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THE CONCEPT OF MYTHOLOGY IN F.W. J. SCHELLING'S *SPÄTPHILOSOPHIE*

Abstract: Schelling's late philosophy is currently experiencing a renaissance. His philosophy of mythology is regrettably very little known. The task we have taken upon ourselves is to introduce Schelling's notion of mythology as systematically as possible. This however requires a construction of the notion in order to capture the *necessity* at work behind an apparently polychromatic and volatile realm. As such we have unfolded an abbreviated form of Schelling's "negative dialectics" at work in progressively identifying and critically determining of diverse theories of myth, that we would today call the psychological, anthropological, sociological, political etc. approaches of the myth. Schelling's masterful analysis culminates with the sublation of all theories into his own metaphysical approach. The effort of thinking is concentrated on establishing the *necessity and objectivity of the mythological process* as a moment in the emergence of mankind's consciousness itself, as a revelation and growing of God himself within the finite spirit.

Key words: Philosophy of Mythology, German Idealism, History, Polytheism, Humankind, Consciousness

1. Mythology: A Lifelong Endeavor

Schelling's interest in mythology is early to be noticed. We can distinguish three stages in the formation of his philosophy of mythology.

In his very precocious study *Ueber Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der aeltesten Welt* (1793) Schelling expresses his interest to the question of myth. The answer is still influenced by the naturalist explanation of Enlightenment. Myth-creators are supposed to actually be examples of pre-scientific mentality, or more precisely infantile scientific attitude.

With his *Philosophy of Art* (1802-1803) he overcomes this naturalism in favor of an aesthetic vision that considers mythology as "the matter of art" *par excellence*.

In his *Spätphilosophie* however his discourse radicalizes and the concept discovers itself in the mythological representation. The myth is elevated to the highest position it was ever granted, as ontological necessary moment in the development of consciousness in history. This is inaugurated in his *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, a published version of his celebrated 1842 Berlin courses. It is already known that young students such as Kierkegaard, Engels, Ruge or Bakunin attended these lectures. Even they were ultimately disappointed, it might well be that, on a different level this was nothing but a sign that philosophy itself was disappointed with each of these young students who really had different urgent matters than the calm and laborious unveiling of the mythical sphere of a time that preceded historical consciousness and philosophy.

2. Schelling's Method

Schelling eulogizes the „freedom of German universities“ because, in opposition to rigid curricular regulation, they allowed for a new and unconfirmed subject, such as the philosophy of mythology, to be explored. It is solely the acceptance of this risk that brings about breakthrough, progress and novelty.

He distinguishes from the very beginning the *existence* of myth from the *essence* of myth. While historical or social research needs to document mythology in their factual existence, it is philosophy's proper task to bring to light the essence of mythology.

In order to achieve this, Schelling formulates an approach that is not very different from a phenomenological approach in that it avoids a priori theorizing. Instead, he tries to „determine the object to allow itself to be uncovered“.

The first step is the inventory of theories that have tried to make sense of the myth grounded on the study of the existent mythologies (documented in writing, customs or historical „mute monuments“). These are important since they reflect the reaction of different branches of study to the discovery of mythology as a distinct object of study.

With philosophical exigency Schelling identifies the weak points in all these theories. His approach is *critical* and *negative* in the first place. This amounts to a laborious clearing up of the field before actually building a comprehensive philosophical approach of myths.

The philosophical understanding of myths should only be evoked in the last resort, when all other “immanent” explanations have failed to account for the myth. The important way to thematise the essence of myth is to identify, after a thorough study of documents, what is „common and concordant” – that is *universal* in the manifold instances of mythology, the invariant core residual when we set aside the profusion of differences that make up different mythologies.

3. The Original Material of Mythology (*Urstoff*)

The main task of a philosophy of mythology is to establish and possess the concept itself. This makes Schelling's *Historical-Critical Introduction* critically important for the second part of the project, *Philosophy of Mythology* where the major mythological systems are thoroughly analyzed.

