

# A Critique of Non-Religious Explanations of Mythology

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## A. Poetic Explanations (VI:12-27)

It is possible to hold that Mythology is purely and simply a product of the poetic imagination, and that “the mythological representations have been created not in order to affirm or teach something, but only in order to satisfy an urge toward poetic invention” (VI:13f). Strictly entertained, this view would eliminate any need for us to puzzle over the particular meaning and truth of Mythology, on the simple ground that no such was ever intended (VI:12).<sup>2</sup>

Although Schelling does not actually impute this view to anyone, he does recognize that many who enjoy Mythology as poetry have often evidenced a great dislike of “any investigation which tends to assign to Mythology a meaning other than ideal” and have opposed any search for the *grounds* of the gods (*causis Deorum*). Possessed of a “tender solicitude for the poetic aspect of the gods,” such persons fear that investigations which go to the root of the matter would be prejudicial to or destructive of this poetic element. But philosophical investigation and poetic appreciation are not antithetical. Just as “everyone is free to view nature from a purely aesthetic standpoint without implying opposition to the investigation of natural phenomena or to the Philosophy of Nature”, so “anyone may look at

mythology from the purely poetic point of view" without feeling threatened by philosophical investigation into the nature and origin of mythology (VI:12f).

Two questions must be answered in connection with this poetic view. First, did poetry really precede and give birth to mythology? And second, does the poetic view necessarily exclude from mythology all truth content? As far as the first question is concerned, the truth, says Schelling, is just the reverse, for it was mythology which preceded and gave birth to poetry!

Every poetic invention presupposes some ground, some independent basis from which it takes its rise. A poetic work cannot be merely concocted or plucked out of thin air. It must have some foundation in fact. Even the poem which is most free and which seems to be a completely subjective invention having no reference to real events, rests none the less, in the last analysis, on the actual common incidents of human life.

Moreover, each separate (poetic) event must bear a resemblance to those which are certified and accepted as true, - as Odysseus said of his stories (Od. XIX, 203) - even when the whole succession and concatenation of these poetic events borders on the incredible. The so-called marvels (*Wunderbare*) of the Homeric epic do not constitute an objection against the poem. They have an actual basis in the theodicy which *already existed* and which, from Homer's point of view, was *true*. The supernatural became natural because the gods who intervene in human affairs belonged to the real world of that time, a world in whose existence men once believed, and because the order of things implied in the representations of the gods conformed to the accepted order of things.

But if the Homeric poetry has as its background this whole great complex belief in the gods, how could one maintain that this belief, in its turn, has poetry as *its* background. Clearly, nothing preceded this belief in the gods; rather did this belief make possible many later things of which free poetic invention was one (VI:14).

To the second question - Does the poetic explanation necessarily exclude all truth from mythology? - Schelling answers: The poetic view, fully stated, holds that "there *is*, indeed, a truth in mythology,

but not one which has been put there *intentionally*, and therefore not one which we can take hold of and express as such" (VI:14). The poets who elaborated previously existing theodicies were moved only by the primitive impulse to poetize and intended no particular meaning through their poems. Hence, any truth that mythology might possess is both accidental and eternally elusive. All other interpretations, as we shall see, will assign a quite specific significance to mythology (albeit a different one in each case), but the poetic conception can live with them all.

The poetic interpretation can acknowledge that natural phenomena are reflected in the forms of the gods, it can claim to perceive in mythology the first experiences of the rule of invisible powers (*Mächte*) in human affairs, and can even claim to see in mythology an expression of religious awe - in short, it can concede that everything that could deeply affect early man, not yet master of himself, must have contributed to the birth of mythology ... Every meaning is present in mythology, but it is there only potentially, as in a chaos, and does not allow itself to be delimited and particularized. As soon as one tries to delimit and particularize, the appearance is distorted and even destroyed. But if one leaves each meaning just as it is and takes a delight in this countless number of possible relations, one is in the right frame of mind for the task of interpreting mythology (VI:7).

The great advantage of the poetic explanation is its simplicity and fairness. "It is without doubt the right or just view in the sense that it excludes no meaning and permits mythology to be taken exactly as it stands. So let us be very careful not to say that it is false" (VI:17).

The objections to the poetic explanation are at least two. The first is its inability to answer the fundamental question of origins: "How or why should mankind (or a primitive people, or the peoples in general in the earliest period of their existence), uniformly seized by an irresistible inner drive, have produced a poetry which had gods and a history of the gods as its content?" The second objection is the poetic view's apparent contradiction of "the systematic character in the succession of the divine generations and of the grave and solemn seriousness which rests on certain parts of the history of the gods" (VI:16f, 50).

