

PART I

Colonial
Knowledge-Formation

1

Friedrich Max Müller

Appropriations of the Vedic Past

THE GERMAN ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT TO INDIA'S ancient past, being unconnected with colonialism in any direct way, has been widely accepted as disinterested. Here I try to show that it was not: that in fact as an 'interest' it was part of a cultural politics seeking to establish a new basis for the German national tradition—a complex and often contradictory process, coherent primarily in the framework of an internal European dialogue. Three figures stand out as significant in the unfolding scholarly activity of the nineteenth century: Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), and finally Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), who occupies a remarkable position between scholar and poet and whose works provide a climax to the concern with India's ancient heritage.¹ These three also demonstrate a shift in perspective during the course of the century.

I shall confine myself to an analysis of one early influential work each by these authors, the three works under discussion having been conditioned by the quality and quantity of the source material available. The author's personal relationship to India, which

¹ All translations from the German in this essay are mine. Cf. Rocher 1978: 224.

in Schlegel's work shows many stages, is an area too large for the discussion here.

J.G. Herder

In the 1780s a variety of travel literature on the Orient had become available in Europe, the kind written in English by missionaries, tradesmen, and civil servants of the East India Company. There was evidently an eager readership for these works; the moment they appeared they were translated into other European languages. Primary textual material was at this time scarce and consisted of preliminary translations of maxims, Puranic legends, and moral-philosophical dialogues of dubious origin.² In spite of this paucity of first-hand knowledge, Voltaire had not hesitated to locate the place of origin of the human race—expressly against the biblical tradition—on the banks of the Ganges. His readiness to use any supportive evidence for this thesis had been enabled by the Jesuits, whose labours provided access to a manuscript of the *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century* (1760). A mixture of Puranic and Christian teaching, this work was a forgery but was only discovered to have been so several decades later.³ Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Yet Another Philosophy of the History of the Formation of Humanity) was published in 1774. Expressive, dynamic, and provocative, this work has been widely regarded as the manifesto of historicism. Though rooted

² Bhartrihari's maxims were available in a Dutch translation by Abraham Rogerius, *De Open-Deure tot het Verborgen Heydendom*, Leyden, 1651, with the German translation appearing in Nuremberg, 1663; there were fragments of Bramah's 'Chatah Bhades' (possibly 'Satapathagrahmana') in John Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*, London, 1776, a German translation by J.F. Kleuker appearing in Leipzig, 1778; passages from a 'Sastra of the Vedanga', the original of which it is not possible to identify, appeared in Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindustan*, 1768.

³ For a contemporary interpretation and speculations regarding possible authorship, see Rocher 1984.

in the eighteenth century, it is at the same time a critique of the progressionist historical view of the Enlightenment whereby contemporary technical and civilizational achievements were regarded as unquestionably superior to any in the past—making these, in fact, a yardstick for measuring the past, which by comparison appeared as steeped in superstition and prey to cynical priestly betrayal. But, as has been pointed out,⁴ Herder did not totally reject the ideas of the Enlightenment; rather, he qualified them: each age was to be regarded in light of what it was capable of accomplishing. Herder was as yet far removed from an uncritical, romantic glorification of the past.

Though he polemicized against Voltaire's scepticism of all human endeavour and refusal to see any hope for the future of mankind, Herder followed him in identifying the Orient as the cradle of the human race. But there was yet another difference, for, unlike Voltaire, Herder left the Christian claim to infallibility untouched. Since the Jewish people had no place in his historical universe, he had qualms about the locations of the origin of the Christian faith 'amongst the naked hills of Judea! Shortly before the overthrow of the whole of this ignominious people, even in the last miserable epoch of these very same people, in a manner which will always remain miraculous . . .'⁵ This, then, made a case for the Orient being the childhood of man. Herder's use of the metaphor of the ages of man for both universal history as well as for individual peoples and states was an effort to organize historically, but without any claim to absolute consistency. For in his scheme successive ages did not transcend those preceding, and nor were later ages seen as inevitably inferior.⁶

The significance of the Orient in Herder's thought is part of his debate with the classicism of J.J. Winckelmann (1717–68), the well-known scholar of Greek art. Herder had accused Winckelmann of paying too little attention to the Asiatic and the Egyptian in his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke*

⁴ Gadamer 1972: 103.

