

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Mythology and Philosophy — the Esoteric
and the Exoteric in New Mythology**

Hitoshi Tanaka

Introduction

In this paper, I analyze the relationship between mythology and philosophy in the writings and lectures of Friedrich Schlegel (1772—1829), a representative figure of German Romantic aesthetics.

In his essay in 1800, “Dialogue on Poetry” (Gespräch über die Poesie), a character named Ludoviko gives his friends a “Speech on Mythology” (Rede über die Mythologie). He maintains the necessity of mythology as a “focal point” (Mittelpunkt) for poetic creation and, after deploring its loss in modernity, declares: “But, I add, we are close to obtaining one or, rather, it is time that we earnestly work together to create one.”¹

Ludoviko characterizes the forthcoming “new mythology” as “emerging from the innermost depths of the spirit and developing only from itself”,² while he identifies the origins of the old mythology with the senses and imagination. He states that the old mythology was “the first flower of youthful imagination, directly joining and imitating what was immediate and vital in the sensuous world”.³ I will raise the following question concerning this argument: If the new mythology emerges in a manner different from that in antiquity, should it not, along with poetry, be substantially different from their antecedents? In order to answer this question, I compare the “Speech on Mythology” with discussions on mythology in other writings and lectures by Schlegel and focus on the relationship between mythology and philosophy since the most distinctive feature of the new mythology is its close connection with philosophy.⁴

**Part I: Mythology and Philosophy in the History of Greco-Roman Poetry
(1798)**

In this part, I primarily deal with the *History of Greco-Roman Poetry* (Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer), Schlegel’s philological work published (only partly) in 1798. In this work, he distinguished between two sources of Greek mythology, namely, the epics of Homer and Hesiod and Orphic mysticism. Schlegel emphasizes the popularity of the former among the Greeks. In particular, he labels Homer the “proto-poet of the ancients,”⁵ for Greek poetry in general — not only epics but also lyrics and

tragedies — had referred to the Homeric epics and also because Greek scientists had considered Homer as their authority.

However, Schlegel did not forget to mention that Greek philosophers did not blindly accept the popularity of Homer and Hesiod: for example, Plato and Pythagoras had severely criticized some of their fallacies, while the Stoics and Neo-Platonists had avoided reading them literally and attempted to endow them with allegorical, i.e., more intellectual meanings. Schlegel evaluated this critical or allegorical reading of the epics by the philosophers as an unsuccessful attempt on the ground that, despite the criticism, Homer had remained popular among the Greeks. Further, according to Schlegel, the allegorical interpretation did not correspond to Homeric texts, which had been originally outlined not on the basis of pure intellect but fantasy.⁶

Schlegel treated Orphic mysticism as the second source of Greek mythology. Schlegel remarked that the Greeks had widely considered Orpheus to be older than Homer and also respected the former as “the father of poetry, founder of mysteries.”⁷ In this context, “mystery” refers to “orgia” — namely, an enthusiastic festival with songs and dances that symbolized the fertility of nature.

Nevertheless, Schlegel pointed out that the mysticism attributed to Orpheus might be later than the Homeric epics. He based this judgment on the ground that the “mysterious” in the sense of a “symbolized secret doctrine on the incomprehensible essence of nature”⁸ is absent in the Homeric epics. Moreover, he asserted that Homer lacked any idea of “the infinite” in general.⁹ With regard to the question of the alleged antiquity of the so-called Orphic mysteries, Schlegel assumed that priests had fabricated it for the sake of their own authority.

The crux of his argument was that this mysticism had expressed the idea of infinity for the first time in Greek history. From this viewpoint, he arrived at the conclusion that “orgia and mysteries were the first beginning of Greek philosophy.” Moreover, he estimated that Orphic mysticism had appeared at the same time as lyrics and republicanism. According to Schlegel, this was because both phenomena testified to “the striving for the infinite and ability of self-determination,” which, he believed were made possible only by the mysticism.

In this context, he also suggests the close relationship between mysticism and the philosophy of Socrates, especially the latter’s ironic style.

