

**The Plate in My Head is a Government Plot:  
Visions of the *Eschaton* in UFO Conspiracy Theory**

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Harold Bloom, in his *Omens of the Millennium* (1996), a very personal meditation on the texts and modalities of the turn of mind we call “gnosticism,” tells the humorous story of an encounter he had with fellow Yale colleague and “gnostic” ruminator, Bentley Layton, author of the popular scholarly translation, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (1987). Apparently, Bloom had had a long day and was beginning the last trek across campus before going home. He ran into Layton who was on his own last migration of the afternoon. Bloom reflects that he must have had a very sour look on his face, for Layton, upon greeting him, inquired as to why he seemed to be in such a terrible, somber mood. Bloom replied that his feet were killing him. Layton paused, became thoughtful, raised one finger, and in a deep, prophetically amused voice reportedly answered with a joke that probably only another academician could understand: “Ah, that is because of the archon of shoes.”<sup>1</sup>

So, we begin with the archon of shoes. When I was exposed to “gnosticism” many years ago in my “Texts of Early Christianity” courses, and incidentally, to the writings of Layton, I was struck with how similar the “grand Gnostic” myth which Layton described resembled in many ways a modern secular conspiracy theory. According to Layton’s schemata, the “gnostic” mind-set of those ancients who subscribed, whether Pagan, Persian, Jewish or Christian, shared some basic assumptions, central among these being that humans are in a kind of exile from true knowledge about their origins and final destinies. “Gnosticism” is generally understood to be a mind-set, or a method of mystical awareness. Most definitions of “gnosticism” focus on the personal, experiential aspects of that process of “coming to know the truth” for, indeed, that is what the term “gnostic” refers to: “knowing, knowledge, a knower.” Texts identified as “gnostic” often contain instructions about how to gain inner knowledge of one’s purpose, destiny or source, or descriptions, even road-maps, if you will, of the inner geography/topography of spiritual, heavenly or other-worldly realms/experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Layton’s text, however, reveals the other side of the “gnostic” equation—a question that the ancients faced, that we face in our own way, in our own worlds. For the “gnostic,” to turn inward, toward the self, was often to turn away from the world—not necessarily in an ascetic sense, but in the sense that the outer world could give no trusted indication of who/what the self might “actually” be. Here enters the archon, that instrument of the Demiurge,<sup>3</sup> the crafting/crafty

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom. *Omens of Millennium*. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Layton. *The Gnostic Scriptures*. 5-21.

<sup>3</sup> The term Demiurge first appears in Plato’s *Timaeus* and is the term used for the god who fashions the physical world in the myth of creation found there.

god who created the physical world and gives humans desire so that we are trapped in the wily labyrinths of physical limitation. What many modern commentators on “gnosticism” and its reported re-emergence in current American life forget to mention is that the personal experiential aspect of the “gnostic” spiritual ascent was predicated on precisely the notion that there is something about the physical world that fools us, and indeed that there are powers “out there/in here” who *intend* to deceive and conceal the deception.<sup>4</sup> In ancient “gnostic” texts, these powers were called “archons” and they were virtually “cabals” organized by and loyal to the keeper of the secret and the deception, the Demiurge. In a sense, “gnostics” affirm what Descartes, in his meditation, most fears: there is a provisional “god” of the world, and it is a spiteful, deceptive, control-hungry deity. In other words, the sense that some individuals have, that they are exiled from their “true” natures and that something is keeping them from that knowledge, is, for the “gnostically” inclined, an intuition that is based on something ‘real’—yes, Martha, there is a conspiracy of sorts. And so, the gnostic must seek epistemological certainty, and ultimately ontological comfort in other places, i.e. the personal realities which are revealed by meditation, spiritual practices and reflection.

Let’s be more specific. Layton outlines what he considers to be the central tenets and practices associated with groups who called themselves “gnostic” in the ancient world. First, they adhered to a distinctive myth of origins, that in its many versions, was dualistic, involving an original Parent Deity, and the morally ambivalent “creator god” who, with his minions, kept humans trapped in their physical bodies through the mechanism of desire.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, there was a strong group identity which emerged in specialized, often exclusive assemblies. Frequently, Christian gnostics separated themselves in congregations apart from “non-Gnostic” Christians, which was part of what motivated the Roman Church to declare them heretical. Thirdly, this separation betrayed an overt hostility to non-gnostics who were often, in the ancient world, identified as being children of Cain—Abel’s murderous brother. Separatism also signaled a lack of trust in established authorities, political or religious, whose attempts to persecute or limit gnostic speculation and influence were often regarded as proof that such institutions were agents of the archons on earth. Fourthly, gnostics often employed a special jargon, in-house signifiers that fueled endless correspondences and metaphysical speculations with “the act of interpretation being itself the proof of the larger project of locating the final order of determination.” This process of interpretation was regarded as an ever-ongoing effort to draw the past into the present—as correspondences linked and drew the speculator back to the beginning, the cessation of being in the Parent of the Entirety. In addition, there was an emphasis on personal election, spiritual transformation and even transmutation, usually signified in the ancient gnostic assemblies through the act of ritual baptism. Finally, gnostic interpreters often drew upon populist sympathies, appealing to those sentiments and individuals who felt themselves to be exiled from or victims of the Roman body politic. This was true, even though the actual reins of power in most gnostic communities appeared to remain within an elite of intellectuals.