⁵ Herder 1982: 75–6.

⁶ Meyer 1981.

(Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works, 1755). Winckelmann had attempted to delineate the significance of Greek works of art, particularly sculpture, for contemporary artistic production. 'If the artist allows his sense and hands to be led by the Greek regulations of beauty, then he is on the way which will lead him most securely to the imitation of nature. The concept of the Whole, of the Perfect in the nature of the Ancients will purify and make more sensuous the concepts of the Divided in our nature . . .'⁷

Herder's attempt to relocate the place of the Greeks in the historical sequence of the cultural history of mankind was an attempt to free himself from the classicism of Winckelmann and the claim that the imitation of nature was possible only by imitating Greek art. Even though Herder's eloquent rhetoric would tempt one to think so, it would be an error to regard his evaluation of the Orient in isolation.⁸ It is not as if Greek culture and its achievements are being questioned: they are—following the metaphor of the ages of man, of which Herder makes consistent use in the first part of his book—the blossoming youth of mankind.⁹ But Greek culture is now

⁷ Szondi 1974: 34.

⁸ This has been the traditional practice since the beginning of the twentieth century, as for instance in Hoffmann (1915: 6), who seeks a psychological interpretation for Herder's enthusiasms, rather than one within the totality of his concept of cultural history: 'It is with apparent pleasure that the soft-hearted Herder depicts the tender dreamy docility of the Hindus. And when he hears of the hard Muhammedan yoke, under which India lies heavily oppressed, then he sees the cause of it not in the political incapability and indolence, in the spirit which has been confined by caste; instead, he assumes there to be a friendly, yielding patience which is his own characteristic.' Similarly Willson (1964: 48): 'The lines above, in which Johann Gottfried Herder refers to the chief figures in the Sanskrit play *Sakuntala*, identify India as a holy land for which he yearns. These lines might serve as a motto to characterize his attitude towards India, an attitude of extreme reverence and adulation, which resulted finally in the formulation of a mythical image, whose development can be traced in the fancy of Herder.' Gerard (1963) seeks a more political explanation.

⁹ 'Greece! Primeval image and proto-image of all Beauty, Grace and Simplicity! Blossom of the youth of the human race—oh if only it could have lasted an eternity.' Herder 1982: 59.

conceived of as part of a historical development rather than as some aesthetic absolute; it appears as a form in its turn affected and formed by the Orient and Egypt. Greek mediation is now no longer the sole way to nature; undivided nature is present most prominently in the childhood of mankind, the description of which bears close resemblance to the biblical world of pastoral patriarchs.

The supreme height of manhood is seen as having been achieved in the Roman imperial age, but it is significant that, despite an ample critique, Herder nowhere explicitly dwells over his own epoch as deteriorating. For, just as he resolves the absolute hegemony of Greek culture, he questions the contemporary European political claim to direct the affairs of the world, to reign supreme over it:

we have only allowed ourselves this one thing, to use three parts of the world as slaves, to dispose of them in silver mines and sugar mills, but they are not Europeans, not Christians . . . The savages everywhere, in the same measure as they grow to love our brandy and opulence, become ripe for our proselytism! When, all over the world, they approach the proximity of our culture, through brandy and opulence . . . God help us—all men will be the same as we . . .!¹⁰

Herder's historicism also explicitly questions the achievements of the European Enlightenment: 'this luminous century . . .' (41), 'our gigantic progress in religion' (107). He sees the political order, the absolute monarchies of the age, as 'impoverished, impoliced Europe, which eats up all its children, or relegates them . . .' (82), a social order mechanized, inhuman, which increasingly pushes back family ties (94). The hope then lies in regeneration by way of the Orient: 'the childhood of the race will work upon the childhood of each individual . . .' (115). In that patriarchal world of 'mild fatherly reign'—the original form of all social order—there is no despotism of the kind denounced by the uninitiated (44), much more an authority radiating with 'godliness and fatherly love'. It is posited as an age lacking in the subsequent division between philosophy and religion, and in which there is no difference between state polity and theology (48). 'With the simplest, most necessary, pleasantest

¹⁰ 'Trade and Popery', in Herder 1982: 101.

inclinations! Human being, man, wife, father, mother, son, heir, God's priest, regent, father of the house, for all centuries shall he be formed there . . .' (44). 'The life of the herdsman in the most beautiful climate of the world thus anticipates and helps to meet the simplest needs' (43). This image of an 'Urzeit', with its many biblical associations, therefore merely awaited discovery, in a way which seems almost pre-programmed, within the ancient scriptures of the Hindus.