Before "ascending" to the next explanation, and in order to discover more about the earliest relations between poetry and

mythology, Schelling pauses (VI:17-23) to examine the well-known claim of Herodotus that Homer and Hesiod were the two poets "who provided the Greeks with a theogony."<sup>3</sup> What does Herodotus mean? Obviously he cannot mean that these two poets created the gods, or even that they invented the history of the gods. Homer [9th C. B.C.], for example, was well aware of the antiquity of "the temples, priesthood, sacrifices and altars that formed part of the worship of the gods" in his own day; and Hesiod [8th C. B.C.], "who sings the origins of the gods" could not have given an epic exposition of the history of the gods unless such a history had already unfolded. Herodotus must mean, then, that the two poets were "the first to express the history of the gods till then unexpressed", for he does not deny the previous general existence of natural and historical differences among the gods, he merely says that before the poets these differences were not known (*οὐκ ἐπιστεῖαυτο*), i.e., they existed in "an obscure, chaotic way" (VI:18-19).

Schelling distinguishes the question of the origin of the subject matter (*Stoff*) and its wrapping from the question of how this came to be unfolded and separated. As far as the first question is concerned, "the mysterious workshop, the first-production place of mythology, lies on the other side of all poetry". Herodotus himself refers to this pre-historic period:

The Hellenes, says Herodotus, were preceded by Pelasgians who *became* Hellenes as a result of a crisis (for the moment we need not say what crisis). And ... Herodotus says of these Pelasgians that 'they sacrificed all to the gods *without distinguishing them by name or surname*'. Here then is that time in which the history of the gods is hidden away, still unexpressed. Let us think ourselves back into this state in which the confused consciousness struggles with the representations of the gods without being able to disengage itself. Consciousness cannot objectify these representations. Therefore it cannot separate them or explain them ... or establish any kind of *free* relation with them. In this undifferentiated (*drangvoll*) state, all poetry was impossible. Thus the two most ancient poets, as poets (and setting aside the content of their poems), mark the end of that un-free state and of that 'Pelasgian' consciousness.

This liberation, which came to the consciousness through this differentiation of the representations of the gods, gave to the Hellenes

their poets; and the epoch which produced these poets was also the period in which the history of the gods was completely unfolded ... Neither precedes the other, but both *together simultaneously mark the end of an earlier state*, a state of involution and silence (VI:20f).

The role of the poets now becomes clearer. Whereas Herodotus says "Homer and Hesiod", we would say "the age of the two poets" gave to the Hellenes the history of their gods.

Herodotus can express himself as he did, for Homer is not an individual like later poets (Alcaeus, Tyrtaeus and others). He designates a whole period; he is the ruling power, the principle of an epoch. What Herodotus means in speaking of the two poets, is what Hesiod means when he relates how Zeus - having ended the struggle against the Titans, and being invited by the gods to assume supreme power - distributed prerogatives and honors among the immortals. With Zeus as sovereign, the real history of the Hellenic gods begins. This critical turning point, the beginning of Hellenic life proper, is referred to by both Hesiod and Herodotus ... the poet referring to it *mythologically* by using the name of Zeus, the historian designating it *historically* by means of the names of the two poets.

... In the Homeric poetry, everything is brand new, so to speak. The historical world of the gods is there in all its fresh, youthful vigour. Only the religious aspect of the gods is ancient (*Uralte*), but this comes only slightly into view out of a dark and mysterious background. The new thing is the historical aspect of these gods; this is what is created before our eyes. The crisis, by virtue of which the world of the gods develops into the history of the gods, is not something outside the poets; it takes place in the poets themselves; it *makes* their poetry. Herodotus, therefore, has good reason for saying that the two poets who, in his firm and well-founded opinion, were the earliest poets among the Hellenes, produced the history of the Hellenic gods. They did not, as individuals, create this history (although, of course, it had to be expressed this way). Instead, it was a product of that crisis of the mythological consciousness which found in them its expression.

It could be objected that two poets do not make a history of the gods any more than two swallows make a summer! But there is no analogy here, for the summer could come without any swallows, but the

history of the gods comes *in the poets themselves*, unfolding in them and finding its first expression in them (VI:21f).