Modern secular conspiracy theories appear to have several discrete origins.<sup>6</sup> Most historians of the “conspiracy theory” have linked its primary origins to the political intrigues

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, Van Den Broek argues that the essential feature of gnosticism ancient and modern is simply the emphasis on personal revelation and ‘gnosis.’

<sup>5</sup> The original Parent Deity was variously referred to as the “Parent of the Entirety,” the “First Principle” and the “Pleroma.” The creator-god/Demiurge was usually called the “Chief Ruler,” the “Craftsman,” or a name which particularly identified him as the god of the Old Testament “Ialdabaoth.”

<sup>6</sup> Fenster. *Conspiracy Theory*. Part I of this work “Conspiracy Theory as Political Ideology” gives an excellent, concise summation of the ‘history’ of conspiracy theory in the West and the nature of the various schools of academic critique that have developed out of studying the cultural phenomenon of conspiracy narratives.

attending the French Revolution, with more recent developments in this century focusing on the Cold War, the rapid ascension of technologies which give governing institutions powers of surveillance unknown in any other recorded age, the sense of estrangement from the means of capital experienced by many in the United States, and a number of actual, though not global, conspiracies on the part of American politicians (i.e. Nixon).<sup>7</sup> This is true even though features or the supposed players in many such theories (such as the persistence of anti-Jewish/semite elements) are much older. Although it might be easy for us to dismiss the grosser and seemingly irrational nature of some of the more obvious and well-known conspiracy theories (e.g. the take over of the U.S by NATO troops), Mark Fenster, in his extraordinary cultural examination, Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture (1999), argues that the tendency towards a “conspiratorial reading” of history can also be found in academics as diverse as Marx (forces of history), Foucault (hegemony), and Althusser (ideologies). Indeed, Fenster contends that “conspiratorial” readings of history seem to be more the norm in American/European society than most who consider themselves “rational” would care to admit. Moreover, reading conspiracy theory merely as a kind of paranoia disguises the fact that it may reveal actual concerns of the periphery in relation to the center (e.g. conspiracy theory often expresses real concerns about individual representation in government, economic/political inequities, and corruption). Rather Fenster insists that one needs to comprehend not only the political utility of conspiracy, but also the importance of the totalizing effect of conspiracy thinking as it links the individual to historical processes, providing identity, purpose and meaning in a world where the promises of endless capital are increasingly remote for more and more individuals.<sup>8</sup>

Fenster describes conspiracy theory as desire, production and narrative and provides a schematic that is startlingly similar to the features detailing gnosticism found above, albeit these are described and understood in primarily materialist terms. As he outlines it, conspiracy theorists desire to create a “totalizing mythology” that interprets the present in terms of the past, engages in deliberate use of linking binaries (fashioning dualisms), and specialized signifiers, which both multiply meanings and join disparate elements into unified, albeit often unstable, fields. These specialized jargons are often the measure of inclusivity: “Like Gnostics, conspiracy theorists interpret for individual and small-group enlightenment—finding significance in the mundane and wonderment in the apparently explicable.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, conspiracy theories often contain narratives of individual election, enlightenment or transition—i.e. when the existence of a conspiracy becomes known, thus motivating individuals to action. There is obvious hostility to institutions, groups, cabals, or individuals who are deemed to be instruments of the “cover-up.” Finally, most conspiracy theorists draw on symbolisms and language that Fenster refers to as a “popular eschatology,” i.e. the moment when the “truth shall be known.”

Yet, for many conspiracy theorists as for ancient gnostics, this moment of revealing is ever receding: “The conspiracy is an enormous structure always on the horizon of interpretation and the cause of everything, always the point toward which interpretation moves but which it

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<sup>7</sup> Staples, William. The Culture of Surveillance: Discipline and Control in the United States. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1998. This fascinating little book by an scholar of criminology and the penal system in the United States, examines the advances of surveillance technology in the west with specific reference to Foucault's articulation of the Pan-Opticon. Although not a book about conspiracy, it is a book which can give even the conspiracy sceptic some pause for thought.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 68-73.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 86.

never fully reaches.”<sup>10</sup> Fenster coins the term “epistemophilia” to describe this endless yearning for “the truth,” this ‘intensification of the unknown through imagination,’ which he argues comes to resemble the “Lacanian notion of desire, which requires, at its core, that its ultimate fulfillment be continually deferred.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the conspiracy theorist, while seeking the truth, cannot allow the truth to be finally revealed, or the narrative of interpretive meaning will cease.

While the similarities between ancient gnostics and modern conspiracy theorists are impressive, there are also important differences to consider. Ancient gnostics believed in a transcendent reality, a literal dualism of flesh and spirit. The interpretive search for truth and meaning focused on becoming a personal “knower” (gnostic) of the existence of that higher transcendence. The desires of the body were regarded as traps and often (although not always) gnostics tended toward various ascetic practices. According to their texts, and what we know of their historical contexts, most gnostics were individuals who could no longer expect the wealth/security of the Roman Empire to trickle their way, and therefore the emphasis was on the renouncing of physical cravings for wealth, ease and political power. At death, for the gnostic, the truth would be known, the story would end. Eventually, all people might come to be freed from the traps of the physical world—and history would end.