Is the whole Phaedrus not full of mystic allusions, in which Socrates philosophizes on the holy intoxication of genuine lovers so lovely with the attic spirit and with such a Socratic mixture of joke and seriousness that is more enigmatic and vague than all mysteries?¹⁰

Despite his hypothesis on the origin of Greek philosophy in mysticism, he criticized the so-called Orphic mysticism on two points: first, in mysticism, the infinite had been interpreted not as a spiritual being, but as the unconscious powers of nature; second, the mysticism had been characterized by esoterism, by means of which the true doctrine had been kept secret only among initiates. Schlegel remarks as follows: “By natural misunderstanding, immature reason took its presentiment of the incomprehensible for

secrets that were allowed to be revealed to the purified and consecrated alone and must be concealed from the common people.”¹¹ Schlegel appears to have interpreted orgiastic rituals and, allegedly, Orphic poetry as exoteric covers that had concealed the esoteric doctrine. In addition, Schlegel criticized Greek philosophy on the ground that it had followed mysticism in distinguishing between the esoteric doctrine and the exoteric cover.¹²

In this context, it is worth noting that Schlegel not only pointed out similarities between Socratic irony and Orphic mysticism, but also found in the latter a type of discourse that transcends the boundary between the esoteric and the exoteric. In a fragment in 1797, he described Socratic irony as follows (the Lyceum Fragment No. 108):

Socratic irony is the only entirely involuntary and nevertheless completely conscious dissimulation. It is equally impossible to attain it artificially or betray it. For him who does not possess it, it will remain an enigma even after the frankest avowal. It will deceive only those who consider it an illusion, [...]. In it, everything must be joke and yet seriousness, artlessly open and yet deeply dissimulated. [...] It contains and incites a feeling of the insoluble conflict of the unlimited and the limited, of the impossibility and the necessity of total communication. [...] It is a good sign if the harmonious dullards fail to understand this constant self-parody, if over and over again they believe and disbelieve until they become giddy and consider joke to be seriousness, and seriousness to be joke.¹³

As in the *History*, Schlegel also admitted in this fragment that Socratic irony had been enigmatic and vague. However, the phrase “a feeling of the insoluble conflict [...] of the impossibility and the necessity of total communication” clarifies the fact that Socratic dissimulation should not be taken for intentional disguise to conceal his true doctrine; rather, it should be characterized as an unavoidable and essential enigma brought about in a self-contradictory attempt to describe what is indescribable in nature. Therefore, we cannot apply criticism against the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, the true meaning and its dissimulation to Socrates’ discourse.

In another Fragment, the Lyceum Fragment No. 42, he conceived of the integration of philosophy and literature through the medium of irony. This does not imply that poetry could provide an exoteric expression to esoteric philosophy but that irony allows poetry to “rise to the height of philosophy” by lending poetry “the mood which surveys everything and rise infinitely above everything limited.”¹⁴ In his theory of irony, Schlegel therefore accorded poetry an equal status with philosophy — namely, as an enigmatic discourse striving to represent an unrepresentable infinity.

In the next part, I will prove that Schlegel attempted to integrate philosophy and poetry as well as the esoteric and the exoteric not only in the theory of irony but also in the concept of new mythology.

Part II: Mythology and Philosophy in "Speech on Mythology" (1800)

In this part, I focus on the relationship between "idealism" and "realism" in the "Speech on Mythology," in order to clarify the significance of philosophy in the concept of new mythology.

Initially, Ludoviko defines idealism solely as "a part, a branch, a mode of expression of the phenomenon of all phenomena: that mankind struggles with all its power to find its own center" among others.¹⁵ For him, it is nevertheless a "great phenomenon of our age" because he considers it to be a leading principle of "the great revolution" of all disciplines and arts, whose most eminent example is the rise of the philosophy of nature at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Concerning the status of idealism in the new mythology Ludoviko argues that not only will the idealism be an example of this mythology but "it will indirectly become its very resource"; this is because the idealism, which generated from the spirit returning to itself, necessarily demand realism as its counterpart. This idealism will be produced by the spirit going out of itself and toward the sensuous world.¹⁷