This study of the Greeks, "a poetic people par excellence", makes it clear to Schelling that "poetry is indeed the natural result of mythology, and even its necessary and immediate product". But this means, of course, that poetry "could never have been the generative ground or the source of representations of the gods" (VI:22, 23).<sup>4</sup>

Studies in the religions of other ancient peoples likewise fail to reveal the existence of a poetry which might have given birth to the polytheisms (VI:23-27). The only people who have in common with the Greeks a free poetry, developed in all forms, are the Hindus, but their poetry too, arises from mythology. Western mastery of Sanscrit had made available to Schelling's generation a new knowledge of Hindu poetry and religion. This occasioned a great deal of enthusiasm for Hinduism and, coupled with the recognition that "the Hindu language belongs to the same formation as the Greek and is nearest to it in grammatical structure", led some "Indomanes" to attribute historical superiority and priority to the Hindus. But enthusiasm for Hinduism can go too far. Schelling deplors "the tiresome intrusion of Hinduism into everything, even into the studies of Genesis" and recalls his long-standing opposition to those who attribute Hindu origins to Greek gods (VI:24, 25n).<sup>5</sup> Like Goethe, Schelling sees the Hindu deities as crude and rather unpoetic. This is because in Hindu mythology "the doctrinal or strictly religious aspect of the gods" is dominant and much more visible than in Greek mythology.

The crisis which gave to the Greeks their gods, gave them at the same time a freedom in their relations with the gods. The Hindu, on the other hand, has remained in much more profound and inward dependence on his gods. The amorphous epics as well as the artistic dramatic poems of India have a far more dogmatic character than any Greek work of the same genre. The poetic transfiguration of the Greek gods as compared with the Hindu is not simply an original quality of Greek mythology, but the result of the more profound victory over, indeed, the complete conquest of, a power which still has dominion over Hindu poetry (VI:26).

As for the Egyptians, they "fixed their theodicy in huge, monumental structures, and colossal statues, but a supple poetry

which treats the gods as free beings, seems completely foreign to them". And the less developed theodicies of the ancient Babylonians and the Phoenicians found expression in "a psalm-like poetry similar to that of the ancient Hebrews", i.e., a doctrinal (dogmatic) poetry, but not a poetry in the full sense of the word (VI:26f). Thus, "nowhere was poetry the primal phenomenon so many explanations suppose" (VI:27).

## B. Allegorical (Philosophical)<sup>6</sup> Explanations

In his second lecture (VI:28-48), Schelling turns to a discussion of allegorical interpretations of mythology. These maintain, in general, that there *was* an original intention to convey truth in mythological guise, but *not religious* truth. Mythology looks like theory of *the gods* and history of *the gods*, hence it appears to have *religious* meaning, but its truth is actually of another kind. What mythology says is not what it means. As Schelling puts it: "There is truth in mythology, but not in mythology *as such*" (VI:28). This "truth" may be historical, moral, scientific or philosophical, but whatever it is, it is not religious.

The various forms of the allegorical interpretation are reviewed in order to show that in no case do they account for the birth of mythology, and also to discover what contribution they make to a general theory of mythology.

The first view mentioned is *Euhemerism*, the notion that gods are really deified historical personages and that mythological events are the apotheosis of occurrences in human or civic history. Schelling acknowledges the antiquity of this view, named after Euhemerus, "an Epicurean of the Alexandrian period who seems to have been its most zealous if not its most ancient advocate". But Schelling also notes that Epicurus used the "Euhemeristic" explanation only in order to discredit the *popular* religion of his day. Epicurus himself believed in the existence of *true* gods who were entirely indifferent to the affairs of man and nature; hence those popular deities who intervened capriciously in the affairs of men were a challenge to Epicurean dogma and were conveniently dismissed as "men represented under the aspect of gods" (VI:28f).

A second form of the allegorical interpretation holds that mythology arose as a result of the poetic personification of *moral* qualities. But Schelling regards this as a reversal of the true order. He readily admits that the gods can be used as symbols of moral concepts,

“for they are moral beings” each endowed with some outstanding spiritual or emotional attribute, and “once a thing is there it will be used”. Bacon, for example, used mythological language to clothe his political ideas (in his tract *De Sapientia Veterum*), and others used it as a pretentious disguise for their moral preachments. “As the demon says in Calderon’s *Wondrous Magician* (VI:30):

Myths are simply tales wherein  
 Writers profane presumed to use,  
 With ingenious art, the names of gods  
 To enshroud in mystery  
 Their moral philosophy.

All of which may be pedagogically expedient, concedes Schelling, but it tells us nothing about the origin of mythology.

A third type of allegorical interpretation looks for *physical* meanings in mythology, or regards it as a poetic personification of the processes of the natural order. Some have come up with very *special* physical meanings for mythology:

During the period when alchemy was flourishing, its adepts could discern the so-called philosophical process in the battle for Troy ... Helen, over whom the battle was fought, was Selene the Moon (the alchemical sign for silver), while Ilios, the holy city, was Helios the Sun (which in alchemy means gold). When anti-phlogistic chemistry began to attract general attention it was believed the substances of this chemistry could be discovered among the masculine and feminine deities of Greece: Aphrodite, for example, was the personification of oxygen ...

