftler* in some way directly related to the facts that, on the one hand, the 19th-century sexologists found it a suitable name for a certain type of psychosexual disorder and, on the other hand, Marx used it to name an analogously aberrant and pathological object-relation endemic to social production under capitalism?

Here, I must not delay in conceding that my aim in the present essay is not nearly as ambitious as an offer of definitive answers to this cluster of questions. Rather, my immediate objective is to recover, by means of an efficacious mix of empathy and suspicion, the logic and sentiment that seem to have been sustaining and mobilizing the self-deprecating fetishism discourse of the Victorian era. For, as we begin to examine the nature of the rampant, imprecise, and disorderly talk of fetishism (which the best scientific minds of the time repeatedly tried and failed to control), our attention is invariably drawn to a broader domain of social and cultural practices well beyond the academic scruples endemic to a particular human science. In short, the subject of fetishism calls for

a more general study of the discourse-network in which this peculiar word/idea evidently had an especial resonance and potent communicability. The task of such a study is obviously too enormous to be contained in the present work. This palpable limitation notwithstanding, in the latter part of the essay I will take the liberty of raising some pointers toward possible answers to the questions mentioned above. I offer these tentative signals in full awareness that, as they stand, they may amount to no more than an assemblage of suggestive images or a montage stimulating to the imagination, rather than, say, a clearly defined set of research directives packed with definitive analytic strategies.

As for the more circumscribed field of interest pertinent to the disciplinary history of *Religionswissenschaft,* it may be useful to recall that, just when the fetishism-bashing was at its height—roughly from the time of Müller's pronouncements to the 1930s—scholars of religion were beginning to speak routinely about "religions of the world." During this period, "religion" was becoming a general category to which belonged all modalities of practice from the lowest to the highest—i.e., from fetishism to modern Christianity. It became normal to speak about a common, permanent, and universal essence of religion, or about "the lowest common denominator" of religion present in all its historical manifestations.[18] Moreover, just as scholars began to lend credibility to something like a common universal core of all religions, high and low, a powerfully innocuous-sounding rhetoric of "world religions" was being born. Today, the discourse of "world religions" has become a basic, all-encompassing strategy for understanding the phenomenon of religion. This discourse supposedly replaced—but in fact has revised and retained—the developmental and hierarchical assumptions inherent in the so-called "evolutionary" mapping prevalent in the nineteenth century.[19] It is in the context of this transition from the unilinear evolutionary schema typical of the Victorian era to the pluralist yet deeply universalist world-religions discourse typical of the twentieth century—i. e., this transmutation of the universalist history of religion(s)[20] from the evolutionist mode to the world-religions mode—that I situate the lingering problem of the value unaccountably invested in the disreputable concept of fetishism.

III. FETISHISM *AU FOND*

Whichever side one stood on in the primitive fetishism debate, one thing was certain about the subject: fetishism was *low.* Whether this debased state, or stage, was presumed to be at the very beginning of human evolution[21], right next to the absolute zero-point of cultural development, or at some later degenerative period in the imagined chronology, fetishism always marked the nadir of cultural value, the polar opposite of the telos of the civilizing process. Moreover, fetishism as a category is repeatedly and consistently characterized as inchoate, erratic, and unprincipled. In effect, fetishism is said to be no more than an incidental assortment of "the worship of odds and ends of rubbish,"[22] a misguided adoration of objects that are intrinsically worthless, such as

"stones, shells, bones, and such like things"—in other words, "casual objects which, for some reason or other, *or it may be for no reason at all,* were considered endowed with exceptional powers."[23]

Fetishism's lowly character is evidenced above all by a tenacious attachment to the base materiality of the object and, by the same token, to its physical immediacy, its incidental nature, and its radical finitude.[24] The fetish is materiality at its crudest and lowest; it points to no transcendent meaning beyond itself, no abstract, general, or universal essence with respect to which it might be construed as a symbol. It is this special tie to materiality, or rather, this ineradicable essence of the fetish *as* materiality, and the alleged absence of any symbolic (or supra-material) dimension, that distinguishes fetishism from idolatry, or "polytheism," as idolatry came to be more commonly called in the course of the nineteenth century.[25] As a matter of fact, it may be speculated that the positing of fetishism as a third category in addition to polytheism and monotheism—or "fetish" as a third category in addition to "idol" and "icon/symbol"—helped clarify and justify the often difficult-to-sustain distinction between the illegitimate and legitimate uses of material objects in religious practice. For, on the one hand, a mere multiplicity of material representations of spiritual reality amounts to idolatry, or a cult of many (false) gods; on the other hand, the equally multiple iconic/symbolic representations of the truly spiritual God do not seem to threaten the unity of that deity. But how do we tell the difference? By positing the fetish as the opposite extreme in contrast with iconic/symbolic representation, one can render idolatry as something of a transitional stage in the development of religion, a midway point between absolute materiality and true spirituality, between, on the one hand, the total absence of the sense of unity and, on the other, the apotheosis of the idea of unity itself, or the idea of the singular Author of the entire universe, the idea central to so-called ethical monotheism.[26]

The notion of the three-stage development—i.e., first fetishism, then polytheism, and finally monotheism—first articulated by de Brosses and later made famous by Auguste Comte[27], John Lubbock[28], and others, has proven so durable as to be reiterated even by those who ultimately sought to discredit the theory of primitive fetishism. In the 1920s, for example, Wilhelm Schmidt insisted on a stricter definition of "true fetishism, in which the object of worship is not symbolic but is worshipped for itself and not as connected with, or representing, a deity or spirit." To be sure, Schmidt is merely quoting this definition from P. Amaury Talbot, only to press the point that genuine fetishism in this exact sense of the term is not to be found anywhere, in Niger or any other of the usually-suspected places in Africa.[29] Likewise, while Alfred Haddon for all intents and purposes denied the existence of any predominantly fetishist society[30], he upheld the assumption of the hierarchy all the same. Never mind that fetishism as such did not really exist, he went on to assert: "Fetishism is a stage of religious development associated with a low grade of consciousness and of

civilization, and it forms a basis from which many other modes of religious thought have developed, so that it is difficult to point out where fetishism ends and nature worship, ancestor worship, totemism, polytheism, and idolatry begin, or to distinguish between a fetish, an idol, and a deity."[31]

As difficult as it may be to make these distinctions *empirically,* the hierarchy of value from the most material to the most spiritual does not seem to be affected by this difficulty, but rather it remains paradigmatic in all these texts. It reflects a general assumption that has never been relinquished, and which has to do with a particular ideology of cognition and, concomitantly, a particular epistemic order. This order of knowledge is predicated on a logic of representation which posits the knowing subject and the object-to-be-known, mind and matter, in a specific, hierarchical relation. In contrast to us moderns, Washburn Hopkins suggested, in 1923, the inability to discern this relation in the proper manner characterizes our primeval ancestors and the contemporary savages alike:

> What is really found in the lowest mental state is not lack of logic but inability to distinguish between mind and matter. To early man all substance is the same, neither material nor immaterial. The most primitive savages do not regard the two as separate. All matter is sentient and has mentality; all spirits are analogous to the minds of men, that is, encased in body, or rather indissolubly one with the material in which they appear. It is not a distinct spirit in a thing which such savages recognize but, so to speak, a spiritized thing, an object imbued with power.[32]

As far as these writers are concerned, the primitive confounding or indifferentiation of matter and spirit/mind does not result in an alternative ontology—say, a mystical monism as an alternative to Cartesian dualism—any more than magic is an alternative science. Rather, according to their opinion, any system based on a mind-matter confusion is bound to get mired in unreality, even if such an illusion may offer a secondary dividend of psychological comfort.