In sum:

1. The childhood of mankind is not restricted to the search for European ancestry; the human race is universally traced back to the Orient, locally and temporally.
2. The Greek ideal remains intact, but without the power to rejuvenate.¹¹
3. Politically, especially with regard to the politics of religion, Herder is critical of the mainstream thought of his time. He sees his own social order as repressive, and as hiding behind the façade of a 'general love of people, full of tolerant subjugation, exploitation and enlightenment' (48). He considers colonial politics ruthlessly exploitative, under cover of the claim to civilize and proselytize.

Friedrich Schlegel

Till the end of the eighteenth century Friedrich Schlegel, one of the most influential thinkers of the early Romantics in Germany, had like Winckelmann before him attempted to demonstrate that 'a generally valid science of the Beautiful and of Representation, as well as the proper imitation of the Greek originals . . . [are] the necessary conditions for the recreation of the truly fine arts.'¹² This was the thrust of Schlegel's 1795 essay *Über das Studium der Griechischen*

¹¹ One of the reasons being that when Greece had a second opportunity to influence Europe, 'it could not work without mediation. Arabia was the muddy channel, Arabia was the "underplot" to the history of the formation of Europe.' Herder 1982: 116.

¹² Szondi 1974: 119.

Poesie (On the Study of Greek Poetry). But if Schlegel's beginnings were classicist, shaped and influenced by the Weimar School, he had moved away from this position by the turn of the century. In 1805 he left for Paris in order to pursue Persian studies. Here he made the acquaintance of Alexander Hamilton, professor of Sanskrit at the East India Company's Haileybury College in England, and from him learnt, in a remarkably short period, what he knew of Sanskrit.¹³ In the meantime, much more source material had become available than Herder could ever have known: the *Law Books of Manu*, the *Bhagavadgita*, and Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* had since been translated into English. Learned articles and treatises published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, many translated into German, were also now available.

In 1808 Schlegel published *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder* (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians). The title of the book alone is sufficient indication of the significance for him of the science of language. William Jones (1746–94) had already proclaimed that the classical European languages, Greek and Latin, were closely related to Sanskrit and Persian, and speculated about their common historical past.¹⁴ Schlegel went further. He raised language itself to the status of a historical document. 'The old languages, whose family tree we seek to follow . . . from their roots to the main branches, are the original document of the history of mankind, more instructive and more reliable than all monuments in stone.'¹⁵ As Schlegel saw it, each work constituted in itself the history of the people who spoke the language, the root of the word being at the same time the root of a concept. And further, just as in Comparative Anatomy, whole family trees of genetically related languages could now be constructed. The botanical metaphors that he used and which prevail throughout the book are an extension of this analogy. It was the grammatical rather

¹³ On Hamilton and Schlegel's scholarly pursuits in Paris, see Rocher 1968 and Struc-Oppenberg 1969.

¹⁴ For a vivid, if disturbingly partisan, account of the early British Orientalists, see Kopf 1969; for excerpts, Marshall 1970; for the translation into German, Willson 1964.

¹⁵ Schlegel 1976: 257.

than the lexical similarity, an organic rather than surface similarity, which bound languages decisively into a family bond, a similarity which reached into their innermost structure: 'The affinity then is not casual, which it were possible to explain as stemming from intermixture; on the contrary, it is elemental and points to a common origin' (115). The organic languages, the Indic—and the Greek, Latin, and Persian which stem from it—are counterposed to the inorganic languages. The organic possess inflection, each root being truly that which the word denotes: 'a living germ' (157). As against this, the inorganic languages possess roots which bear 'no fertile seed, on the contrary, they are like a heap of atoms, which each casual wind can drive asunder or together' (159). Similarly, Schlegel maintained on the origin of languages that the inorganic were largely onomatopoeic, 'merely an emotional cry' (171), and unlike the organic in no way constituted of meaningful syllables and fertile seeds. Later research was to demonstrate the arbitrariness of this division.¹⁶