While in the "Speech," the term "idealism" refers to idealistic philosophy such as Fichte's theory of knowledge, Ludoviko states that the realism will definitely appear as poetry. He offers two reasons for this. First, he believes that realism as a philosophical doctrine was already overcome (by idealism); second, he supposes that the most appropriate form of realism, which will have been aroused by the idealism will be poetry. Ludoviko makes this assumption on the ground that poetry is "based on the harmony of the ideal and real"¹⁸ — here, as an indirect expression of invisible ideas through visible symbols. Ludoviko proposes interpreting the pantheistic system of Spinoza (1632-1677) as a paradigm of poetic realism, and he demands that all poets imitate Spinoza both with regard to his imagination and his feeling of love for God. Ludoviko laconically defines poetic realism in mythology as a "hieroglyphic expression of surrounding nature in the transfigured form of imagination and love."¹⁹ According to Ludoviko, this expression should make perceivable "what usually escapes our consciousness" — in other word, "something original and inimitable" which is absolutely irreducible," namely, the infinite.²⁰

To summarize the "Speech" the new mythology should consist of the idealism, which has discovered the infinite in the human spirit, along with the realism, which should express the infinite through poetic symbolism. This concept obviously shares a close relationship with the mysticism dealt with in the *History of Greco-Roman Poetry*. For example, Ludoviko describes the pantheism of Spinoza as the "basis and support for every individual kind of mysticism,"²¹ and after the "Speech" his friend Lothario refers to "the Eleusinian mysteries" and "the Orphic fragment" as possible materials for the creation of the new mythology.²²

In comparison with the two sources of Greek mythology treated in the *History*, I can provide three distinguishing features of the new mythology. First, the new mythology is so closely related to philosophy that it can be included within it as a part of it, while the Homeric epics remained alien to philosophy. Second as opposed to Orphic mysticism to which Schlegel attributed the origin of Greek philosophy, the new mythology should

emerge from the idealistic philosophy. From this viewpoint, the new mythology should be understood as an attempt to revive mysticism in modernity by means of philosophy.²³

The third, most important characteristic of the new mythology is that Ludoviko does not distinguish between the exoteric and the esoteric in his "Speech." He grants both idealism and realism an equal status. He does not undervalue realism in poetic form as a disguise for philosophical idealism nor does he advocate a hierarchical differentiation between initiates and the common people. Ludoviko encourages his friends to contribute to the creation of the new mythology in their own way: "Let each pursue his own in joyful confidence, in the most individual manner; for nowhere has the right of individuality more validity."²⁴ Furthermore, Antonio, a friend of his, refers to a seemingly egalitarian concept of mutual instruction among artists.²⁵

In conclusion, the concept of the new mythology progressed alongside that of Socratic irony, insofar as they both expressed Schlegel's attempt to integrate the esoteric and the exoteric as well as the philosophic and the poetic. In any case, we should pay attention to the framework of the "Dialogue on Poetry" as an intimate conversation between literally and philosophically talented friends. We can easily assume that the theory and practice of the creation of the new mythology by Schlegel and his friends must have caused considerable embarrassment and antipathy among the public due to the idea of revived mysticism and enigmatic expressions. In 1800, Schlegel himself wrote an essay exclusively on the negative reaction to his style. In this essay entitled "On Incomprehensibility" (*Über die Unverständlichkeit*), he frankly admitted to the incomprehensibility of his style and, above all, his fragments on irony. However, he opposed the condemnation of the incomprehensible, arguing that inner satisfaction of the human spirit depends solely on a point in obscurity, which would lose its power immediately if one attempted to resolve it through understanding.²⁶

As an alternative to ordinary readers, who tend to reject incomprehensible texts, Schlegel anticipated the advent of "readers, who are able to read."²⁷ Schlegel explained this expression with an earlier fragment (Lyceum Fragment No. 20): "A classical work doesn't ever have to be understood entirely. But those who are educated and who are still educating themselves must desire to learn more and more from it."²⁸ Therefore, the "readers, who are able to read" are the recipients of mysterious discourse who accept an incomprehensible text as it is and repeatedly generate productive interpretations of it.