In fact, this process of finding the optimal definition made up the bulk of his so called Historical-Critical Introduction. Schelling maintained that by means of his methodology, every possible mode of interpreting myths would be considered at its appropriate place. These included: (1) their appearance as imaginative fictions (*Dichtungen*) expressive of their creators' subjective fantasies; (2) their external, social function; (3) their role as representing struggles among competing ideological paradigms; (4) their inner, psychological effects on believers; and (5) their revelatory value, as disclosing a realm of spirit that possibly transcends the world of material existence altogether.¹

The most general definition of myth comprises three characteristics which make up original material of mythologies comprises

a) A *world of gods* (*Götterwelt*) that is different in kind from the historical world, and

b) A *history of gods* (*Göttergeschichte*), the becoming and acts of gods themselves.

c) The *primordial time, the primordial beginning* (*Uranfang*) the problem that is posed by mythology its own origin and the origin it describes itself. This „inaccessible” original time that mythology narrates was

called by historian of religions Mircea Eliade *illo tempore*² “when” the major cosmic institutions came into being. The problem with this time is that it is neither pure (radical) eternity, nor pure (radical) historicity. It is rather a frontier-time of the two worlds where the eternal realm of gods met/affected the temporal realm of men.

4. The Poetical Origins of Myth

The first chapter is dedicated to the poetic theory of myth which was current at the time. One of the major antinomies in determining the myth is that it was conceived either as true, or as poetry. We believe Schelling deliberately plays of the famous title of Goethe (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*) to introduce this difficulty. The myth is difficult to separate both from poetry or truth, although it is difficult to conceive it either as mere poetry or as mere truth.

When a story is related we spontaneously take facts as real, the meaning of story is its very reality. A reality claim however comes with a reality check and mythology does not function according to ordinary rules of adequacy. A striking element in mythologies, however, is that what it narrates is somehow true, it has a meaningful truth: „their meaning resides simply in that they are true”³.

The poetical standpoint reflects a desire to maintain the purity of the *ideal* side of myth, beyond any limitation and conditioning to historical reality that would render myths poorer. Schelling calls this poetical theory „the innocent standpoint”.

There are problems however with this abstraction of myth from the real. This cannot of course be the modern meaning of poetry. But Homer found himself already in the element of a belief in gods, with rituals and priests where the miraculous was constantly entering the natural realm. This indicates that it is not poetry that grounds myth but the other way around, such as in his *Philosophy of Art*: „myth is the material of art”.

Despite this factual check, Schelling insists that the poetical doctrine of mythology is not purely „false”. Since the first intuition is generally true, this indicates the direction and the final purpose, even though it is abstract and incomplete. Even though Homer does not clearly indicate prior elaborated myths, there’s no reason to suppose they did not existed.

Schelling’s solution is that the ideal and the real elements must somehow work together in the formation of mythology, so that we can say poetry and mythology are born together. He interprets Herodot’s account of the “birth of mythology” in Hesiod and Homer’s poetry as an epochal crisis of consciousness that is one with the genesis of Greeks

themselves as a nation in the act of expressing and bringing to light the amorphous primitive religious consciousness.

This *inaccessible immemorial time* where myths coexisted in an obscure and chaotic consciousness was actualized and differentiated in poetry. The mythical consciousness was subjected to representations but was not free in this silent epoch. It is poetry, through Homer and Hesiod which brought these representations to light and freedom emancipated them from their indeterminate condition. Their expression realized them, differentiated them and put an end to this state of unconscious primitive subjection. This genesis of myth is in fact the genesis of a distinct world of distinct gods and their movement which is the history of gods. Poetry is therefore simultaneous with mythology and they both put an end to the primitive dark ages of silent and obscure religious consciousness.

5. The Philosophical Origins of Myth

In opposition with the poetic vision of mythology there are different views that indicate the truth-content and truth-aspiration behind the mythological meaning. Myths tell so to say a different story than what is actually expressed, but they do reveal a truth. Most of these visions explain myths as *allegorical*. Schelling discusses some of them before he provides a verdict.

a) The first allegorical theory of myth is the *historical* explanation of mythology. This holds that gods are in fact exceptional personalities, utterly human characters sublated into supra-human figures (e.g. kings, heroes, legislators).

b) A different theory asserts that gods are not divinized exceptional personalities but objects or phenomena: *moral* phenomena or *physical* phenomena.