This general idea, of course, was later elaborated by J. G. Frazer (in connection to "sympathetic magic"), Sigmund Freud ("the omnipotence of thought"), and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl ("primitive mentality"). Early in *The Golden Bough,* Frazer famously characterized magic as "a false science, as well as an abortive art," which is to say, a spurious theory and practice predicated on "misapplications of the association of ideas."[33] Freud, drawing a complicated analogy between obsessive neurotics and savages, theorized this notion more explicitly and proposed that the proclivity to confuse what occurred merely in thought and what actually took place—i. e., conflation of a psychical/subjective reality and a material/objective reality—were common to both sorts of people. In effect, according to Freud, magic, taboo, and other such superstitions—that is to say, observances obviously inefficacious yet tenaciously adhered to—owe their compelling power to the infantile tendency for thought-reality confusion, for easy psychic transfer from subjective to objective, from a mental wish to its material fulfillment.[34] It is therefore evident that the primitive undifferentiation

of matter and spirit/mind is more or less a direct echo of what E. B. Tylor had identified decades earlier: "Among the less civilized races, the separation of subjective and objective impressions, which in this, as in several other matters, makes the most important difference between the educated man and the savage, is much less fully carried out."[35]

The clarity and lucidity of the demarcation between the subject and the object of representation is presumed to be essential to the modern epistemic order, especially to *science.* As Frazer put it bluntly: "The principles of association [of ideas] are excellent in themselves, and indeed absolutely essential to the working of the human mind. Legitimately applied they yield science; illegitimately applied they yield magic, the bastard sister of science."[36] From the point of view of these mental/spiritual developmentalists, the ability to extricate the subjectivity of the knower from the material contingency of the object and from the physical and corporeal immediacy of the experience of cognition is the hallmark of reason and civilization, and this ability is equated with the power of abstraction, generalization, and universalization. Like its concomitant, "magic," fetishism—whether it is believed to be an empirically extant condition among tribespeople somewhere or merely a virtual point of reference—is consistently marked as the opposite extreme to this ideal of true knowing.

Beyond the invariable baseness of "fetishism," the scholars of the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth opined more or less in unison that there was no clearly articulable, logically coherent principle for its definition. Consequently, the concept of fetishism was considered inherently liable to confusion and abuse. Writer after writer would warn the reader that there was something incorrigibly imperfect or incomplete about the concept, that the concept itself was rather "common" and "unscientific," and thus that its very entry into the scholarly vocabulary was somehow "unfortunate."[37] In short, if a fetish was a contemptible little object in the eyes of reason and science, its iniquity seems to have been transferred to the theory of fetishism itself, as this latter was also spoken of as being beneath the dignity of science. Yet, somehow, science could not make fetishism go away. Tenacious attachment in defiance of common sense and reason appears to be the defining characteristic not only of the fetish, but also of fetishism theory. Already beyond such obsession himself (or so we are led to believe), Müller describes the irony in this way: "It will be difficult indeed to eradicate the idea of a universal primeval fetishism from the text-books of history. That very theory has become a kind of scientific fetish, though, like most fetishes, it seems to owe its existence to ignorance and superstition."[38]

Curiously, those very same authors who despised the fetishism concept and denounced the theory of primitive fetishism in one breath seem to have believed that there was a way to restore something like the original meaning of "fetish," that is, the true definition of fetishism, which had eluded even de Brosses himself who invented the term. They sought to ascertain this proper, authentic con-

cept of fetishism by means of etymology. It is largely on account of this desire for a correct definition of an inherently flawed concept that we are referred back, again and again, to the Portuguese and the savages of the Gold Coast, their shared superstitions recalcitrantly attached to materiality in its most trivial forms, their uncanny exchange rooted in misrecognition, their shady trade based on bogus values that were heaped upon rubbish, trinkets, and unfamiliar objects of foreign manufacture.

IV. FETISHISM IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

In all these respects, Müller's attitude toward the problem of fetishism is rather more typical of his time than it is exceptional. What is not so typical, however, is his way of accounting for the conceptual origin of fetishism: i.e., his explanation as to how the initial, erroneous estimation of an insignificant material object could have taken place. There is something slightly eccentric about his account of how such prodigious values and powers came to be ascribed, quite irrationally of course, to that humble materiality that is the fetish. As we have seen, in nineteenth-century discourse a fetish is a "mere object," taken for a singular being endowed with supernatural and superlative virtues and efficacy. How could an inanimate, intrinsically valueless object come to be charged with such non-material, almost ghostlike, "spiritual" values? How could this purely material object come alive, as it were, in this way?

In a nutshell, Müller's argument amounts to this: the initial misrecognition of an inert material object as a fetish, as something believed to be animate and powerful *in and of itself,* lies ultimately on the side of the European travelers rather than the savage natives of Africa. To be sure, in Müller's estimation, the Europeans in question were not exactly Christians of the modern, rational, enlightened sort. Indeed, he implies, it was their impure Christianity and their own residual savagery that was responsible for the mistaken conception:

> Why did the Portuguese navigators, who were Christians, *but Christians in that metamorphic state which marks the popular Roman Catholicism of the last century* [emphasis added]—why did they recognize at once what they saw among the negroes of the Gold Coast, as *feitiços?* The answer is clear. Because they themselves were perfectly familiar with a *feitiço,* an amulet, or a talisman; and probably all carried with them some beads, or crosses, or images, that had been blessed by their priests before they started for their voyage. They themselves were fetish-worshippers in a certain sense. (58–59)

As Müller goes on to suggest, this apprehension of sameness—that is, the instantaneous recognition of the identity between the European self and the African other with respect to certain religious observances—is coupled with an equally instantaneous apprehension of difference, or rather, an immediate presumption of radical disparity between the civilized self and the savage other. Although they are ostensibly similar in that they both perform certain acts of veneration toward special little objects, the Portuguese of course "knew" that there was more to their own religion than this particular type of personal

practice with *feitiços*. They did recognize, however imperfectly, the invisible reality and the formidable institutional apparatus associated with it—namely, Christianity—which purportedly empowered their precious objects and made them sacred in the first place. In contrast, the Portuguese failed to perceive any comparable system of invisible power in relation to the African practice, and immediately assumed the total absence of any such higher order of reality. Müller thus concludes: "As [those first European visitors to the Gold Coast] discovered no other traces of any religious worship [among the Africans], they concluded very naturally that this outward show of regard for these *feitiços* constituted the whole of the negro's religion."[39]