On the one hand, Schlegel expected new readers in the future; on the other, we cannot overlook the fact that he himself provoked conflict with the public opinion. In the fragment cited in part I, he observed that "if the harmonious dullards fail to understand this constant self-parody" it was "a good sign" for irony. Such a contemptuous choice of phrase must have deepened his isolation from the public sphere, despite the intended integration of the exoteric and the esoteric.

His later lectures indicate that his expectation of new readers never became a reality and that he attempted to avoid fatal isolation from the public opinion in a different manner.

Part III: Philosophy and Mythology in Lectures on "Development of Philosophy" and "European Literature" (1803-1805)

In this part, I deal with the relationship between philosophy and mythology in the period following the dissolution of the Romantic circle in Jena in 1801, during which Schlegel approached Catholicism.

In a lecture on "theory of divinity" (*Theorie der Gottheit*) as a part of lectures on the "development of philosophy" (*Entwicklung der Philosophie*, 1804/05), Schlegel defined idealism as philosophical cosmogony, and he stated that idealism "presupposes strength of spirit and vivacity of imagination, which can be found not everywhere, but only rarely."²⁹ For this reason, he asserted that idealism remained an "esoteric doctrine" and stressed the necessity of an "exoteric philosophy" with poetic expression. Such a philosophy could, on the one hand, conceal the idealism from the common people who must misunderstand it and, on the other hand, equip their aptitude for it. In this lecture, Schlegel termed this "exoteric philosophy" as "mythology." It is obvious that this "mythology" no longer enjoyed an equal status with philosophy; its only function was to supplement the idealism as an exterior disguise as well as a preparation for it.

Although Schlegel had included philosophical idealism in the new mythology in 1800, he reserved the idealism for initiates and referred the common people to poetic mythology in 1804/05. This distinction also dominates his argument on poetic and philosophical languages in lectures on "European literature" (*Wissenschaft der europäischen Literatur*, 1803/04).

In these lectures, Schlegel distinguished the philosophical language from the poetic one in the following manner: the former seeks to describe the infinite clearly — so that it must remain an unfinished attempt, and only a minority can comprehend such an incomplete language — while the latter does not describe but only suggests the infinite. Based on this distinction, he concluded, "all poetry in general is very easy to understand,"³⁰ which was in direct opposition to his argument for incomprehensible literary discourse in 1800.

In the "theory of divinity", Schlegel argued that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church must guarantee the distinction between philosophy and mythology institutionally.

It arises from the necessity of philosophical criticism on academic treatment applied concerning the revelation that the original tradition of the Church should not come into the possession of all its members. Interpretation, history and sources of the revelation, with all knowledge and background belonging to them, befit only the Church itself and the theologians in it. It will only produce one mistake after another and provoke the greatest anger to refer people to the Bible; therefore, the Protestants are wrong to the greatest degree to dismiss everything as symbolic and follow the written revelation so immediately.³¹

Schlegel not only applied his defense of hierarchy to Christianity but also to the history of Greek philosophy. In the lectures on "European literature" instead of Socrates, he paid the greatest attention to the Pythagoreans because he perceived a close similarity between

the Pythagorean sect and the "church militant" of Christianity. He provided two reasons for this: First the Pythagorean sect was an institution that rejected the deification of natural forces in traditional mythology and strived to "consecrate people, bring them closer to God and unite them with the infinite"; second besides their doctrines, the Pythagoreans appealed to people through "external customs, allegories and symbols," — in the same manner as did the Catholic Church.³²

Conclusion

In direct contrast to his criticism of Greek esoterism in 1798, in his later lectures, Schlegel defended the division of esoteric philosophy and exoteric poetry. However, this was not an abrupt conversion. In the *History of Greco-Roman Poetry*, he distinguished two types of Greek philosophy: one that had concealed its esoteric doctrine with an exoteric cover and the other that strived to unify the esoteric and the exoteric. Schlegel himself assumed the latter position in his Romantic period and developed the idea of the new mythology. Irrespective of his subjective intentions his writing activities — and those of his friends — isolated them from the public sphere and led to them being branded as incomprehensible. As a result of this isolation, he abandoned the attempt at unification and turned to the strict separation of the esoteric and the exoteric, of which he had considerable knowledge from his study of Greek mysticism and philosophy. This process of conversion led him to characterize the poetic language as "very easy to understand in general" and seek the guarantee of modern esoterism in the Catholic hierarchy.