Through personification a goddess like Hera or Athens indicate a moral attitude (jealousy or wisdom). Alchemical theories play on etymology to uncover correspondences (Elena/Selena, Iliad/Helios). Chemical theories force associations like Aphrodite and oxygen (both would be universal mediums). "In short they speak of gods where they are only thinking of natural forces; thus they mean something different than they say, and express something about which they are not actually thinking"⁴. The physical theories suppose that mythology camouflages natural history like catastrophes and the whole process through which nature went from the dark turmoil to a calm order. At its limit, mythology contains a cosmology.

Schelling does not deny entirely such correspondences but states this is mostly a retroactive reflected attribution of a scientific mind to a myth-creator. Schelling asks why would a scientific minded author

create such a elusive and complicate detour to explain basic natural facts? Paradoxically, such theories attribute either a poetical genius or a scientific mind to Hesiod or Homer. But if both theories can be formulated, than it is obvious that neither theory really captures the specificity of its object.

What if, entirely in accord with the lawfulness that we perceive in the Hellenic culture, the two poets, Homer and Hesiod, so very different from each other (and between whom very old stories and sayings already know of a struggle and thus of a certain opposition), designated the two equally possible – not beginnings but – exits from mythology? If Homer showed how it ended in poetry, Hesiod did in philosophy.⁵

Mythology and poetry are simultaneously the exit from a world of dark and obscure presentment. Schelling's second argument is that science or philosophy are not prior to mythology as well, but they are immanent to mythology and they are actually true at the end of mythology as an attempt to understand itself, to conceptualize itself: the positing of *Chaos* as a dark (indeterminate) background for the world of the gods is the first expression of abstract reason at work in overcoming differences and concrete representations in mythology, and effort of reason to objectivate itself.

6. The Linguistic Origins of Myth

One other theory Schelling analyzes is a semantic theory of myth current at the time. There's obviously some truth in the etymological derivation from gods' names. Moreover, the language is itself so saturated with mythological implication that Schelling observes we can say that language in itself is saturated with mythology: "One is almost tempted to say: language itself is only faded mythology; what mythology still preserves in living and concrete differences is preserved in language only in abstract and formal differences"⁶.

But the basic argument against something that would have generated myth is the same: there was no pure language and then the myth. There is no language without myth. Just like there are poetic or philosophic elements in myth, but this is not a derivation of myth from prior forms, in the same manner, even if there are a lot of philosophical elements in language, it doesn't mean that philosophy preceded language. These all are co-original structures of human consciousness. Consciousness itself is in its very genesis mythological, philosophical, poetical and linguistic.

Schelling rejects the common ground implied by these theories. Both the poetical and the mythological vision operate on the supposition that myth is an *invention*. Schelling argues effectively against the crude *intentionality* (*Absichtlichkeit*) implied in this narrative of myth-creation,

and language formation at least is much more similar to the process of myth formation.

Myths have something of *natural* and *organic products*: their force, hold and endurance on entire peoples, the original obscure manner in which they spread and received immediate acceptance looks very much like a natural process, much more unconscious than conscious. But the organic form of mythological visions appears as if they express *finality*. This finality however cannot be accounted by the deliberate subjective creation of one individual.

7. The Popular Origins of Myth

A further theory that avoids the extreme subjectivist idea of individuals creating myths like they were poetry or scientific theories is the one suggesting "peoples" created myths. This has the advantage of some de-subjectivation, since this would be an amorphous, collective process. But again this misses the point: there's no "Egyptian" or "Greek" peoples before Egyptian or Greek mythology. Peoples themselves are a creation of a mythological *Weltanschauung*, and the cultural identity, institutions, customs, history are explained through their myths, not the other way around. Again, *mythology is no invention*: when a nation first emerges it is already endowed and identified with its system of gods. Peoples are results of their own mythologies. All these factors that assume to explain myth are actually co-effective in its organic emergence. Schelling discards purely naturalistic explanations of the emergence of races, ethnicity and finds the best explanation in language differentiation, since language is a *spiritual* phenomenon, not a natural one. The violence that resulted in the fracture of humankind into heterogeneous tribes can only be understood through a powerful spiritual crisis of the primordial people.