In sum, the African observances involving small, portable objects were recognized by the Portuguese sailors as *religious* acts (hence belonging to the same genus as their own devotional acts predicated on Christianity). At the same time, the African and European forms of *feitiço* veneration were sorted out into two entirely separate categories and made incommensurate: On the one hand was the primitive worship of purely material objects, eventually to be called "fetishism," and on the other hand, a peripheral manifestation of Christianity still prevalent among the uneducated—i.e., superstitious veneration of icons and amulets. Thus it came to pass, according to Müller, that half-civilized Europeans in a transitional state of religious development took the erring first step along the course leading to the illusion that was fetishism, and eventually to the benighted theory of primitive fetishism.[40]

In Müller's opinion, the notion that a purely material object could *in and of itself* generate a non-material power/entity is an illogical—indeed impossible—idea. If one wants to claim that such an irrational, spontaneous generation of the immaterial/spiritual from the material cannot take place in the exterior world of nature, then one must be prepared to recognize that it cannot happen in the interior world of the savage mind either. By ascribing fetishism to the Africans, Müller here seems to say, those theorists fell into the same "superstition" that they attributed to the savages. By disputing the theory of primitive fetishism and thus exonerating the Africans of any such confounding beliefs, Müller restores their rudimentary religiosity to the proper sphere of pure spirit. For, in his view, all forms of veneration and worship, however humble, always refer to the Infinite (the unitary, invisible, and spiritual), regardless of what particular finite objects or entities may come to stand as a vehicle or as a mediating agent for the Infinite. Unilaterally championing unbounded spirit over finite matter, Müller would vanquish the specter of fetishism. This accomplished, at least to his own satisfaction, we hear no more from him about this curious tale of cultural hybridity, the lawless commerce of novel objects, and the spontaneous generation of disproportionate values, which were taking place in the contact zone of Africa-meets-Europe. Here, what might have been an opening of a new ground for colonial cultural criticism, a crevice which we could glimpse in the passage quoted above, was henceforth closed off. Instead,

on the basis of this closure and the triumph of the Infinite, Müller was to engender an altogether different kind of discursive tradition: an idealist history of the spiritual—i.e., the History of Religions as we know it today.

All the same, it is noteworthy that, from his position in the nineteenth century, Müller has reminded us that it was on the volatile ground of disjointed colonial exchange between incommensurable systems that the fetish, at once an idea and an object, was born.

V. TROUBLES AT HOME

I reduce the systems of philosophy concerning man's soul to two. The first and most ancient is materialism. The second is spiritualism.

Those metaphysicians who suggest that matter might manifest the faculty of thinking have not dishonored reason. Why not? Because they enjoy the advantage (in this case it is one) of expressing themselves poorly. Strictly speaking, to ask if matter sheerly in itself can think is like asking if matter can tell the time. Already we see that we shall avoid this reef, on which Mr. Locke had the misfortune to run aground.

Leibnizians, with their *monad,* have set up an unintelligible hypothesis. They have spiritualized matter rather than materialized the soul. But how can one define a being whose nature is absolutely unknown to us?

Descartes and all the Cartesians . . . made the same mistake. They said man consists of two distinct substances, as though they had seen and counted them.

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'Homme machine* (1747)[41]

After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

If we have learnt something from Müller's explanation concerning the hybrid formation of "fetishism," we may again reformulate our earlier question (see p. 246) more exactly: If fetishism continued to be a viable topic after its official demise, then what was it in the nature of those nineteenth-century intellectuals that could not help resonating with this seemingly exotic subject and the similarly outlandish theory about it?

As we have seen, the contempt in which both the fetish and fetishism theory were held—hence their easy dismissal—stems from the apparent absurdity of the notion that the pure materiality of "stocks and stones" is inherently and essentially commingled with a supra-material reality of some sort—let us call this latter "spirituality" for short—or from the even greater absurdity of the notion that materiality in and of itself generates spirituality and, consequently, that spirituality is ultimately nothing but a peculiar mutation of materiality. The more we look into the matter, the more difficult it seems to differentiate clearly and distinctly the superstition of fetishism from the superstition of fetishism theory—i.e., on the one hand, the belief that certain material objects are more than "mere matter" but magically spiritual, and on the other, the belief that a mere material encounter with some physical object of no particular significance

can instill in the savage mind the idea of spirituality. In either case, the material object seems to keep generating its own phantom other. Yet this specter does not leave the body behind; rather it inheres in the very materiality of the body itself. Conversely put, it is as though materiality itself—"dead matter," the cadaver—began to move, even to think and to speak, all on its own.

Materialism

A few years before Müller's lecture on fetishism, on the pages of the journal that was bringing to public attention such works as Herbert Spencer's "The Genesis of Superstitions" and "Idol-Worship and Fetish-Worship,"[42] another scandal of materiality was unfolding. The beginning of the controversy was the presidential address of the British Association delivered in Belfast on August 19th, 1874, by an eminent physical scientist and friend of Spencer, sitting president of the Royal Institution of Great Britain and successor to Michael Faraday in this capacity, John Tyndall. This address—and its expanded printed version—was partly an evocation of the nobly-enduring history of scientific materialism that harkened back to the pre-Socratic atomists, and partly a plea for the right of science to explore all aspects of nature according to its own principles, free from theological sanctions and dogmatic prescriptions.[43] Among the immediate reactions provoked by Tyndall's speech, the most substantial came in the form of another address, delivered in London on October 6th of the same year by a distinguished Unitarian and author of numerous treatises on theological subjects, James Martineau. The full text of Martineau's address was published early in 1875 as *Religion as Affected by Modern Materialism,*[44] and was prefaced by an introduction written by a certain Rev. Henry W. Bellows. The opening remarks of this introduction signal much about the controversy that was to ensue:

> Is the mind of man only the last product of the matter and force of our system of Nature, having its origin in the blind or purposeless chance which drifts into order and intelligence under a self-executing mandate or necessity, called the survival of the fittest? . . .
>
> It is certain that a spirit older than matter, an intelligence other than human, a will freer than necessity, does not enter into the causes of things contemplated by the new science. It studies a mindless universe with the sharpened instincts of brutes who have slowly graduated into men—themselves the most intelligent essence in existence. Consciousness, reason, purpose, will, are results of blind, undesigning, unfeeling forces, inherent in matter. (5–6)

If this grievance sounds a trifle hackneyed to our twenty-first-century ear, it is nonetheless noteworthy that, with proper distillation, the Reverend's protest boils down to a case against the atomist theory, which supposedly holds that mere matter—or atoms in random motion—can generate *of its own accord* the entire gamut of ideational phenomena, from the most visceral feelings to the highest form of intelligence. which is manifest (so says the theologian) in the total design of the universe. In effect, one might say that the atomistic mater-

ialism of "the new science" is exposed as a kind of fetishism, as a belief in material objects (here, atomic particles) endowed with, or inherently capable of generating, supra-natural powers, insofar as nature is defined and determined exclusively in terms of (inanimate) materiality. If the atom is a kind of fetish, then atomistic materialism would be a form of scientific fetishism. Thus vaguely adumbrating the train of thought that we saw at work in Müller's argument against the primitive fetishism theory, Martineau arrives at this observation: "It is not in the history of Superstition alone that the human mind may be found struggling in the grasp of some mere nightmare of its own creation: a philosophical hypothesis may sit upon the breast with a weight not less oppressive and not more real . . ." (26–27).