The dichotomy organic/inorganic was related to the divergent characters of the respective families of peoples. Schlegel maintained: 'it is true, that practically all of the Indian language consists of philosophical or much rather religious terminology' (173). Sanskrit, then, was not the language of the universal childhood of mankind, it was the proto-language of one branch of mankind which had its origin somewhere in Asia; from here its speakers had spread over parts of Asia and all of Europe.¹⁷ Schlegel went on to speculate: 'not only the external pressure of necessity but some other miraculous concept of the high dignity and splendour of the North, such as

¹⁶ Timpanaro (1977: xxxv) situates Schlegel's linguistic-ethnographic ideology within the general context of the historiography of comparative linguistics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Whereas he views Herder as a corrective to the Enlightenment's 'intellectualizing narrowmindedness', he points out that Schlegel's is 'a kind of Manichaean, potentially racist, mysticism which splits the human species in two.'

¹⁷ Schlegel converted to Catholicism in 1808, the year in which his Indian study was published. In spite of the change in faith, and the awareness that this kind of glorification of Sanskrit as the most ancient language should actually have been reserved for Hebrew, all his life he held fast to the belief in Sanskrit as the most ancient language of his family of peoples: Nusse 1962: 67.

we find spread all over the Indian legends, led them northwards' (293). This then was an important consideration 'for the history of our fatherland' (ibid.).

It was amongst the Indians, the 'most cultivated and wisest people of Antiquity', that 'traces of divine truth' (209) were still to be found. While on the one hand it was true that Indian sources no longer contained the original revelation, 'an upsurge of innermost feeling, the feeling for the true' (207), at all events there still existed the first system that had come to replace the original, authentic system. It was the same with poetry. Schlegel believed that it was the Indians who were the nearest to the original source:

From a worship of nature and superstition still fructified by the thoughts of the eternal and the divine, there first sprang the abundance of originally wild and gigantic compositions; as the beautiful light of a gentle and noble enthusiasm was added to it, through just this moderation, the raw fable became poetry . . . If it were not too bold to dare to speculate after such few fragments, then I would plead that Indian poetry is not so different from older Greek poetry in its essence, only that it offers the same in a still greater measure, partly in that the original fable is stranger and wilder, but partly also in that the later moderation is spiritually more tender and more lovely, more sensuous and more moral, more beautiful than the charm even of Pindar and Sophocles.¹⁸

As regards nature worship, Schlegel assured his readers that Indian religion did not revere 'the wild and destructive, lasciviousness and death, but only the pure and benevolent, fire and light, in fact, free life and the inner spirit' (231). He described Vishnu as the most benevolent of deities, as a king and sage whose repeated incarnations occurred in order to destroy the evil and protect the good. The notion of God becoming man was proof of the Indian depth of thought and

¹⁸ Schlegel 1976: 261 and 263. The Oriental poetry that Schlegel spoke of was not to be considered the same as the extravagant variety generally known as 'Asiatic'. This latter was to be confined to some Asian peoples, foremost to the Arabs and Persians—'Raw and uncultivated as the exuberance of the arrogance in the teachings of Mahomed'—as well as those portions of the *Old Testament* which were generally regarded as merely poetic rather than religious in character.

of the level of their knowledge (233). The history of their philosophy and of the oriental way of thinking was the most beautiful and most instructive commentary on the Christian Holy Script (297).

Herder is mentioned once, though only in a note: 'Glorious indications are to be found about this (traces of divine light in Indian religion) in Herder's *Älteste Urkinde des Menschengeschlechts* (Oldest Document of the Human Race). Except that I would not wish to derive each murky stream of degenerate mysticism from the pure fountainhead of divine revelation. Otherwise the abundant Oriental spirit flows through this work, as also several other early theological works of Herder' (297). Parallels of Herder's thoughts are present most of all in the suggestion of that age which preceded the one preserved in the Indian works. In the first epoch of the Vedas, Philosophy, Religion, and Poetry were still one with each other, suggestive of a yet nobler age, not divided as they almost were in the Greek and the European (265, 307–9). Priests and Warriors must have also been united in one stand, suggestions of this being preserved in the Roman patriarchal system. It was the severe constitution of Manu, the rigidification into a caste system, which drove the Kshatriyas away from the priestly stand, fostering feuds amongst them, such as the battles in the *Mahabharata*, and forcing them to flee as well as later to found new colonies (281–3).