It is a waste of time to argue with one who interprets mythology in this way, since his discovery brings him the priceless satisfaction of gazing at the reflection of his own most recent opinion in the looking-glass of high antiquity. He therefore finds it unnecessary to tell us *how* those who supposedly invented the myths, arrived at the excellent knowledge of physical nature imputed to them, or *why* they enshrouded and concealed their knowledge in so strange a fashion (VI:31f).

Such views seem capable of proliferating endlessly, and at least bear witness to the universality of mythology. The difficulty is that once we



admit allegorical explanations, "it becomes almost more difficult to say what mythology does *not* mean than to say what it means".

Interpretations of a more general nature have claimed mythology to be "an allegory of the annual movement of the sun through the signs of the Zodiac", or "a poetic representation of the real history of nature", or even "a theory of the genesis of the natural world (an allegorized cosmogony)" (VI:32).

This "philosophical" or "cosmogonic" explanation was proposed by Heyne (VI:32-36).<sup>7</sup> Mythology, he insisted, was *created by philosophers*, and its original content consisted of more or less coherent philosophemes about the formation of the world. Such views were dressed out in mythological form partly for dramatic effect, and partly because these ancient philosophers lacked a scientific terminology (and were therefore compelled to express abstract concepts as persons and logical and real relations under the metaphor of "generation"). The philosophers knew, of course, that they were not talking about real persons. How then did the personalities they created become real persons and then deities? Because of the poets, concludes Heyne. "The poets noticed that these personifications, taken as *real persons*, could furnish material for all kinds of amusing stories and delightful tales ... They therefore separated the mythological personalities from their scientific meanings and assured for them that meaningless character in which alone they are known to popular belief" (VI:34, cf. 58).

These philosopher-scientists, according to Heyne, were not "allegorizing", because they did not *deliberately* fabricate mythological language in order to disguise and cover up their doctrines and opinions. Nevertheless, replies Schelling, they did speak of gods when they were thinking only of natural forces - they neither said what they meant nor meant what they said - and this is allegory. But, after all; Heyne's view is half-hearted, for he accepts the *content* of mythology as scientific but not its *expression* (VI:35f). To go all the way and hold that both the form and the content of mythology are scientific, would constitute a complete opposition to the poetic interpretation. And just such a step was taken by Heyne's famous successor in philological studies, Gottfried Hermann. His philosophical-philological interpretation represents a rebellion against allegorical conceptions of mythology and is reviewed by Schelling in some detail (VI:36-48).

Hermann<sup>8</sup> believes, as a result of his etymological studies, that what are supposedly the names of gods are nothing but the forms, forces, phenomena and activities of nature. What appear to be

personifications are in fact scientific designations of natural objects. Dionysus, for example, is not the god of wine, but the wine itself. Phoebus is not the god of light but the name for light itself. And all the genealogies and inter-relationships of the gods are a deliberate scientific expression of the coherent connections to be found in nature.

This whole assemblage of "mythological" names and relationships was, for Hermann, the invention of an atheistic philosopher-scientist who lived long before the time of Hesiod (Hesiod's *Theogony* being simply our earliest witness to this ancient cosmology). Somewhere, among a people still ignorant and illiterate, some perceptive and especially able individual "conceived the idea of sketching a formal theory of the origin and connection of things". To do it he looked for the distinguishing predicates or functions of things and personified them. For example, since hail comes "hurtling and smashing down" it was called not merely "that which smashes" (a predicate) but "the Smasher" (*Kottos*), rain became "the Furrowmaker" (*Guges*), and snow became "the man of Heaviness" (*Briareus*). "It is not the object itself which is personified, as Heyne's theory would have it, but only, if you will, the expression ... It is a purely grammatical personification" (VI:37f).