Meanwhile, the editor of *Popular Science Monthly* stepped forward as a partisan on the side of the new science. In the "Editor's Table" of the November 1874 issue he defended Tyndall unequivocally, but in a language that did not necessarily contradict the theologian's accusations: "Prof. Tyndall claims that there is a great deal more, in this mysterious and unfathomable something which we call matter, than has been hitherto allowed; he sees in it 'the promise and potency of every form and quality of life.' Much horror has been expressed at this statement, but the expressions seem to us quite gratuitous."[45] Tyndall's stirring language of material potency and vitality quoted here harks back to the eighteenth-century French materialism of Julien Offray de La Mettrie. As a matter of fact, following the cue of the renegade French physician, Baron d'Holbach expressed the following opinion in 1770, entirely in line with Tyndall's view: "A satisfactory definition of matter has not yet been given. Man, deceived and led astray by his prejudices, formed but vague, superficial, and imperfect notions concerning it. He looked upon it as a unique being, gross and passive, incapable of either moving by itself, of any thing by its own. . . ."[46] From the perspective of the nineteenth-century materialists, it appears, this unsatisfactory conception of matter had not changed appreciably in the intervening hundred years.

In any event, there is little room for concession to Christian orthodoxy in this tradition of materialism. We might safely surmise, therefore, that the suspicion of theologians, far from being quelled, was rather ominously compounded by the editor's endorsement of the materialist new sciences. Their "horror" may very well have been already exacerbated by his earlier reference to a sixteenth-century Dominican philosopher and Church-certified heretic, Giordano Bruno, who had evoked, instead of the almighty Father-Creator and cerebral Designer of the Universe, something resembling the Earth Mother. Bruno believed, the editor comments approvingly, that "Matter is not that mere empty *capacity* which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who brings forth all things as the fruit of her own womb."[47]

We shall not follow here the full extent of this debate[48] which, in variously transmuted forms, continues to this day.[49] Suffice it to say that the initial rift

was established on the basis of divergent (and contradictory) conceptions of materiality, and over the question of whether or not matter as such was inherently inert, blind, deaf, dumb, and generally unfeeling—in effect, dead. The trouble was—perhaps by irony, perhaps by necessity—that the more "dead" matter was assumed to be, the more haunted the material world seemed to become.

Spiritualism

As far as Victorian intellectuals are concerned, the haunting of the spirit may or may not be an ordinary state of affairs in Africa, Polynesia, or other far-flung primordial locations. That is one thing, but it is quite another when something similar is suspected of happening in the world of educated Europeans, especially among the cutting-edge scientists of the time. Yet the controversial atomism that scientists advocated and theologians tried to exorcise was but one instance—and by nature a highly circumscribed one—of this phenomenon. Another, no doubt more sensational spirit-manifestation was the sudden vogue of Spiritualism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which swept across the darkened parlors of some of the most respectable households in Victorian England and North America. Highly fashionable men and women gathered around a person functioning, usually for a fee, as a medium—an often slightly disreputable, exotic character, typically migrating from another continent, another region, or another class—for an evening of mysterious rapping, table-tipping, and other tangible signals from the spirit-world of the dead. Many emerging middle-class intellectuals—anthropologists and historians of religions among them—came into the orbit of this phenomenon. Some of them, such as Alfred Russel Wallace and Andrew Lang, became enthusiasts, while others, like F. Max Müller and E. B. Tylor, took the position of the recalcitrant skeptic.

The latter's skepticism, however, did not necessarily signify their indifference to the spiritualist phenomenon. On the contrary, especially in the case of Tylor, one might surmise that his unyielding disbelief and high-handed dismissal of the spiritualist phenomenon was in part an expression of his annoyance at the senseless—yet all the more symptomatic—fad raging all around him. As he saw the matter, so-called Spiritualism was not only instigating false hopes and fears among the gullible and the weak-minded but also threatening to cause undue confusion of the scientific categories. The point of controversy here—which, in fact, mirrors that of the materialist debate in reverse—was whether some essentially immaterial power (or disembodied "spirit") could temporarily activate inanimate objects (including such quotidian items as tables and chairs, or even a whole house) or communicate through foreign bodies (spirit mediums). As a way out of the conceptual mire and as a definitive move against this (for him) alarming insurgence of primitive irrationality, Tylor proposed a new theory that at once described the precivilized mode of

thought and explained the origin of religion. As it happens, this theory was also a way out of the benighted problem of "fetishism."

Several years before the publication of his most famous work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor incrementally ushered his signature theory of "animism" into being through a series of articles.[50] A passage in the first of these articles makes evident that the idea of "animism" initially emerged as a way of correcting an earlier misconception that went by the name of "fetishism." Here is what appears to be the inaugural moment in the transformative overcoming of "fetishism":

> Readers familiar with the study of human thought in its lower phases will ere this have missed the familiar name of "fetishism," as denoting this very opinion "by which man conceives of all external bodies as animated by a life analogous to his own, with differences of mere intensity;" but the word is so utterly inappropriate and misleading that I have purposely avoided it. A *fetish* (Portuguese *feitiço,* "charm, sorcery") is an object used in witchcraft; and the mistake of applying the word to religion at all has arisen from the images and other inanimate objects used by sorcerers being confounded with idols, which we thence find commonly, but very wrongly, called fetishes. The theory which endows the phenomena of nature with personal life might perhaps be conveniently called Animism.[51]

Clearly, this emergent discourse on 'animism' is a virtual prototype, one might say, for what we referred to earlier as a mantra protecting the rational mind against the disorderly proliferation of fetishism discourse. The language here is typically disdainful and dismissive. Yet this is not all. While the newly coined "animism" was above all meant to disable the unruly currency of "fetishism," this neologism was also designed to eschew, circumscribe, and inoculate us against another term/category—namely, "Spiritualism."

As Tylor later noted in *Primitive Culture,* insofar as the minimum definition of religion that he settled for was "the belief in spiritual beings," the naturally appropriate term for the most primitive form of religion would have been "spiritualism," had it not been for the fact that "the word Spiritualism . . . has this obvious defect to us, that it has become the designation of a particular modern sect."[52] Needless to say, with his new theory of primordial religion, Tylor did not wish to evoke first and foremost the images of those table-tipping, self-levitating parlor spiritualists regularly observable in his own society. This is not to say, however, that this urban Spiritualism is entirely unrelated to what Tylor has now chosen to call animism. He proposed "animism" in lieu of "spiritualism" not in order to isolate and exclude the latter from consideration, but on the contrary, in order to include and contain it as a subcategory of the former, and an exceptionally ludicrous one at that. For, in his opinion, the fact that this was very much a modern "sect," emerging in the midst of the most civilized population, by no means entailed that it should be presumed any less savage or barbarous. As he declares summarily: "The modern spiritualism, as every ethnographer may know, is pure and simple savagery both in its theory and the tricks

by which it is supported."[53] And Tylor was most assuredly one of those ethnographers who knew—and knew at first hand.