For modern conspiracy theorists in America, a transcendent reality is not necessarily assumed, therefore the emphasis is on the conspiracy itself—the deception that lies at the heart of what we think “reality” might be. For those theorists who adhere to a “spiritual version” of conspiracy, such as the prolific David Icke, the emphasis is on a theurgic reconstruction of the soul in order to conquer the physical world, thereby exposing the conspiracy and getting the “cabals” to cough up their material “goodies,” since culturally many, if not most Americans expect and demand wealth.<sup>12</sup>

However, for most conspiracy theorists the “end of days” is also often described in ever-receding terms as new signs and moments of evidence complicate the revealing of the final forces/individuals who hold the reins of economic and political power: “Unfortunately, if the chain is endless, so the layers of deception are infinite, and if the connections are never completed, then the bare truth remains out of reach.”<sup>13</sup> The desire for some seemingly transcendent explanation appears to be the central yearning of the conspiracy theorist, yet, if a desired explanation or object were truly forthcoming one would discover in the words of Slavoj Zizek, that the “really found object is not the reference of desire.”<sup>14</sup> The desire never ends, but then neither does the narrative of personal identity and meaning. Still, for both the gnostic and the conspiracy theorist, the *eschaton*, the “end of days,” is understood generally to be a gradual process, brought upon largely by individual and group effort, with occasional assistance from “insiders.”

Therefore, one should not construe that I am arguing for a perfect continuity between gnostic and conspiracy cosmologies. The major objection against Layton’s description of the “gnostic” mindset is that his interpretation of it may well be the result of a retroactive projection of present day assumptions upon a practice which existed in the past and cannot be actually

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 93-95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>12</sup> One could also call this a ‘New Age’ approach to conspiracy—See David Icke’s latest installment, *The Biggest Secret* (1999) in which he joins Reptilian extra-terrestrials, the death of Lady Di, so-called evidence of ancient astronauts and the Trilateral commission in a dizzying display of creative associations.

<sup>13</sup> Fenster. *Conspiracy Theory*. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 91-92.

known or understood as it was. On the other hand, one could just as easily say that present day conspiracy theories represent simply a historically contingent secular version of various mental tendencies that are latently present in civilizations which have been foundationally constructed out of Christian assumptions, since the majority of historians who research Christian origins do agree that “gnostic” traces have been present in most forms of Christianity throughout its history.<sup>15</sup> Such “secular gnosticisms” would represent the “re-emergence” of a specific “trace” (in Gramscian terms) of a recurring mental posturing, brought upon by a specific set of historical conditions that allow for its exposure, its “re-surfacing.”<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, in this discussion, we are not talking about the typical run of the mill cover-ups—such as Watergate, the political intrigues of factions in French society during the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century or the various plots that family members of the Caesar clan made against one another in the Roman world. There are actual plots and counter-plots to be sure---no we’re talking about the “global/cosmic” intrigues, about which such overall generalizations as “archon” and “hegemony” can be made. Furthermore, we are describing the conditions which render “gnosticisms,” “millenarian thinking,” and “conspiracy theory” as conceptual, ideological and strategic performances which lie along a continuum of constructed meaning. Although it is possible to be a millenarian and not a gnostic, it is very difficult, as Fenster describes it, to be millenarian and have no sense of conspiracy. Moreover, it is well-nigh impossible to be any of the above and not engage in eschatology—even if the “end of days” is regarded as extremely remote. All of the above are dualistic, all seek to understand and totalize the past while retaining the importance of individual action, identity, experience and conscience. All can be considered forms of “fetishism and metonymy precisely because they substitute instrumental Power, which is one part of the historical process, for the whole.”<sup>17</sup>

What does this have to do with the archon of shoes—or with UFO conspiracy theories for that matter? Well—let’s unpack the assumptions in the joke that Layton told, assumptions that must be present in order for the joke to be funny. We can start with “shoes” themselves—the conception that shoe-ness has been so constructed by “external forces” (such as NIKE) that the pain inflicted on feet is an inevitable result, particularly since feet are so constructed (or created or evolved) to require, at least in some instances, the wearing of the very artifacts that might hurt them. This illustrates the receding line of correspondences which render disparate elements into a meaningful whole, constituting what Charles Sanders Pierce ironically called “the abduction” as “the process of interpreting unexplained events by figuring out a law that can explain them.”<sup>18</sup> It is this insidious turn, this irony, that the conditions of the physical body itself might require the invention of tools which can further discomfort, or at least not insure comfort, that can lead the gnostically-minded ascetic down the road of denying bodily pleasures because of the potential for addiction and entrapment, or the conspiracy theorist to contemplate the dark motives of multinationals. The feet can hurt, despite the fact that they are made for standing and walking—and the hurt is very personal. But most importantly, for the sake of the joke, and the gnostic, and perhaps the conspiracy theorist, the hurting of the feet is also a meaningful thing. It points to the possibility of there being a state of being where there is no pain, where, for the ancients, there

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*. Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press. 1975. This interpretation of the Pauline corpus is not without its controversial moments—still the views expressed are well within the mainstream of academic interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers. 1971. 376-377.

<sup>17</sup> Fenster. *Conspiracy Theory*.