Of course, when Hesiod came across this ancient science, he was, according to Hermann, innocent of its true character and naively took the names to be the names of real gods. *Kottos*, *Guges* and *Briareus*, for example, became for Hesiod the three one-hundred-armed giants. Originally, however, they were not giants at all but natural elements. Hermann regards the doctrine on which the *Theogony* is based as "the most admirable masterpiece of antiquity." He sees in the myths, "not some superficial collection of hypotheses, but theories established on the basis of long experience, careful observation and even exact calculation." The whole edifice of mythology (VI:39ff)<sup>9</sup> is "not only a well-grounded science but a profound wisdom," an "attempt to explain all things naturally." It is proof of an atheistic rather than a theistic way of thinking, for "of gods there is no trace unless one wishes to introduce them arbitrarily." In fact, the whole mythology is "a polemic against already existing representations of the gods" (VI:39, 41f).<sup>10</sup>

Schelling criticises Hermann's view at several points. In the first place, it is clear that Hermann has limited his explanation to the mythological gods proper and has not even tried to explain the origin of belief in the gods in general. Secondly, is it credible that an ancient

people "still ignorant and illiterate" could have produced a philosopher of such discernment as Hermann imagines? Thirdly, suppose they did! Suppose some ancient scientific genius came to see that the alleged gods were nothing but nature and its powers and wished to propagate his purely physical knowledge so that people could be forever free of all belief in the gods. Is it credible that such a thinker (or thinkers), who knew better than anyone else that gods did not exist, would invent a whole new mythology *in order to put an end to all religious belief*? How could they have neglected to provide the people with an explanation of the personification which, for its authors, was merely a matter of grammar? Finally, why would the people in question abandon their religion - which was "probably a grossly physical superstition resting on belief in invisible beings behind the phenomena of nature" - in favor of this newly invented mythology? Hermann is asking us to believe that such a people first *misunderstood* the new doctrine (by interpreting these names of natural phenomena to be the names of real deities), then *adopted* it, giving up their meaningful primitive beliefs to believe in a meaningless (to them) set of names (VI:42-44).

The conclusion, according to Schelling, is clear: the supposed ancient philosopher-author prior to Hesiod simply did not exist. Hesiod *himself* composed the Theogony substantially as it is. He did not mythologize an earlier science; instead, he himself is the budding philosopher struggling to free himself from an already existing mythology. Hermann's view that Hesiod artlessly understood the names of gods mythologically (i.e., as actually referring to gods) is contradicted by the abstract, impersonal and therefore *non-mythological* character of the *Theogony*, especially its opening section where many of the names could not have been and were not understood by Hesiod as deities. Gaea, for example, produces the mountains but these do not become personalities. Erebus is the place of subterranean darkness (as even Homer knew) not a masculine deity (which Hermann reads into Hesiod). To be sure, the literal and the figurative are jumbled together in the *Theogony*, so that the impersonal, sexless Erebus can "marry" Nyx. But his "child", Aether, is a purely physical notion and his "grandchildren" ("false words" and "ambiguous speech") were never regarded as mythological personalities. Above all, Hermann's principle of grammatical personification comes to grief as early as the first verse - "Behold first of all there was Chaos" - for Chaos is not a god or a personality. Chaos is a *purely speculative* notion, betokening

the birth of philosophy:

The concept of Chaos, placed boldly at the beginning of Hesiod's poem, was totally strange to Homer. But in Aristophanes it has already become the battle-cry of a philosophy which is directed *against* the gods and which strives to go beyond popular beliefs. The concept of Chaos reveals and proclaims in the most unequivocal way the earliest movement of an abstract thinking which is beginning to detach itself from mythology, the first awakening of a free philosophy.

... Chaos, which was only later defined as empty space or as a gross melange of material elements, is a *purely speculative* notion. It is not the product of some philosophy which preceded mythology, but of a philosophy which *followed* it, one which strove to comprehend and therefore transcend mythology. Only a mythology which has attained its end and which then, from this vantage point, looks *back* into its *beginning*, seeking to apprehend and to comprehend itself, could have placed Chaos at the beginning (VI:47f).

Hermann's theory, in Schelling's view, has been worth considering because "it goes as far as possible in the direction of attributing a scientific content to mythology", because it correctly insists "on the presence of the *philosophical* consciousness at the beginning of the *Theogony*" (though Hermann has misconceptions about it), and because it has used philological analysis to establish beyond doubt the scientific meaning of mythological names (VI:48). Nevertheless, it has failed to establish the priority of philosophy over mythology. Hesiod in particular is no inventor of mythology but "has it already before him as a model". His poem is "an essential moment in the development of mythology" because it is mythology's first attempt "to become conscious of itself, to represent itself to itself".

Both Homer and Hesiod, then, mark not the *beginnings* but the *final stages* of mythology. Homer shows us how mythology has ended in poetry. Hesiod shows us how it has ended in philosophy (VI:48).

### C. A Synthesis of Poetic and Philosophical Views

Although Schelling has rejected poetic and philosophical explanations he pauses (VI:49-57) in his third lecture to ask whether a synthesis of these two explanations would help us to understand the birth of mythology. Can we explain mythology as philosophical poetry or

poetic philosophy? The question gives Schelling an opportunity to digress on the affinity between philosophy and poetry and the relation between mythology and language.