The Vedas were still largely unknown to the Western world;¹⁹ but to Schlegel it seemed that in times to follow these 'most antiquated and most mysterious works would attract the most desire for knowledge' (251). His expectations regarding the fruits of Indian studies are summarized thus at the conclusion of his book:

And if a too one-sided and merely playful preoccupation with the Greeks has estranged the spirit of the last century far too much from former earnestness or even from the source of all higher truth, then the deeper

¹⁹ The travel literature had reported the sacred character of the Vedas—for instance Dow, and excerpts in Marshall (1970: 109–13). H.T. Colebrooke had written his essay 'On the Vedas, or Sacred Writings of the Hindus' in 1805 in the *Asiatick Researches*, but it has not been possible to determine whether Schlegel knew this work.

we delve into this completely new knowledge and contemplation of Oriental antiquity, the more so might it guide us back to the recognition of the divine and to that rigour of conviction, which first bestowed light and life on all art and all knowledge.²⁰

The following may then be concluded:

1. For Schlegel, the study of language is of primary importance; a scientific method, comparative philology has been evolved in order to accomplish this backward thrust into the history of mankind.
2. For Schlegel in 1808 the Orient, India, is not the cradle of all mankind, as it was for Herder, but it is the original home of his own family of languages and peoples. He draws a sharp boundary between his own and the Semitic languages, which form a loosely assorted group along with the languages of the savages existing in need and penury on the African continent and the Americas.
3. Herder had denounced colonial politics on humanitarian grounds; his philosophy of history had universal aspirations. Schlegel on the other hand regarded it as a task for his own family of peoples to see to it that 'some of the supply and seed of higher intellectual activity, learning, and flexibility' become available to other countries (273).
4. For Herder all of the Indian tradition was a potential source of regeneration for European society. For Schlegel there were only traces of the original revelation in the religion and poetry of the Indians, to be found primarily in their earliest works, which were still largely unknown.

Friedrich Max Müller

The Veda remained unexplored territory for scholars. Max Müller, son of the romantic poet and scholar of Greek Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827), took upon himself the task of compiling and editing the Veda for the first time from manuscripts and making it known

²⁰ Schlegel 1976: 317.

to the Western world, and he invested energy in this venture as no other Indologist of his generation had done before him. More than anything else it was Schlegel's work which inspired Max Müller, as so many others at the time, to turn his attention towards Indian studies, for as he noted in 1860: 'This work was like the wand of a magician. It pointed out the place where a mind should be opened; and it was not long before some of the most distinguished scholars of the day began to sink their shafts and raise the ore.'²¹

His pioneering and painstaking edition of the *Rgveda* (1849–73), along with the medieval commentary by Shayana, gained him an immense reputation in India as well as Europe. In 1859 his *A History of Ancient Indian Literature* was published.²² In it he offered the fruits of his own philological research and summarized—within the bounds of his conceptual framework—all the available information on the literature and religion of the Vedic period. The book was an instant success. The first edition was sold out within five months of publication; in the following year a second edition appeared.

Max Müller stated the aims of his work in no uncertain terms: 'to discover the first germs of the language, religion and mythology of our forefathers, the wisdom of Him who is not the God of the Jews alone.'²³ Right at the beginning, then, he draws a clear distinction between his own branch of language, religion, and mythology, and that of the Semites. To the ancestors of his own race, Max Müller

²¹ Müller 1965: 176. Schlegel's work proved to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the pioneering generation of German Indologists: Franz Bopp, A.W. von Schlegel, Christian Lassen, to name a few.

²² Reprinted in India (Delhi, 1965) with the following justification: 'It is however true that some of his conclusions have, now, become back-dated, some of his cautious conjectures have proved futile, in a number of cases he might have been mistaken, due to insufficient data then at his disposal, to determine the true spirit and value of ancient Indian culture, but the method he followed to reconstruct the cultural history of India's past, the scholarly sincerity he displayed at every step of the work and, over and above the love he cherished for India can never be devalued; so the intrinsic merit of the work is still held in high esteem.'