Nor is it to be assumed that mankind would have left that state - where there were no peoples, but rather mere differences among tribes - without a spiritual crisis that had to be of the deepest meaning and had to have occurred in the foundation of human consciousness itself if it was supposed to be powerful enough to enable or determine the heretofore united humanity such that it disintegrated itself. And since this has now been said in general, that the cause had to be a spiritual one, we can only be surprised how something so obvious was not perceived immediately. For different peoples cannot really be conceived without different languages and language is, after all, something spiritual. (...) then the emergence of languages is inseparable from the emergence of peoples. And if the differentiation of peoples is not something that has always been, but rather something that has emerged, then this must hold of the differentiations of languages. Were a time in which there were no peoples, and thus also one in which there were no different languages, and if it is unavoidable to presuppose of the mankind cleaved into peoples one not so

cleaved – then it is no less unavoidable to have a language common to all mankind preceding the languages separating the peoples.⁷

With this, Schelling has just logically derived the religious problem of the *Tower of Babel*. Not only differences cannot be accounted without a lost unity, but he considers the *Genesis* narrative to be a special original document that preserved this catastrophic crisis in “actual memory”. The confusion of languages, the violent loss of mankind’s unity is a fact of consciousness.

For a confusion of language cannot be conceived without an internal process, without a tremoring of consciousness itself. When we arrange the processes according to their natural sequence, then the most internal is necessarily an alteration of consciousness, the next, already more external, the spontaneous confusion of the language, and the most external cision of the human species into henceforth not merely spatial, but rather internally and spiritually self-excluding masses – that is, into peoples⁸

The only way Schelling believes the unity of mankind could have been preserved before this great split was if one single principle filled this homogeneous mass of primordial mankind. And the only principle that could have been so powerful as to maintain humanity in a unity is God. Only a God could have acted effectively against the natural inclination to dispersion so as to provide such a durable unity. The nature of the *spiritual crisis* invoked by Schelling meant a sort of innermost loss of the spiritual principle, of God, which resulted in the confusion of languages: *the apparition of different images of God, of different gods* before human consciousness. The emergence of veritable systems of gods that, the more determinate they were, the more exclusive of one another they were. Different people emerged, the world we call pagan which in Hebrew is plainly stated as “the nations”.

8. The Ontological Nature of Myth

After discussing and negatively displaying limits in all previous theories, Schelling proceeds therefore to set the ground for his positive encompassing interpretation of myth.

The joint emergence of peoples, languages and polytheistic mythologies is set against the background of the principle of the original unity. Of course, the monogenism imposes the inquiry into what unites humankind behind the variety of ethnic differences. This is where first Schelling argues in favor of a *common God* before the great spiritual crisis (the loss of this principle) that resulted in the confusion of languages and the separation of peoples. Before history, but not in a mere chronological anteriority – but also epochal anteriority, Schelling uncovers that underlying mythology there is “something into which human invention will have not reached, *which is not made by humans*”

(XI, 222). The loss of the unitary principle, of the common God that originally filled mankind's consciousness resulted in different images of God, then in autonomized and mutually exclusive polytheistic systems that are *a revolutionary alteration of the original consciousness*. Otherwise put: *subjective projections resulted in objective consequences*.

This multiplication of languages and peoples are not to be accounted for as mere empirical inventions. The obscure origin of mythology has been explained. Polytheism is the imaginative loss of a primordial monotheism. But this is not the pure result of subjective agency. This resembles more the primordial sin, which is a collective guilt.