<sup>18</sup> Pierce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1931-1958. 2: 643.

are no feet to hurt, because the body has been transcended, the truth of the spiritual body as permanent, and the physical body as temporary is assured. In Layton's point, the painful feet can also be a reminder of the future potential, in simple physical terms, of the ability to "put ones feet up," to relax, to let go of the obligations of walking, teaching, writing and talking, which are the activities of those considered fortunate enough to have procured a tenured position. The pain points to the reality of an archon, an oppressive power, whose hold over the soul, once named, can be transcended and overcome with that knowledge. The knowledge of the archon exposes the conspiracy of oppression, the illusion that painful feet and all they might represent, are an eternal fact of existence. Or, as Fenster puts it:

"In a similar way, conspiracy theory masks the impossible ideals of representative, participatory democracy within a capitalist economy. Displacing the fears of this impossibility onto fears of conspiracy condensing these fears into notions of murderous, licentious presidents and secretive cabals (or simply mercenary corporate executives) the conspiracy theorist enjoys his/her symptom, indulging in its practice, reveling in its excess, never fully reaching the fulfillment of desire lest s/he be confronted with the realization that the notion of a willful, secretive conspiracy by an elite cabal is not quite right."<sup>19</sup>

So, what is a UFO conspiracy theory?<sup>20</sup> In simplest terms, as it has been described by a variety of scholars (Dean, 1998; Matheson, 1998, Flaherty, 1990), the "classic" UFO conspiracy theory holds that there have been, at least since 1947, periodic contacts between ETs and the American Government (or even more broadly a conglomeration of world military, government and economic authorities). These contacts are understood to be literal physical occurrences which the Government has covered up for a variety of reasons which include, but are not limited to: government interest in receiving technology in exchange for research on humans; government interest in controlling the panic level of populations in the face of a possible invasion; or perhaps the government has literally no control over the actions of the ETs and wants to hide knowledge of that fact: or to cover up the testing of technology that has been gotten from ETs, either through exchange, or by the salvaging of crashes, such as many believers maintain occurred at Roswell, NM in 1947. Actually, most of us are familiar with this narrative line of reasoning since the advent of the show *X-Files* (1993-Present), a television series which has fully developed this story, bringing it into the entertainment comfort of any household in America that wishes to indulge.

UFO conspiracy theories have been around longer than the current abduction narratives, and in fact have been a both a counter-voice to that strand of UFO narrative and an occasional support. The first widely read text to make the charge of government conspiracy and cover-up was written by Donald Keyhoe, *Flying Saucers are Real* (1950). Despite its out of print status, this book has remained a staple for individuals who adhere to a literal UFO conspiracy explanation. Keyhoe's text relies on the poor PR handling of UFO cases by the Air Force, (such as the Mantell disaster)<sup>21</sup> and seeks to convince readers that instances of bungling were in fact

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<sup>19</sup> Fenster, *Conspiracy Theory*. 94-95

<sup>20</sup> This is the UFO conspiracy theory in general terms—the variations on this theme are almost endless.

<sup>21</sup> On January 7, 1948. Capt. Thomas F. Mantell was scrambled along with several other pilots to visually engage a reported unidentified object. The planes, f-51s, were not equipped with automatic oxygen units, pilots had to carry oxygen aboard with them. Mantell forgot his in the haste and when he opted to fly up to 20,000 feet he blacked out and crashed. The Air Force was

instances of poorly concealed cover-up. This book was followed by Frank Scully's The Flying Saucers (1950) and Dr. Morris Jessup's The Case for the UFO (1955). These texts argued that UFO reports constituted actual observation of legitimate flying artifacts and at the very least implied strongly that the U.S. government was systematically denying access of this information to the American public. As these reports accelerated during the McCarthy era, a fact which has not been lost on UFO historians of the period (Flaherty, 1990, Peebles, 1996, Devereux and Brooksmith, 1998), the conspiracies of hidden knowledge grew to include the existence of cadres of secret operatives, variously called "The Society" or MIB (Men in Black) (Grey, 1956 Keel, 1976) who were said to either work for the military or were actually disguised ETs and who occupied themselves with silencing civilian witnesses of UFO activity.

These conspiratorial narratives were understood by their adherents to be distinct from those individuals who were part of what Peebles has termed the "Contactee Movement," those individuals, such as George Van Tassel and George Adamski who claimed to be in personal and usually spiritual contact with ETs. Conspiracy theorists held that they were "nuts and bolts" investigators, and were embarrassed by the "bizarre" antics and spiritual revelations of an Adamski. UFO conspiracy theorists (e.g. Keven Randle, the late Philip Corso) still talk about the "betrayal of Project Blue Book" and more recently have been caught up in the renewed conspiratorial ruminations concerning cattle mutilations and the reported crashed UFOs at Roswell, NM and other (in fact ever expanding) locations.<sup>22</sup> Matheson has described this demarcation between the two strands of American UFO narrative well, and follows it into the advent of abduction accounts, which textually emerges into American culture with Fuller's book The Interrupted Journey (1966) and was mainstreamed with Whitley Streiber's Communion (1985).