¹ Friedrich Schlegel: *Dialogue and Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*. Translated, introduced, and annotated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc. University Park and London (The Pennsylvania State University Press) 1968. p. 81.

Hereafter, this translation will be abbreviated as DP and cited with some modifications.

² DP 82.

³ DP 81.

⁴ My presentation complements the following paper of Prof. Dr. Otabe at the fifteenth Congress for Aesthetics: 'The Aesthetic' and 'the Scientific' or 'the Exoteric' and 'the Esoteric': An Essay on the History of Modern Aesthetics. In the Proceedings of the 15th Congress of Aesthetics. (CD-ROM) Tokyo 2003. Prof. Otabe points out, that "the Romantics," here mainly Schelling to 1802, intended to "aestheticize" the scientific, i.e. to provide subjective intellectual intuition with objectivity through aesthetic intuition. For Schelling in *System of Transcendental Idealism*, only art is able to document what the philosophy cannot express outwardly.

My presentation makes clear that among the "Romantics" Schlegel (at least until 1800) regarded both philosophical and aesthetic discourse as enigmatic and mysterious insofar they eternally strive and never achieve to represent what in nature unrepresentable.

⁵ *Kritische-Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Hrsg. von Ernst Behler unter Mitwirkung von Jean-Jaques Anstett u. Hans Eichner. Paderborn u.a. (Schöningh) 1958ff. vol. I, p. 447.

Hereafter, this text will be abbreviated as KA and cited from my translation.

⁶ Cf. KA I 457.

⁷ KA I 339.

⁸ KA I 408.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ KA I 405.

¹¹ KA I 403. "Durch ein ebenso natürliches Mißverständnis hielt die kindliche Vernunft ihre Ahnungen des Unbegreiflichen für Geheimnisse, die nur dem Gereinigten und Geweihten offenbart dürften, dem gemeinen Haufen aber verborgen werden mußten."

¹² When the *History* was reprinted as a part of his *Works* in 1822, Schlegel omitted the criticism against the egoism of Greek priests.

¹³ DP 131.

¹⁴ DP 126.

¹⁵ DP 82.

¹⁶ DP 83.

¹⁷ DP 84.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ DP 85.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ DP 87.

²² DP 91.

²³ Karl Heinz Bohrer insists, without grounding, that the new mythology has no philosophical background and that "Utopia of «work of art»" of new mythology expresses "aesthetic absolutism" — i.e. complete autonomy of art from philosophy. (Karl Heinz Bohrer: Utopie »Kunstwerk«. In: Utopieforschung, Hrsg. von Wilhelm Voßkamp. Stuttgart (Metzler) 1982, pp. 303-332, here p. 308)

Manfred Frank's interpretation of new mythology as "the second advent of gods" does not correspond to the argument in the "Speech on Mythology" because Frank based his argument on the opposition between "mythology" and "mystery." His expression "the second advent of gods" indicates transition from the esoteric (mystery, secret ritual) to the exoteric (mythology, revealed religion). (Manfred Frank: *Der kommende Gott*. Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1982, pp. 251f.)

Contrary to Frank, Dirk von Petersdorff emphasizes the tendency of Romantics (in this case Schlegel, Schelling, and Schleiermacher) toward self-mystifying discourse. However, he also opposes "mythology" and "mystery" in the same way as Frank, so that he finds in the "Speech," in which Ludoviko calls mythology itself as mystery, only contradictory mixture of the esoteric and the exoteric, not an attempt to unify the esoteric and the exoteric. (Dirk von Petersdorff: *Mysterienrede. Zum Selbstverständnis romantischer Intellektueller*. Tübingen (Max Niemeyer) 1996. Here p. 160)

²⁴ DP 87.

²⁵ DP 79.

²⁶ KA II 370.

²⁷ KA II 371.

²⁸ DP 122.

²⁹ KA XIII 58.

³⁰ KA XI 98f.

³¹ KA XIII 62.

³² KA XI 107f.