Like many anthropologists of his time, Tylor's theoretical construction of "animism" was not based on his own experience living among the savages in distant places, but mostly on books and reports made available to him secondhand. Of course, it is generally understood that this condition is rather more typical of the "armchair anthropologists" of his time than not, and this fact often affords contemporary anthropologists—in whose career-formation "field-work" is mandatory—an occasion for condescension. As it turns out, however, Tylor—the paragon of Victorian armchair anthropology if there ever was one—was for a time engaged in a certain kind of "field" observation after all, though not too far away from home.

We learn about his firsthand ethnographic adventure thanks largely to George Stocking's 1971 article, "Animism in Theory and Practice: E. B. Tylor's Unpublished 'Notes on "Spiritualism."'"[54] These notes proffer a view—a better view than Tylor's published works would allow—of the background negotiations leading to the ultimate triangulation of the key terms "animism," "fetishism," and "spiritualism."

Beginning in 1867, and especially intensively in 1872, Tylor attended some of the most prominent spiritualist séances in London[55], out of scientific curiosity, one would assume, or, as he puts it, in order "to look into the alleged manifestations."[56] In effect, these notes, dating from November 4 through 28, 1872, are a rough equivalent to the field notes of "participant observation," in a rather literal sense of the term. To be sure, his mode of participation/observation was significantly at variance with what is meant by that term in contemporary ethnographic methodology. He "went up to London," much as a news reporter might, to see "it" with his own eyes, in order to determine whether it was genuine or a fraud. As a piece of investigative reporting, the result was a rather disappointing one, as his last entry reads:

> *Nov. 28.* Returned home. What I have seen & heard fails to convince me that there is a genuine residue. It all might have been legerdemain, & was so in great measure. . . . My judgment is in abeyance. I admit a prima facie case on evidence, & will not deny that there may be a psychic force causing raps, movements, levitations, etc. But it has not proved itself by evidence of my senses, and I distinctly think the case weaker than written documents led me to think. Seeing has not (to me) been believing. I propose a new text to define faith: "Blessed are they that have seen, and *yet* have believed. (Quoted in Stocking, 100)

In the last analysis, then, as intrigued as he had been by the spiritualist vogue, and despite empirical evidence seeming to support its authenticity (that is, despite whatever it was that he "saw"), Tylor gained the same skeptical distance from this "modern sect" as from the indigenous animism of distant savage tribes. He regards both as results of the unconscious complicity between the gullibility of the many uncritical minds and the deceitfulness of a cynical few

who would manipulate the credulous. Tylor's new scientific ethnography thus stands apart equally from primitive animists and from modern spiritualists, as well as from the previous generation of anthropologists mired in the "utterly inappropriate and misleading" notion of fetishism. Stocking helpfully summarizes this outcome in this way:

> Intellectually, [Tylor's theory of animism] had its roots . . . in Comte, and more especially in De Brosse's concept of fetishism. Empirically, Tylor seems to have drawn on the observed behaviour of children, as well as on his own extensive ethnographic reading. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that between 1866 and 1871, the concept moved away from its roots in the notion of fetishism, and that it did so in the context of an increased interest in modern spiritualist analogues. . . . Indeed, the essay "On the survival of savage thought" would suggest that the spiritualist movement provided a major source of the empirical data in terms of which that concept was developed. (90–91; emphasis added)

In effect, it appears that Tylor sought to achieve scientific equilibrium by means of his new theory, which objectified—and thereby distanced—not two but three forms of superstition: (1) the fetishism/animism of the primitive savages, which is predicated on a misguided notion of materiality and vitality, as well as on the fundamental inability to distinguish the subjective from the objective; (2) Spiritualism fashionable among the fellow Victorians, which for him was nothing other than an atavistic return of primitive animism and which, no less than the animism of the savages, conflated and confused subjective thought and objective reality by positing certain dubious notions of the material and the spiritual and an improbable idea about their relation; and (3) the fetishism theory, also popular among the Victorians, which failed to resolve this confusion and ultimately compounded it by repeating it.

It's Alive!

For the time being, a certain aspect of our historical interest may rest satisfied by the knowledge that at least two representatives of the Victorian human sciences, Tylor and Müller, resolutely rejected the vagaries not only of modern Spiritualism but also of the modern theory of primitive fetishism. To be sure, their views do not speak for the whole, nor probably even for the dominant majority of the learned opinions of the time. Indeed, there were many other possible positions to occupy as Victorian men and women of letters alternately struggled and consorted with the problem of materiality, or with whatever was supposedly other than materiality. In order to project a compelling historical picture of the cultural discourse of the time, it behooves me to take into account, and superimpose if need be, those alternative and dissonant positions. Among the converts and committed enthusiasts for modern Spiritualism were, for instance, the folklorist and novelist Andrew Lang, who at different times positioned himself as a conspicuous opponent to both Müller and Tylor, and Harriet Martineau, a celebrated translator of Comte, the sister of the aforementioned

Unitarian James Martineau and, unlike her brother, a noted atheist. These are but two figures representing altogether different perspectives on the subject of materiality and non-materiality. Instead of following their leads and launching on a new mission (since an expedition in this direction would certainly digress from the limited objective of this essay), I will conclude, for the time being, with a sketch of one more figure: Alfred Russel Wallace.

Today mainly remembered as a collaborator and interlocutor of Charles Darwin and an advocate of certain controversial ideas about "race" and evolution, Wallace had seen some faraway regions of the world and, in the course of his turbulent career, had espoused varying positions with regard to the question of materialism and spiritualism. The product of a socialist experiment in education for the working classes, Wallace was exposed to progressive ideas and skills of science in his adolescent years, when he was being trained as a land surveyor, amateur geologist, and botanist. By the time he reached his adulthood, as he himself testified decades later, he was a thoroughly non-religious, scientific materialist.[57] All in all, he led an eventful life with little insurance, making a precarious, often impecunious living. His first great misfortune was an actual shipwreck in 1852, on his way home from four years of expedition in the Amazon. With nearly all of his entomological and botanical specimens—the fruit of his years of labor in the tropics—lying at the bottom of the sea, he could do nothing but write about the whole affair, which he did in *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* (1853).[58] Presently he came to renounce the materialism of his youth and became an ardent believer in Spiritualism during the 1860s. He was convinced that "spiritual facts" were real enough to manifest materially from time to time under certain favorable circumstances, through especially sensitive individuals or instruments, such as mediums and "spirit-photographs." Eager to shed some scientific light on the matter, he persuaded the likes of John Tyndall and E. B. Tylor to attend séances. Ultimately, he could not sway either of them.[59]

Paradoxically—yet perhaps in the last analysis, inevitably—Wallace's spiritualism was an almost perfect mirror image of that brand of materialism, full of mystery and wonder, endorsed by the editor of *Popular Science Monthly.* There is an unmistakable symmetry between these positions: either seemingly dead matter turns out to be intrinsically or potentially animate, or immaterial spirit comes to possess, disrupt, and intervene in the otherwise quiescent (dead) material world. One of Tylor's passing comments in *Primitive Culture* is illuminating here:

> It is extremely difficult to draw a distinct line of separation between the two prevailing sets of ideas relating to spiritual action through what we call inanimate objects. Theoretically we can distinguish the notion of the object acting as it were by the will and force of its own proper soul or spirit, from the notion of some foreign spirit entering its substance or acting on it from without, and so using it as a body or instrument. But in practice these conceptions blend almost inextricably.[60]

Wallace's life-course and his changing outlook from materialism to spiritualism may be a fitting emblem for this fundamental difficulty—or impossibility?—of telling apart, once and for all, intrinsic (self) activation from extrinsic (foreign) possession.