Abduction theorists have tended to shy away from conspiracy theories, even though they have depended heavily on the literal interpretation of the ETH (extra-terrestrial hypothesis) offered by this narrative. I have described this tendency in my M.A. thesis and the literal interpretation of alien abduction remains the most popular and recognizable narrative of human/alien interaction in American culture, despite the fact that many abductees/contactees actually opt for a "spiritual interpretation" of their reported experiences. Current UFO conspiracy theory straddles these possibilities and tends to emphasize that "spiritual experiences or information" presented by aliens/abductors is probably intended to confuse the victims of these experiences (Jacobs, 1994),<sup>23</sup> that abductions themselves might indeed be yet another ruse by government authorities to cover up human/military genetic experimentation, or that in the style of the *X-Files*, there may be a world-wide conspiracy to genetically manipulate or alter the human species in accordance with alien or even "Tri-lateral" designs (Icke, 1999). In fact, in the current formulations, (Icke, 1998; Corso, 1998, Lammer & Lammer, 1999), there is almost no limit to the reach that the "New World Government" can employ with the current

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embarrassed to admit that he died chasing either the planet Venus, which had a distorted appearance that evening due to an atmospheric anomaly-or a weather balloon that failed to register on radar.

<sup>22</sup> Project Blue Book was a study of UFO reports conducted by the Air Force from approximately 1967 to 1972. Much has been made of this study, with most UFO conspiracy theorists opining that it was a sham, just another instance of government cover-up. In fact, the purpose of Project Blue Book was to determine whether reported UFOs constituted a security threat to United States air space, thus causing them to fall under the investigative jurisdiction of the Air Force. Blue Book and the later, even more infamous "Condon Report" concluded that most UFO reports were mis-identifications of naturally occurring phenomena or human artifacts (i.e. planes, weather balloons, satellites, etc.), thus they did not constitute a security threat, therefore the Air Force was not obligated to collect reports. Neither report actually stated categorically that literal UFOs (as simply 'unidentified objects') do not exist. In fact, each report contains cases that are admitted to be unexplained.

<sup>23</sup> Jacobs. Secret Life. New York: Simon & Schuster. 253-257.

technologies of surveillance, computers and the Internet in its intention to control and manipulate the minds of humans who are kept in the dark. As one of my interviewees put it, “the Government is the present embodiment of Satan, the anti-Christ, the entity who creates our world with advertising and keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves and what reality is.” In other words, using a term from another time—the Demiurge.

Carlo Ginzburg, in his well-known documentary history, The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller, (1992) argues that while it is not possible for an individual to adequately mirror an entire stage in history, it is possible to get a sense of how a specific person might significantly fashion identity from both oral and written components of his/her environment. If the self is constructed, then by examining selves, one should be able to get a sense of currents of construction that are available given an individual’s background, education and intelligence. Ginzberg admits there is no ready explanation which can account for everything an individual might find significant, cause and effect do not uniformly determine the generation of meaning. Still, finding a singular individual who is willing to tell his/her story, outside of a talkshow, can still be seen as important for cultural historians who are interested in uncovering the narratives of the private person for whom the “gnostic” myth or the UFO conspiracy theory seems particularly suited.<sup>24</sup>

Enter my informant, Chuck. That’s the name he said I could use. While doing research for my M.A. thesis in Religious Studies, I spent much of 1993, when I wasn’t teaching or reading, traveling to various UFO conferences both large and small. I went to about one a month. I noticed “Chuck” at the first two conferences I attended, and by the fifth conference, in Laramie, WY, we had started talking. We seemed to be hitting the same places at roughly the same time. I knew that he wasn’t an academic. In our first conversation, started while we were waiting for an abduction forum to end, he introduced himself as a farmer from Arkansas. At a certain point, after we had run into each other several times, I had gathered the gumption to ask him about his travels from conference to conference. How did he have the money or the time to travel, since my experience of farmers is that they really don’t have that kind of leisure, unless they’re retired, and although he appeared to be disabled, he didn’t appear to be elderly. He granted me three interviews, a gold-mine of information about his life and his explanation for traveling the circuit of UFO conferences. We would meet at a conference and at some point pull away from the crowd to have coffee and talk. The story that emerged is one of those accounts that sticks with a person, even a “hardened academic” like myself who by now has probably over 500 formal and informal interviews with UFO contactees/abductees under her belt. It was/is a story that I believe can illustrate not only how an individual can construct a narrative of meaning for his/her own life, but how pervasive elements of “gnostic conspiracy” are in our culture, and how the UFO conspiracy narratives can function to assist in making personal tragedies into dramas of “cosmic” proportions, in which the literal confirmation or refutation of facts is less important than the “revealing” of a “hidden” knowledge that heretofore was unknown, thus making the incomprehensible, if not completely understood, at least not an oppression.

Chuck considered himself a “nuts and bolts” man, a serious believer in the literal existence of aliens and in government cover-up of ET contacts. He regarded abductees as either deluded victims, duped by government forces, or conniving charlatans. By his own account he was a materialist, not very religious. At the same time he maintained that the aliens were not evil, but were being painted as either evil or salvific by government forces who were afraid that alien influence would encourage humans to think on their own. What was most important to him

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<sup>24</sup> See Ginzberg’s introduction, Part 8, xxii-xxiv.

was his belief that the knowledge of human/alien interaction and the exposure of government intervention in what he considered a natural process of communication and evolution could generate a material, literal change in society. This was a belief that had been forged by his exposure to specific UFO texts which he regarded with almost the sanctity of scripture (although he would never have admitted that), interaction with other like-minded individuals at UFO conferences, and his own personal interpretation of a tragic experience that had befallen him several years previous. For Chuck insisted that he had physical proof of a government conspiracy to keep him from contacting aliens, and that proof was in his head.