There is, he says, "a natural affinity, an all but necessary mutual attraction" between poetry and philosophy. True poetry has a universal and eternal significance, and true philosophy has poetic power. "The same universality and the same necessity are to be required of *truly* poetic forms as of philosophical concepts". The true poet confers upon his work a kind of mythological power, and the true philosopher will employ concepts which are not mere general categories but real and definite essences. The more the philosopher's concepts are "endowed with real and specific life, the more they seem to approximate poetic forms - even when the philosopher involved holds poetic forms in contempt". In such cases the poetic element does not need to be added on as an external envelope, but is part and parcel of the thought itself (VI:50f).

This affinity, moreover, was originally a unity, for Schelling has shown how both poetry and philosophy arose out of mythology, whence it follows that they were originally united there. When mythology took possession of human consciousness, it became, so to speak, "the common center or nucleus from which both poetry and philosophy arose". Hence, before mythology was born, poetry and philosophy could not have existed as such, i.e., in their formal opposition. When in the course of time they emerged from mythology and began to move in different directions, they separated very slowly indeed. Philosophy, for example, began to separate from mythology in the work of Hesiod, but "the final separation of philosophy from every mythological and therefore every poetic element, required the whole period from Hesiod to (the purely conceptual mode of exposition of) Aristotle" (VI:51).

Poetry and philosophy, though present in mythology, are not responsible for its birth any more than they are responsible for the creation of language. There is, for Schelling, a general parallel between the rise of mythologies and the formation of languages. He observes that languages characteristically designate by differences of gender things which imply opposite number - for example, *der Himmel, die Erde; der Raum, die Zeit*; - and notes that this resembles mythology's expression of spiritual concepts by means of masculine and feminine deities. "One is almost tempted to say", concludes Schelling, "that language is only faded mythology which preserves in abstract and

formal distinctions what mythology still contains in the living and concrete state" (VI:54).<sup>11</sup>

Poetry and philosophy, however, were *potentially* present in the birth of language, and their actualization contributed to the material formation of language. Hence, the most ancient languages are, in Schelling's view, treasure-stores of philosophy and poetry (VI:51-54). Language arose, he says, "not in a piecemeal or atomistic fashion, but as a whole. All its parts came into existence together in an organic way". He sees in language, a profound objective coherence, a true system of ideas, not introduced intentionally by man but inherently and "purposefully" present. "Just as creative nature, in forming the skull, has already in mind (so to speak) the nerve which must travel through it", so the spirit (*Geist*) which created language has already in mind its later use as an instrument of *philosophical* and *poetic* expression (VI:53f).<sup>12</sup> The poet, for example, simply persuades language to reveal its treasures to him. He does not place them there; they are hidden in language as such. Language, like anything organic, appears to be a product of necessity and chance! Schelling reasons:

Since no philosophical consciousness, indeed, since no human consciousness of any kind is conceivable without language, it follows that consciousness could not have presided over the creation of language; and yet, the more deeply we penetrate into the nature of language, the more definitely do we discover that its profundities go far beyond those of the most deliberately conscious creation. It is the same with language as it is with organic beings; we believe their formation is due to blind chance, and yet we cannot deny the unfathomable purposefulness of their formation even down to the smallest detail (VI:54).

Thus, neither language nor mythology owe their birth to poetry or philosophy (for the actual appearance of these latter presupposes the existence of the former), but both were originally, and in an essential way, *potentially poetic and philosophical*.

Mythology cannot have undergone the influence of a philosophy which had to seek its forms and figures in poetry; rather must that philosophy have been already essentially poetic. And inversely, the poetry which created the forms of mythology could not have been in the service of a philosophy distinct from it, but must itself have been

essentially a knowledge-producing activity, i.e., philosophy. It would follow from this last proposition that truth is present in the mythological representations not in a purely accidental way but by virtue of a kind of necessity; and it follows from the first proposition that the poetic element in mythology has not been introduced from without, but is an integral part of its very essence, inseparable from the thought that created it. If the philosophical or doctrinal element is referred to as the Content, and if the poetic aspect is called the Form, one must conclude that the content could never have existed by itself, that it could have arisen only under this form and that the two have grown inseparably, indissolubly together (VI:54f).

Mythology now appears as a *natural, organic* product - *poetic* in form and *philosophical* in content - whose birth, like the birth of any organic entity, is both free and necessary, a kind of "instinctive invention", at once intentional and unintentional. On the one hand, there is nothing merely fabricated or artificial about it; on the other hand, its deepest meaning and most authentic relations are not merely accidental (VI:55).