* * *

As we attempt to take stock of the situation, we are left to wonder why the matter-spirit relation has come to seem so problematic, so permeated with the smell of death. When did matter as such become so dead, and its animation so ghoulish? Has it been always this way?

Of course, there would be a materialist answer and a spiritualist answer to this question. Spiritualists might say that it is the mechanistic, scientistic, technologized ideology of materialism (and the industrialization beholden to this ideology) that has been choking all the living spirit out of the world. Materialists might in turn blame the mystifying theological obscurantism of the spiritualists for cadaverizing the body and matter, for making it impossible to read any pulse and appreciate any sign of life in the material world, the world of "flesh and blood," as Feuerbach once put it. Clearly, these are not propositions to be fairly compared or easily mediated and reconciled. In fact, the contention has gotten considerably more complicated over the years, because neither "theologians" and "scientists," nor "religionists" and "secularists" fall neatly into opposing sides, but rather cross over the materialism-spiritualism divide in multiple, confusing ways.

There is still a little room for an alternative speculation, a wager, an idea to be thrown into the fray. This speculation has an affinity with what might be described as dialectical materialism, or, before this term was coined in the late nineteenth century, what Engels called "Marxist materialism" (as distinct from the "vulgar materialism" of some of his contemporaries), and what was for Marx simply a "new materialism." In any event, the speculation will be in the spirit of Marx.

If materiality was becoming "dead matter" as modernity progressed, and, as is often said, we humans were becoming increasingly differentiated, abstracted, and alienated from the rest of the world, it was also in the course of these changes, as many historians of modernity have observed, that "we" were becoming solidified and disciplined into subjectivity, individuality, and agency. At the same time, the rest of the world other than "us" was becoming progressively the world of *things,* and, as Marx would point out, under the spell of a capitalist economy certain things never remained *just* things but were destined to enter an altogether new and different system of value and circulation—that is, they became *commodities.* As a commodity, a thing, dead or alive, leads a kind of double life: on the one hand, in its "natural," intrinsic being (use value) and on the other, in its capacity as a measure of equivalency in relation to all other commodified things (exchange value). As commodities, then, material or

embodied objects are essentially non-subjective, non-human, inert beings that are nevertheless endowed with a seemingly mysterious power to circulate and substitute, either actually or virtually. But this power appears mysterious, Marx would argue, only insofar as its real nature is hidden from our view. For, according to Marx, the exchange value of commodities is none other than the effect of our material and social relation to the world and to our fellow human beings through the process of labor and social intercourse. It is therefore our alienation from our social production under capitalism that material beings-qua-commodities come to seem at once inert (dead) and animated (possessed).

Having examined several scenes from Victorian science and culture more or less anecdotally, I do not of course imagine myself to be in a position to conclude definitively, for example, that it was capitalism that rendered materiality at once dead and possessed while turning certain material objects into veritable fetishes, even if that seems to be just what Marx *does* suggest when he refers to the fetishism of commodities. Let me instead conclude by observing that there was nothing *merely metaphorical* about Marx's appropriation of the concept of fetishism. For, if the problem of materiality in the nineteenth century turns out to be the problem of *commodified things,* and if the problem of fetish embodies the problem of materiality as such, then we have reason to suspect that the uncanny object first conjured up in the encounter with African primitives was directly, i.e., non-figuratively, relevant to the understanding of the everyday mystery of modern economy.

It is no wonder that the fetish discourse could not be shed, and that it continued to haunt the science of religion for decades on end.

NOTES

1. Various names and phrases commonly used to refer to the study of religion, such as "religious studies," "science of religion," *Religionswissenschaft,* "history of religions," "comparative religion," and their cognates in various European languages are not exactly interchangeable in all occasions, but in this essay I will be using some of these as more or less equivalent.

2. Among the notable exceptions—i.e., those who held onto the theory of fetishism as the most original/primitive form of religion—was Frederick Harrison, Comte's protege in England. His public debate with Herbert Spencer over the alleged primitive knowledge of the Infinite (first published as a series of article in *Popular Science Monthly*) was later collected in one volume (edited by Edward Youmans, *The Nature and Reality of Religion: A Controversy between Frederick Harrison and Herbert Spencer,* New York: Appleton, 1885): "Wilst I find in a hundred books that countless races of Africa and the organized religion of China attribute human *qualities* to natural objects, and grow up to regard those objects with veneration and awe, I shall continue to think that fetishism, or the reverent ascription of feeling and power to natural objects, is a spontaneous tendency of the human mind" (123).

3. *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* (Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1905), 532–33.

4. "This animation hypothesis, held as a faith, is at the root of all the mythologies. It has been called Fetichism; which, according to the common accounts of it, ascribes a

life and personality resembling our own, not only to animals and plants, but to rocks, mountains, streams, winds, the heavenly bodies, the earth itself, and even the heavens. Fetichism thus resembles Totemism; which, indeed, is Fetichism *plus* certain peculiarities. These peculiarities are, (1) the appropriation of a special Fetich to the tribe, (2) its hereditary transmission through mothers, and (3) its connection with the *jus connubii.* Our own belief is that the accompaniments of Fetichism have not been well observed, and that it will yet be found that in many cases the Fetich *is* the Totem." J. F. McLennan, "The Worship of Animals and Plants," *Fortnightly Review* (London), 12 (1869), 422–23.

5. W. Robertson Smith, *The Religions of the Semites* (1889).

6. The first articulation of the animism theory seems to have occurred in "The Religion of Savages" (*The Fortnightly Reviews,* vol. 6, 1866, 71–86), and it was fully elaborated in *Primitive Culture* (1871 and 1873). See below.

7. Cf., for instance, Frank Byron Jevons's *An Introduction to the History of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1896); Daniel G. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive Peoples* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1897); Alfred C. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism* (London: Constable, 1921); E. Washburn Hopkins, *Origin and Evolution of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923); Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories,* trans. H. J. Rose (London: Methuen, 1935; based on *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee,* 1926–1955).

8. In the literature at the period in question—roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s and 1930s—the convention among scholars was to refer to their contemporary inhabitants of the "uncivilized" parts of the world as "savages," whereas the word "primitive" was reserved for the prehistoric ancestors of the civilized world, also called "early man." These scholars tended to aver that the primitive and the savage were not the same thing, because the latter underwent a long course of history just like the civilized peoples today (though the savage's "history" was generally considered degenerative or stagnant rather than evolutionary or progressive), and that, despite this difference, the savage of today still offered much to teach us about "our" prehistory, because of some important commonalities they share with their primordial ancestors. Throughout this paper I conform to this terminology of the savage and the primitive, which is at variance with the contemporary use of these terms.