As Chuck told the story, he had been raised to be a rural farmer in Arkansas, by the son of a rural farmer. He had not finished high-school, although he did like to read, since “there’s not a whole lot else to do in the hills where I come from.” He claimed that his prospects for life were pretty ordinary for a person of his socio-economic background, he was going to farm as his father had, perhaps marry at some point and have some kids. He reports that, in his words: “My dreams were really no larger than that.” He liked to read about traveling and watch TV documentaries about “far-away countries”—but, he never thought he’d ever get to see any of those places.

However, those plans, such as they were, were rudely disrupted one evening in 1984 when he was coming home from town on a narrow mountain road. It was dark and he never saw the truck that hit him head on. The driver was drunk, and had neglected to turn on his headlights. Chuck said that the police later told him they estimated the speed of the truck had surpassed 70 mph by the time it hit him. Apparently Chuck survived only because he was thrown from his vehicle (a smaller truck). He hit a tree while airborne and sustained massive head injuries. The drunk driver walked away from the wreck, apparently without even realizing that Chuck was alive, and had to be tracked down later on. Chuck was discovered by a passing motorist who found the road blocked by the tangled vehicles. By the time Chuck got to the hospital, a tiny rural facility, he was in a coma and near death. Apparently the hospital didn’t even have the resources to provide adequate ER assistance given the nature of his injuries. He was flown to Little Rock with little more than a blood transfusion and almost no hope of survival. He was 28 at the time.

A section of his skull had been crushed due to his impact with the tree, and this constituted his most serious injury other than a broken arm. The doctors inserted a plate during surgery in order to replace that part of his skull that had been literally pulverized. When he told me this part of the story, in fact, whenever he spoke of the plate in his head, he would instinctively touch some part of the long scar which ran from under his left ear up the back of his head and well into the hairline (he wore his hair very short—buzz cut). Part of his head had a curious, flattened shape where one could see the outline of the plate. Although the plate had been inserted with the stated (to us obvious) intention of providing protection for the brain tissue, his body had not taken well to the metal intrusion and he had suffered a series of infections as his body attempted to reject the foreign material. Disfiguring scarring occurred, and he sustained additional brain damage which resulted in motor dysfunctions in both legs and prevented his broken arm from healing properly—it was withered and barely usable. It was one of those instances where practically every effect attempted by medicine goes wrong. Still, he survived.

But, as is unfortunately often the case, in a story we hear all too often in our society, his family was ill-equipped to deal with the medical expenses of his four month stay. And, he was faced with the prospect of being disabled, unable to do the work he was used to for the rest of his

life. He was understandably bitter and traumatized. The few, modest objectives for his life were irrevocably changed, and he had no idea what to do.

During his hospital stay, during those long hours of recovery, Chuck read books that members of his family and a few friends brought him, since they knew that he liked to read. One friend brought him a small stack of books that he said he had gotten at a garage sale—he thought that the books were “kind of crazy,” that Chuck would get a kick out of reading them. According to Chuck this small stack of books changed his life—for they were books about UFOs, something about which he had heard very little up to that point, or to which he had paid little attention.

He was able to recall these books quite clearly—Flying Saucers are Real (1950) by Donald Keyhoe, Contact at Pascagoula (1983) by Charles Hickson & William Mendez, They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers (1956) by Gray Barker, The Mothman Prophecies (1976) by John Keel, and The Philadelphia Experiment (1979) by Moore and Berlitz. It must be noted that three of these books are quite difficult to obtain, even for the dedicated UFO enthusiast (Flying Saucers, Contact, The Philadelphia Experiment). Four of them were out of print at the time Chuck read them although two of these have been reprinted in recent years due to consumer demand.<sup>25</sup> Four of the titles make specific charges about government involvement with various features of UFO or related reports. Contact at Pascagoula is the only detailed description of a fascinating but obscure abduction case which may be an example of a UFO contact hoaxed by the military. The Philadelphia Experiment charges the Pentagon with conspiracy during WWII involving accidents occurring during the testing of primitive stealth technologies. These texts riveted his attention in a way that no other texts had ever done before. As he put it: “I felt as if a whole new world of possibilities had opened up for me. I felt as if I understood things I had never seen before.” These books put his predicament in a whole other light. “Reading those books motivated me to get well, to get that bad stuff behind me. I felt like I needed to get out of the hospital, to get away so that I would have a chance at finding out the truth.”

And so, his recovery advanced, much more quickly than the doctors had expected given the complications of his condition. Still he faced the prospect of not being able to make the living that he had made before. He ended up on disability for awhile, and by the time I was interviewing him, he was beginning a laborious process of seeking education so that he could do something in the computer field, no mean feat for someone who is crippled and had not completed high school. “So,” I asked him, “that is part of your story. So why do you come to these conferences, particularly when you don’t buy most of what the folks here are saying about contact and abduction?”