But does this synthetic view really *explain the birth* of mythology? Not at all, says Schelling, for although it may be a formal improvement to speak of a philosophical poetry or a poetic philosophy as the principle which gives rise to mythology, the fact remains that we are still talking of poetry and philosophy and are no closer to an explanation than we were before. The true explanatory principle must lie *above* poetry and philosophy, not *in* them, and the poetic and scientific aspects of mythology must be necessary by-products of this supervenient principle which acts, so to speak, through them.

The poetic and scientific elements exist only in the product; they are necessary by-products, but for this very reason they are simply additional and accidental factors. According to the first two interpretations, it was only one of these two elements, the poetic or the doctrinal, which had this supervenient character. Here, however, both are regarded as adventitious and the essential principle, the truly explanatory principle, is independent of them both, being outside and above them (VI:56f).

Schelling's task will be to discover the nature of this third principle (this *tertium quid*) which has appeared as the source of mythological

ideas. All that we presently know of it, is that it dominates poetry and philosophy and can therefore have nothing in common with free invention but must come from an entirely different source. Schelling dismisses clairvoyance, trance, dream, and religious frenzy as the source of mythological ideas, for such explanations cannot be historically justified, and historical justification is *essential* because mythology is above all a historical phenomenon. The true explanation of mythology will have to show "by what natural or divine decree" mythological ideas were imposed in one period or another on the human race (or part of it) (VI:57).

#### D. Mythology as an Individual or Collective Invention

Schelling now returns to a notion shared by both the poetic and the philosophical explanations, to wit, the assumption that mythology is an *invention* (VI:58-68). That this invention was the work of an individual or individuals (e.g. poets, philosophers) has already been denied. And Schelling insists again that anyone who knows what its mythology means to a people, will understand perfectly well that it cannot be introduced like some academic program or imposed like a catechism.

To create a mythology, to give it that credibility and reality in the thought of men which it needs in order to achieve even that degree of popularity which makes it poetically useful - this is something which goes beyond the power of any individual to accomplish. ... (Could individuals possibly have given rise to) the living streams of religious myth and legend which poured out deep and powerful, as if from some unfathomable source, and flooded the prehistoric world? ... Did belief in gods, with all its vast mysterious power, evolve merely from some arbitrary reflection, from some limited, poorly-informed intelligence which produced childish personifications and notions about nature? (VI:58f, 61 cf. 50).

The more plausible alternative is to see mythology, not as an individual invention, but as the "instinctive invention" of a whole *people*. One could hold that "a people's mythology is so interwoven into its life and essence that it must be its own creation." Just as certain families of animals instinctively work together on some common project, so men who belong to the same people (*Volk*) form a spiritual



community by a kind of necessity, and in continuing concerted action create a product like mythology (VI:61f).<sup>13</sup> We find, indeed, that there exists in a human community both a folk-poetry (*Volkspoesie*) and a worldly wisdom (*Weltweisheit*). This natural folk-poetry is made up of legends, tales and songs of forgotten origin and more ancient than any poetic art (*Dichtkunst*). And this natural wisdom, inspired by the incidents of everyday life or the lessons of social life, continually invents new proverbs, riddles and parables. Thus one could hold that "as a result of the interaction of natural poetry and natural philosophy in real life - i.e., without premeditation or deliberate intent - the community created those higher forms which it needed to fill up its emptiness of mind and imagination" (VI:62).

But there are two major difficulties with this notion that mythology is the collective invention of a people. In the first place, how does it account for mythology as a *general* phenomenon? The fact is, says Schelling, that *many* peoples have produced mythologies and these mythologies bear a striking resemblance to one another! How are we to account for this? Was the same series of chance events repeated over and over again in different communities? But this is incredible. Perhaps, then, there was a process of propagation or dissemination from some original source. This was Hermann's view which Schelling has already judged to be fanciful (cf. VI:59, 61, 63).<sup>14</sup> Must we believe, then, that the material agreements of the various mythologies are purely external and the result of chance? But this is not possible, says Schelling, for the mythologies are not *superficially* similar; they evidence an inward affinity, "a blood relationship":

If the Greeks had received their Demeter from the Egyptians, then Demeter, like Isis, would have had to search for a slain husband, and Isis, like Demeter, for a kidnapped daughter. The resemblance, however, is restricted to the fact that both are searching for something that was lost. And since what is lost is different in each case, the Greek representation cannot be a mere reproduction of the Egyptian; it must have arisen independently of the latter. The resemblances are not like those which exist between an original and a copy; they do not suggest a unilateral descent of the one mythology from the other, but that all mythologies have a common extraction (*Abkunft*). The similarity of mythologies is not externally explicable, for it is based, so to speak, on a blood-relationship (VI:64).