Mythology is associated to the opposition to a *relative monotheism* which results in polytheism, in the sense that *mythology was an objective process*: the crisis that brought about the *split* followed an *objective necessity* that produced the differentiation of humanity into peoples, languages, mythologies and polytheism. This cannot be accounted by a "pure monotheism", abstract monotheism that simply discards mythology as error and idolatry. Schelling tries on the contrary to understand the mythological process not with our enlightened, differentiated and autonomized reason, but within the element of the obscure initial genesis of mankind, as a young species in an alien nature, very much in a fallen condition. The original, abstract monotheism that was fractured since the great spiritual crisis into polytheism is not to be subjectively accounted for, since the force of this crisis compelled and overcome any individual subject. "It is a production and a process independent from thinking and will (...) that has an unavoidable reality for the subjected subject"⁹.

Myth is a necessary moment in the genesis and becoming of universal consciousness. All subjective theories were determined as incomplete. What is left unaccounted for is the necessary unfolding of consciousness in the form of myths. This is an *objective* process. Consciousness is not *inventing* mythical representations (or contributes little to the superficial imagery of myths). It is instead subjected to their fundamental content which is metaphysical in substance and reflects in a subjective vision natural truths of the spiritual world. This unconscious dimension of the mythical process has been elaborated by C.G. Jung, very much inspired by Schelling. The unconscious is determining representations that the subjective conscious decision cannot totally control or simply invent. Humankind could not have realized its consciousness immediately in a mature and full-blown form as revelation and rationalization without passing through this objective stage.

Schelling goes ever further: the loss of the common God was not simply a subjective choice. There are ontological grounds internal to

God for such a process. This is analogous with Schelling's quasi-Gnostic positivation of the primordial sin. There is a reason in this crisis. Man secedes from the beautiful unity with God; man is left alone so that he can grow. The unity needed is a reflected unity, not an un-reflected unity. "The same potencies, which in their collective effectivity and in their unity make consciousness into what posits God, become in their divergence the causes of the process by which gods are posited"¹⁰

Man was destined to be the center of creation but he lost its centrality through the original sin, which resulted in a fall on the periphery. Mankind ended up at the level of objects, in an inferior condition. However something in him preserved the *seal* of his central destination and vocation. This seal is the presence and the actualization of God's own potencies alive at work in humankind. "The creative potencies of nature are simultaneously the potencies that create the consciousness and that become active and real in it, as mythological processes"¹¹.

The theogonic process, through which mythology emerges, is a subjective one insofar as it takes place in consciousness and shows itself through the generating representations: but the causes and thus also the objects of those representations are the actually and in themselves theogonic powers... The content of the process are not merely imagined potencies, but rather the potencies themselves - which create consciousness and which create nature... The mythological process does not have to do with natural objects, but rather with the pure creating potencies whose original product is consciousness itself.¹²

With this last fragment, the metaphysical core of Schelling's philosophy of mythology is revealed. Myths are part of a necessary process of the Spirit. But the opening and unfolding of the ontological principle is not a subjective human creation. Quite the other way around: the subjective consciousness was *a priori* constituted along this growing of God in humankind itself.

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Notes:

¹ Beach, Edward Allen, *The Potencies of God(s), Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994)

² Mircea Eliade, *History and Cosmos. The Myth of Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959)

- ³ F.W.J. Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), XI, p.11
- ⁴ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, X34, p. 27
- ⁵ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 46, p.36
- ⁶ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 52, p. 40
- ⁷ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 101, p.73
- ⁸ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 104, p. 76
- ⁹ „Die Mythologie als im Bewusstseyn sich ereignende, aber nicht von ihm hervorgebrachte Tatsache ist hinsichtlich der Notwendigkeit ihres Auftretens das Erscheinen der Natur im Bewusstsein, genauer: das Erscheinen der Produktivität der Natur auf der Stufe und im Medium des Bewusstseins“ (*Sämtliche Werke* (I-XIV), K.F.A Schelling (hrsg.) (Stuttgart, 1856-1861), XI 194.
- ¹⁰ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 208, p. 154.
- ¹¹ Sandkühler, H.J. (ed.), *F.W.J. Schelling* (Stuttgart / Weimar: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 1998), p.163.
- ¹² Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, XI 207, p.144.

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