Recalling the earlier discussion regarding “gnostics” and “conspiracy theorists” we can begin to approach a deeper understanding of Chuck’s forthcoming revelation. In the ancient world, as well as in many of the mystical meanderings of present day Christians, Jews, Muslims and New Agers, search for truth and meaning focuses on the experience of “coming to know” first hand, personally, inwardly, the truer, higher, source of soul and being. Conspiracy theorists also describe discrete moments in their lives when they “intuitively grasp” the presence and scope of the “world deception.” In both systems, the method initially involves renouncing the apparent conditions of the physical world, denying that those conditions are “true fact.” Yet, for those folks in the modern age who don’t believe in a transcendent reality—what is there to focus on but the physical conditions which seem to oppress and entrap? As Martin Luther

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<sup>25</sup> The Mothman Prophecies, and They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers both reprinted by IllumiNet Press, 1996 and 1997 respectively.

sought to expose the wiles of the devilish Pope and Augustine could not escape his conviction that the physical body was the literalization of a perverse will lying at the very heart of material experience in life (even though both believed in a transcendent reality which was bestowed by grace), so too does what I have come to call the “secular gnostic,” concentrate on exposing the conspiracy, the deception at the heart of reality itself, since the conspiracy is all he/she has left. It is a struggle for self that does not depend on the necessary posturing of eternity, a God. But for Chuck, it did depend on the hypothesis of extra-terrestrial life, as it does for many “nuts and bolt” UFO conspiracy believers. As “gnostics” posited the necessity for an intermediary power (i.e. the Christ, the Logos) which provided the means by which “gnostics” could access, even temporarily, the light of the Pleroma, so for many “conspiracy theorists” such as Chuck, extra-terrestrials provide for an intelligence and power that lies “outside the system” of deception—the hope that the loop of conspiracy can be broken or transcended.

By the time Chuck spoke to me he had come to believe in the following, after he had laboriously reconstructed the events which had befallen him. First, there was a political scandal at the hospital in which he had stayed. I was unable to follow his rambling recollections of the particulars, but it had something to do with his principal surgeon being indicted along with some minor politicians for nepotism at the hospital and a money laundering scheme. Through loose connections, which were significant to Chuck, involving family and one of his friends, and the difficulties he and his family had in settling the bill, Chuck had come to conclude that the plate which had been put in his head had been prematurely and deliberately placed, not to protect brain tissue, but to encourage the crippling infection. He had concluded that the aliens were similar in kind to the Mothman beings described by John Keel in his so-titled text.<sup>26</sup> They were telepaths, and Chuck defined telepathy in what he considered to be purely scientific terms—i.e. directed electro-magnetic fields stimulating parts of the temporal lobes. (Actually, he must have gotten this from a conference—probably one in which the findings of Canadian scientist, Michael Persinger were discussed, Keel doesn’t come up with this himself).<sup>27</sup> The plate in his head prevented him from being able to receive these possible telepathic messages. When I asked him why he had not received messages before his accident he told me that he believed Government forces monitored alien activity and sought to prevent contact whenever they could—thus the plate in his head at a strategic moment. So I asked him about the books—how did the books help you understand that this was happening, had happened to you? He said that Keyhoe’s book and the book about The Philadelphia Experiment had revealed to him the reach of the long arm of the government, and the lengths to which government forces were willing to go to hush people up. The book by Gray Barker, with its detailed description of the covert operatives now famously called “The Men in Black” had further confirmed this suspicion. John Keel’s book had provided him with an heroic exemplar (although the way he put it was that Keel was the “bravest man he had ever read about”) and the Contact at Pascagoula text had convinced him that what abductions exist are performances by the government. The *piece de resistance* was that the friend who had brought him the books was the very same that was somehow mixed up with the doctor in the ensuing legal entanglement. He now regarded that former friend as an government

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Mothman’ as Keel describes them are giant entities, who appear either with or without wings, and can fly or hover rather like a helicopter

<sup>27</sup> Michael Persinger is a Canadian scientist who specializes in the effects of electro-magnetic frequencies on the human body and human perception. He has pioneered work demonstrating that abduction like hallucinations and paralyzing fear can be induced in humans upon their exposure to specific electro-magnetic frequencies. He has advanced the theory that UFO abduction experiences may well be the result of humans encountering naturally occurring, periodic electro-magnetic phenomena. The UFO community has reacted to his research in a variety of ways, with Chuck obviously coming in contact with the theory, and fitting it to his needs—the oral feature of the UFO community at work.

informant, a spy—“they wanted me to know what they had done to me—they wanted to break my spirit.”

“So, Chuck,” I asked, “why do you come to these conferences? Especially since so many the folks here promote beliefs that you think are silly?” I finally pressed him on this point. He admitted that he attended the conferences in order to follow the travels of a woman who claims she is in contact with the Ashtar Command, a supposed collective of ET intelligences with which various persons have claimed contact since the time of George Van Tassel.<sup>28</sup> According to Chuck, she operates as his telepathic link to the aliens—since he is physically prevented from reaching them. He claims that the information he gets isn’t spiritual but practical. Consequently, his contact doesn’t ‘channel’ the Ashtar Command in the manner of New Age mediums, but rather she “receives transmissions,” through a physical implant she claims to have received via an ET contact. Chuck was quite adamant about this, desiring as he did to separate himself and his telepathic aid from claims made by those who reportedly “channel” the Ascended Master, Ashtar: “They help me figure out what I’m going to do, they encourage me to continue my studies, they give me warnings about what to expect—they are my fifth column.”