Thus, the fact of mythology as a *general* phenomenon remains an objection to the "collective invention" theory. It is a fact that cannot be explained in external, mechanical terms, and Schelling will return to it later.

The second fundamental difficulty in the view that mythology is a community invention, is its presupposition of the prior existence of the people who allegedly invent a mythology for themselves, for such a prior existence is impossible if it be true, as Schelling claims, that a people as such cannot exist *without* a mythology.

What is a people? What is it that makes human beings into a people? It is certainly not the mere spatial co-existence of a greater or lesser number of physically similar individuals. No, it is the community of consciousness among them. This community of consciousness finds in the common language only an indirect expression. Where, therefore, are we to find the community of consciousness itself, along with its reason for being, if not in a common world view? And where is a people's world-view originally contained and given, if not in its mythology? It seems impossible, therefore, for a people already constituted as such to receive a mythology after the event - whether through the invention of one of its individual members, or as a result of a kind of collective instinct ... for we cannot conceive of a people existing without a mythology.

It could be argued, perhaps, that a people is held together by virtue of some common undertaking, like cultivation of the land or trade, and by virtue of common customs (morality), laws, governing authorities, etc. No doubt all this belongs to the concept of a people, but it seems almost unnecessary to call to mind the intimate relation which exists, among every people, between magisterial control, legislation, customs, even occupations, on the one hand, and representations of the gods on the other. The question is precisely whether all this, which is presupposed by, indeed, given *with* a people, can be conceived as existing apart from those religious representations which are to be found only in mythology (VI:64f).

Where primitive tribes are found to have no religion, they are also found to have no sense of community (VI:65n, 66n).<sup>15</sup> For that matter, take away his mythology and the Greek is no longer a Greek, the Egyptian no longer an Egyptian. It is absurd to suppose that a people

exists for a time and then decides to invent a language, laws, and a mythology for itself. The truth is, says Schelling, that a people is not a people at all till it has these things. It becomes a *particular* people by virtue of its language, laws, etc.

It receives along with its existence *as a people*, the law of its life and of its development, and all the laws which emerge in the course of its history can only have been received in and with the world-view which comes to a people at its birth, and which is contained in its mythology (VI:66).

The birth of mythology, then, *coincides* with the birth of peoples. "A mythology is the individual folk-consciousness of a people." A people's mythology does not arise out of its history, rather does the mythology *determine* the history.

The mythology of a people *constitutes* its destiny (just as the character of a man *is* his fate); it is the fate that befell it in the beginning. Who would deny that with the theodicy of the Hindus, Greeks, etc., the whole history of such peoples was given! (VI:67).

Schelling's insight here makes it clear that the origin of mythology goes back to a period in which it is simply meaningless to talk about invention (be it individual or collective), artistic clothing of ideas, popular misunderstandings and other such conditions as assumed by Heyne, Hermann and others. Poetic and philosophical explanations have erred in assuming the prior historical existence of peoples. Schelling does not say, of course, that these earlier explanations contain no truth at all, but simply points out that they fail to penetrate back to the period which saw the rise of mythology (VI:67f). The true explanation must lie elsewhere.

## E. Conclusion

The examination of these non-religious explanations has contributed to our understanding of mythology. We have seen that mythology is not an invention, individual or collective; that its formation was neither accidental nor fabricated, but free and necessary like the birth of any natural, organic product; that it is the common nucleus from which both poetry and philosophy emerge; that it has been elaborated by poets and philosophers, but that its poetic and scientific aspects are

simply necessary by-products of a supervenient *tertium quid* which acts through them; that there are family resemblances among the various mythologies; that the birth of mythologies coincides with the birth of peoples; that a mythology represents the individual folk-consciousness of a people and is a real force which takes possession of consciousness and constitutes a nation's destiny.

But the explanations so far discussed have refused to ascribe any original religious significance to mythology. The poetic explanation holds that if, at the beginning, mythology contained truth (religious or otherwise) it was a pure accident. The philosophic view concedes an original truth in mythology but insists it was not *religious* truth for such was deliberately excluded. Schelling must move, therefore, beyond these inadequate explanations and look to those which recognise that the mythological representations "must have been meant as truth, the whole, complete truth, and therefore as a theory of the gods (*Götterlehre*)."<sup>1</sup> He has to explain how mythology could have arisen in this sense, i.e., he must turn to *religious* explanations (VI:68).