9. Sometimes this indiscriminate conflation and expansion of the definition is attributed to Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor, Adolf Bastian (*Der Mensch in der Geschichte: zur Begründung einer psychologischen Weltanschauung,* Leipzig, 1860), or Friz Schultze (*Der Fetischismus,* Leipzig, 1871; English translation, *Fetishism: A Contribution to Anthropology and the History of Religion,* trans. J. Fitzgerald, New York, 1885), rather than to de Brosses.

10. Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: the Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Knopf, 1948) 368.

11. Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India; delivered in the chapter House, Westminster Abbey, in April, May, and June, 1878* (London: Longmans, Green, 1879).

12. This was Lang in his Tylorian phase. By the time he was advocating the theory of primitive monotheism, his opinion on this matter seems to have changed significantly. Cf. George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888–1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 50–63.

13. Eugene Comte Goblet d'Alviella, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of the Conception of God as Illustrated by Anthropology and History* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892).

14. Respectively published as *Natural Religion* (1889), *Physical Religion* (1890),

Anthropological Religion (1891), and *Psychical Religion* (1892). The nature of the Gifford Lectures was such that four different individuals were to deliver respectively a series of lectures in one of the four Scottish universities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrews). In the inaugural year (1888–1889), Müller gave his at Glasgow, while Andrew Lang did likewise at St. Andrews under the title, *The Making of Religion.* A year later, E. B. Tylor inaugurated the series at Aberdeen. Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion,* 570–71.

15. See note 7 above, as well as Goblet d'Alviella, *Lectures.* I am assuming here a certain level of respectability on the basis of the prestige of the publishers, as well as the academic appointments held by these authors. Jevon was a classical tutor in the University of Durham, described by Eric Sharpe as the best known English-speaking liberal Christian among the "founding fathers of comparative religion" (Sharpe, *Comparative Religion,* 148–49); Brinton was professor of American Archaeology and Linguistics at University of Pennsylvania; Haddon, University Lecturer in Ethnology at Cambridge University; Hopkins, Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology at Yale University; Schmidt, University of Vienna; Goblet d'Alviella, University of Brussels.

16. This "conventional wisdom" is intelligently summarized in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe,* Bd. II, hrsg. von Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, Matthias Laubscher (Stuttgart: Kohnhammer, 1990), "*Fetisch/Fetischismus,*" s.v.

17. As Müller put it: "If you consulted any of the books that have been written during the last hundred years on the history of religion, you will find in most of them a striking agreement on at least one point, viz., that the lowest from of what can be called religion is *fetishism,* that it is impossible to imagine anything lower that would still deserve that name, and that therefore fetishism may safely be considered as the very beginning of all religion." *Origin and Growth of Religion,* 53.

18. C. P. Tiele and Daniel G. Brinton respectively gave prominent lecture series in 1896 and 1897—the former the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, the latter the second series of the newly established American Lectures on the History of Religions (delivered at seven Northeast American cities)—and spoke from a viewpoint explicitly assuming the universality of religion, in the language of the common essence and its greatly various manifestations "from the lowest to the highest." Tiele, *Elements of the Science of Religion,* 2 vols. (London: Blackwood, 1897–1898); Brinton, *Religions of Primitive Peoples* (New York: Putnam, 1897). A few decades later, this universalist conception famously culminated in Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Tübingen, 1933), which was translated into English under the title, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London, 1938).

19. I argue this point more extensively in a monograph-length study underway, entitled *The Invention of World Religions, or How the Idea of European Hegemony came to be Expressed in the Language of Pluralism and Diversity.*

20. Despite the current use of this singular/plural distinction to demarcate the different philosophies involved in the earlier and the later generations of scholars—the use made and insisted on by Eliade, Kees Bolle, and others—nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers seem to have used both forms indiscriminately. In English, the following designations seem to have been used more or less interchangeably: history of religion, history of religions, science of religion, comparative religion, study of religion, historical study of religions (Morris Jastrow), comparative history of religions (James Moffatt). In other western European languages I have also encountered: *l'histoire des religions, sciences religieuses, scienza delle religioni, Religionswissenschaft, Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft, Geschichte der vergleichenden Religionsforschung, allegemeine Religionsgeschichte,* and *allegemeine kritische Geschichte der Religion,* among others. Individual writers often make their own case about the difference between, for instance, history of religion(s) and comparative religion, or between history of religion and "anthropology" (by which Andrew Lang meant the difference between

the study of religion based on "historical" cultures with written sources—such as India—and that based on ethnographic study of savages); but these distinctions are not consistent and tend to be idiosyncratic.

21. Here, as in most contemporary discussion concerning the nineteenth-century theory of the origin of religion, the word "evolution" is used in a non-technical, rather loose sense of "development" or "improvement." Suffice it to say that this "popular" notion of evolution is in fact contrary to the non-teleological thrust of the Darwinian notion of natural selection, according to which the survival of the fittest is a contingent process and the transmutation of the species itself is essentially random.

22. Andrew Lang, "Fetichism and the Infinite," in *Custom and Myth,* new ed. (London: Longmans Green, 1893), 212.

23. Müller, *Origin and Growth of Religion,* 116–17; emphasis added.

24. In an extraordinary series of articles published in the 1980s entitled "The Problem of the Fetish," William Pietz, a historian of religion with no connection to the Eliadean tradition of History of Religions, has documented the genealogy of this problem/idea, recovering its disjunctive "history" from the sixteenth century to the Enlightenment ("The Problem of the Fetish," I, II, and IIIa, respectively published in *Res* 9, Spring 1985; 13, Spring 1987; and 16, Autumn 1988). I derive these characterizations of fetishism from his elucidation. Perhaps this is as good a place as any to acknowledge the not-easily-calculable extent of my indebtedness to his monumental work.

25. We recall that idolatry and polytheism were interchangeable terms in David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (written but publication suppressed in 1756, posthumously published in 1777). For a useful historical account of how "polytheism"—a term invented by Philo of Alexandria, and rediscovered in the sixteenth century by Jean Bodin—came to replace "idolatry," see Francis Schmidt, "Polytheisms: Degeneration or Progress?" *History and Anthropology,* vol 2 (1987), 9–60.

26. In the nineteenth century this hierarchical dichotomy was prominently played out in the form of a radical differentiation between local (or ethnic) religions and universal religion(s). For instance, James Freeman Clarke differentiated the "catholic" religion (Christianity) from "ethnic" religions (all the rest) in his widely-read *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1871), and Cornelius Petrus Tiele drew an important distinction between "national nomistic" (or nomothetic) religions and "universalistic" religions (or "world religions") in "Religions," *Encyclopaedia Britannica, s v.,* 9th ed., 1884. Cf. also Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

27. To be exact, according to Comte, the progressive stages of fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism together constitute the theological-fictive phase of evolution, to be superseded next by the metaphysical-abstract phase, and finally by the positive-scientific. Cf. Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy,* trans. Harriet Martineau, chapters VII–IX.