Now, Chuck isn’t crazy—in fact I found him to be a very lucid individual, self-possessed, and even though he rambled a bit, not at all incoherent. Neither should we assume that he is a typical believer in UFO conspiracy—most have not had his difficulties, or his reasons to be bitter. Still, he expresses themes that are familiar to most of us: the sense of powerlessness when dealing with pain, physical or emotional trauma; the ambivalence many of us feel when we entrust our well-being to doctors or institutions of health, the spectre of losing one’s livelihood in a culture where individual worth is defined by what one can produce. There is a resonance in his arguments, Chuck seems familiar to many of us, even those who spurn such entertainments as *Jerry Springer*. How many of us have honestly wondered from time to time, even if only from the secrecy of our personal bedrooms, about what the GOVERNMENT (and yes, we use that word, in that way, as Foucault seems to use the term ‘hegemony’ and Apostle Paul appears to utilize the term ‘archon’) was hiding from us about wars, disease outbreaks, crime, actual conditions of poverty, etc. One only has to listen to the hyperbole regarding Y2K, the possibilities of computer espionage, or the recent concerns about an outbreak of a Nile virus on the East Coast of the U.S.; there is enough potential trauma afoot to feed even moderate paranoid tendencies.

Finally, I came to ask him about outcome—what will it be like when the truth comes out, when the government forces are exposed? Chuck—do you have an eschatology? He had thought some about this, for he believed that the conspiracy had to be exposed. He said he was doing what little he could do by talking to people like me (so I guess I’m his messenger) and sharing with others at conferences. He thought that once “the People” (again a common generic construction that most of us use without really knowing what we’re talking about) knew the extent to which they had been deceived, the government (Demiurge) would be overthrown naturally. He couldn’t tell me where “the People” would get the physical/political power to do this, presumably the aliens that are in contact with some of us will assist with practical information.

As I listened I was struck with the simplicity of his “end days” vision. Often UFO conspiracy theorists have conflicting views about what the world will look like after government

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<sup>28</sup>Contact with the Ashtar Command is claimed by literally hundreds of individuals and groups worldwide with most interpreting the messages spiritually. Currently, among many in the New Age community the Ashtar Command is identified with the Ascended Masters, a spiritual collective who are responsible for leading the spiritual evolution of humanity. Wojcik concisely summarizes the Ashtar Command in his *The End of the World as We Know It*, (1997). 185-187.

lies are exposed. Will the story of cover-up simply end like the *X-Files* series must end at some point, or will there be new disclosures, or is there a paradise awaiting our construction of it? Conspiracy eschatology appears to be largely gradual (even though it's ever imminent) and comes about through human effort. Chuck believed that the ETs would have a hand in our deliverance, albeit behind the scenes. His vision, in some ways was as affecting, American and simple as his dreams before his accident had been, a moderate utopia: "I don't expect perfection," said Chuck, "just a world where poor people can pay their bills, and we can decide what wars to fight in, and if people get hurt, we can take care of them. I want to know the truth, I don't want to be lied to. I don't have to be rich, I just don't want to starve." A simple view to be sure, one that might seem to be far removed from the present realities of nation-states and corporate ventures but still, so much a part of each of us.

Interestingly, despite the fact that he isn't a typical UFO conspiracy theorist (his choice of texts is a case in point), I also don't think he's terribly unusual. Bloom's "parable of the shoes" demonstrates the ability of gnostic thinking to develop a narrative of cosmic significance out of the most mundane of occurrences: painful feet. From painful feet, we move to shoes, to the corporation which makes the shoes, and concurrently from the fact of pain, to the physical nature of a world in which pain exists, and from there to the promise of painlessness. Chuck, supported by his texts, an environment in which the persistent poverty of mountain farmers remains a fact of life, an accident with resulting disabilities, and a scandal at the hospital involving both his principal doctor and a good friend, moved from his pain to the source of pain, the plate, to the doctor, to the government of Arkansas, finally to the Federal Government. The UFO texts provided him with the evidence that governments lie, doctors can be deceitful, and even friends lie if the secret they are concealing is considered explosive enough. The plate and its painful aftermath was the proof of deception, since, as Chuck reasoned, a deceitful doctor would know how to so apply such a device as to cause maximum damage. Since there was no logical reason for the infection to have been so severe (according to Chuck, the infection defied even the doctors' expectations)—there must have been another way it could have been, and a reason for why his trauma had been so debilitating. The 'why' was the 'cover-up,' the information hidden that was only mockingly presented to him in the texts that his 'insider' friend had provided.

For Layton's gnostic, the *eschaton* can be initialized in the individual by ascending in the spirit, transcending the limitations of painful feet, or by more simply not wearing shoes if that is determined to be the problem. Chuck's *eschaton* is not realized in quite the same manner. For Chuck, knowing elements of the 'truth' or that there is a 'truth out there' (to paraphrase the *X-Files* slogan) does not enable him to transcend his situation all at once. He travels the UFO conference circuit, following the revelations of a woman who acts as his intermediary to off-worldly realms. He is not content, although he claims that he is not unhappy, now that he "knows where the truth lies." He is another traveler, journeying through the societies of story-telling, secrecy, power and still-unrealized ideals that all of us have constructed together. The last time I saw Chuck he was standing in line, waiting to get into a meeting that concerned itself with the Roswell, NM UFO crash site. He nodded at me and disappeared into the crowd of onlookers and believers. About Chuck, I knew many things. About the others surrounding him, I had barely an inkling.

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