28. John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* (London, 1870).

29. Wilhelm Schmidt, *Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories,* 59.

30. All alleged cases of fetishism, Haddon claims, "when examined, show that the worship is paid to an intangible power or spirit incorporated in some visible form"; therefore, a fetish is merely a mediating object between the worshipper and the power "behind the material object." *Magic and Fetishism,* 70.

31. Alfred C. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism,* 91–92. Haddon goes on to suggest that the choice of objects to be worshipped—and the degree of materiality attached to the object—may very well depend on such factors as climate: "The cold, practical, phlegmatic Northerners worship within bare walls, while the fervour of the imaginative South demands expression in an elaborate ritual, with richness of decoration, warms of colour, dim

lights and soft music. The extraordinary vivid imagination and the childlike capacity for 'make-believe' of the negro, lead him further still; the lively fancy of the West African demands a visible object to which worship may be directed. He wishes really and sensibly to behold and even to possess his god, so he incorporates him in a tangible object . . ." (93).

32. Washburn Hopkins, *Origin and Evolution of Religion,* 11.

33. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion,* abridged edition (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 11–12.

34. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 13.

35. *Primitive Culture: Research into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization,* 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1870), 6. Here, Tylor, is relegating some contemporaries from his own society to the rank of the most savage: "for no Greenlander or Kafir ever mixed up his subjectivity with the evidence of his senses into a more hopeless confusion than the modern spiritualist."

36. *The Golden Bough,* 50.

37. Cf. Lang, "Fetichism and the Infinite."

38. Müller, *Origin and Growth of Religion,* 93.

39. Müller, *Origin and Growth of Religion,* 59.

40. In that remarkable passage, Max Müller made visible, if only inadvertently, a textbook case of the orientalist construction of a phantom other. For fetishism turns out to be a veritable mirror image of one's own practice, an image of one's likeness but in reverse. To be sure, a critical analysis of this specter, generated by the orientalist compulsion to play out the logic of sameness and difference, does not end with this recognition, but rather begins with it. Indeed, so long as the problem of the fetish is regarded essentially as an error in the European *perception,* or as a flaw in the western order of knowledge, our critical thinking is bound to be "self-reflective" only in a narcissistic sense, bound to circulate within the domain of Western guilt and fantasy. Instead, this hegemonic representation of Europe's other, this colonial order of knowledge of the West about the rest, must be understood and analyzed as a component in the material history of several centuries of colonial contact, and not merely as a derivative effect of this history or, conversely, as an icon of some abstract motivating force behind it. As Müller's unselfconsciously critical passage itself testifies, "fetishism" as a phantom object—as a cultural hybrid of a problem, a new breed of monster born of a historical/accidental transmutation—presents an obvious point of departure for such an analysis. For the present occasion, however, my aim is far more modest; I will continue to dwell on the Victorian afterlife of fetishism, that is, the time when fetishism had already become a veritable ghost of an idea/theory, but still troubled living theorists with its strange (im)materiality.

41. English translation in *Man a Machine and Man a Plant,* trans. Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 27.

42. *Popular Science Monthly* (New York). Spencer's articles were published in March and December, 1875.

43. John Tyndall, *Address Delivered before The British Association Assembled at Belfast* (London: Longmans, Green, 1874).

44. James Martineau, *Religion as Affected by Modern Materialism: An Address Delivered in Manchester New College, London, at the opening of its Eighty-Ninth Session, on Tuesday, October 6, 1874* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1875).

45. "Editor's Table," *Popular Science Monthly* (New York), November 1874, vol. 6, 110–12.

46. Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (Mirabeau), *The System of Nature, or Laws of the Moral and Physical World,* English trans. H. D. Robinson (New York: Burt Franklin, 1868; reprinted 1970), 24.

47. "Editor's Table," 110. As we remember, while Bruno has been much honored and given pride of place in the history of materialism and modern religious thought in line with the scientific spirit, things did not turn out very well for him in his own dealings with the Christian authorities. He was imprisoned by the Inquisition for the last nine years of his life, at the end of which, in the year 1600, he was burnt alive as a condemned heretic.

48. In addition to the three works just discussed, there were sequels. Tyndall responded to Martineau in the new preface to his *Fragments of Science,* which also appeared in the December 1875 issue of *Popular Science Monthly.* Martineau's further "rejoinder" appeared in *Contemporary,* February, 1876. The editor of the *Monthly* devoted another column of "Editor's Table" to and discussed "Martineau's Reply to Tyndall" in the April 1876 issue. As the debate progressed, it increasingly became a contention over the territoriality of "science" and "religion."

49. Today's thriving industry in the field of "science and religion" may be regarded as one of its outcomes, the predominant one on the side of theology.

50. "The Religion of Savages," *Fortnightly Review,* vol. 6 (1866), 71–86; "On Traces of the Early Mental Condition of Man," *Proceedings, Royal Institution of Great Britain,* vol. 5 (1867), 83–93; "On the Survival of Savage Thought in Modern Civilization," *Proceedings, Royal Institution of Great Britain,* vol. 5 (1869), 522–35; "The Philosophy of Religion among the Lower Races of Mankind," *Journal of Ethnological Society* (New Series), vol. 2 (1870), 369–79.

51. "The Religion of Savages," 84.

52. *Primitive Culture,* I, 426.

53. "The Religion of Savages," 85.

54. George W. Stocking, Jr., "Animism in Theory and Practice: E. B. Tylor's Unpublished 'Notes on "Spiritualism"'" *Man* (New Series), vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1971), 88–104.

55. "Of the ten mediums with whom he had séances, all, with the exception of Mrs Olive, are identifiable in the standard histories of the spiritualist movement. Three of them were among its major figures: Kate Fox, one of the founding sisters; Daniel Home, its most glamorous public personage; and the Reverend Moses, a country curate whose gradual conversion to spiritualism was accomplished just prior to Tylor's acquaintance with him, and who was to become what one historian [Arthur Conan Doyle] called "the best modern exponent" of spiritualist views in a series of articles and books published in the '70s and '80s. Among the participants in the séances are several of the more prominent of what might be called "lay" figures of the movement . . . ." Stocking, "Animism in Theory and Practice," 91–92.

56. In Stocking, "Animism in Theory and Practice," 92.

57. Alfred Russel Wallace, *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1908).

58. George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 96–97. Today, something of Wallace's life has been fancifully memorialized in A. S. Byatt's recent novellas, and in a disquietingly beautiful film based on one of the stories, *Angels and Insects.* Admittedly, references to Wallace are either tangential or mutated, but "Morpho Eugenia" refers to the naturalist-entomologist aspect of Wallace's career, and "The Conjugial Angel" seems to allude to his interest in Spiritualism. Both novellas are published in a single volume under the title, *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

59. Cf. Peter Pels, "Spiritual Facts and Super-Visions: The 'Conversion' of Alfred Russel Wallace," *Etnofoor* VIII (2), 1995, 69–91.

60. *Primitive Culture,* II, 153.