²³ Müller 1968: 3.

assigned the designation 'Aryans', a term with a remarkable historical reception.²⁴

They have been the prominent actors in the great drama of history and have carried to their fullest growth all the elements of active life with which our nature is endowed. They have perfected society and morals, and we learn from their literature and works of art, the elements of science, the laws of art and the principles of philosophy . . . these Aryan nations have become the rulers of history, and it seems to be their mission to link all parts of the world together by the chains of civilization, commerce and religion. In a word, they represent the Aryan man in the historical character.²⁵

This active side of the Northern European Aryans was still extant in the poetic compositions of the Vedic *rishis*. Later, in the rich, fertile plains of Central India, this energy was turned inwards; it was to become abstract and passive with time. This was the explanation for the absence of history and the failure to establish political dominance over wide tracts of the earth's surface. It was this notion again which prompted Max Müller to maintain that there was in fact no heroic poetry after the Vedic age. The germinal sections of the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, belonged to the Vedic period, since identical genealogies could be traced in the Veda. In character and behaviour the figures of the later epics differed from the heroic typology of the shorter hymns of the Veda, these latter being then much more amenable to comparison with Homeric hymns.

The criteria for the division of Vedic literature into successive epochs were not only thematic, they were also formal: metrical

²⁴ The term 'Aryan' was not originally coined by Max Müller. It was introduced into German by J.F. Kleuker in his translation of Anquetil Deuteron's *Zend Avesta* (Riga, 1776–81). Friedrich Schlegel used the term for the Indo-Persian languages and peoples. A.W. von Schlegel's pupil C. Lassen used it first as a designation for the so-called Indo-Germanic peoples. For further details, see Roemer 1985: 65–6. Max Müller, however, bears full responsibility for the popularization of the term, a responsibility he willingly acknowledges in the *History* as well as in a later essay, 'Aryan as a Technical Term', German version in Müller 1879, 333–45.

²⁵ Müller 1968: 13.

innovation signalled a new epoch. Since the *anushtubh shloka* was not familiar in the Vedic age, the epics, Manu's Law books, the Puranas as well as the Shastras and Darshanas were excluded from this period. The rest of the works were then classified chronologically into four periods: Chandas, Mantra, Brahmana, and Sutra.

Max Müller constructs his edifice with care, with a certain amount of suspense inbuilt. He begins his descriptive analysis backwards, starting from the Sutra period, i.e. the six Vedangas, or the six disciplines necessary for the right understanding of the Veda: phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy. The Sutra period was apparently an age when a spontaneous understanding of Vedic hymns was no longer possible. Max Müller describes the style of the Sutras thus: 'It is impossible to give anything like a translation of these works, written as they are in the most artificial, elaborate and enigmatical form. Sutra means a string . . .' (64). 'There is no life and no spirit in these Sutras' (65). The various Sutras had been composed for practical purposes: to disentangle the theological and mystical meandering of the Brahmanas, to teach and make them widely comprehensible. Max Müller recounts attempts to date the Sutras, and compares these with the chronology of the Buddhists. Half of the *History* consists of this documentation. Only towards the end does he allow himself to remark that, with the passing of time, the Sutra style degenerated further. Of Panini he says: 'He is no longer writing and composing, but he squeezes and distils his thoughts and puts them before us in a form which hardly deserves the name of style . . .' (260). Katyayana is 'algebraic', Pingala possesses the greatest possible measure of 'enigmatic obscurity' (280).

It is in the third Vedic period, that of the Brahmanas, that Max Müller apprehends most clearly the fall from original clarity. In this, as in the section on the Sutra period, he likes to speak of the ancient Hindus, not of the Aryans.

He treats the Aranyakas and the Upanishads briefly, conceding that they have a virtually unlimited range of ideas and speculations. According to his conceptions of the natural and the originally authentic, he judges them to be 'a most extraordinary medley of oracular sayings . . . all tending to elucidate the darkest points of

philosophy and religion, the creation of the world, the nature of God and similar subjects. That one statement should be contradicted by another seems never to have been felt as a serious difficulty' (288). The reason for contradictions and half truths being that the authors were poets who composed according to fantasy, seeking to follow their own subjective visions of reality. In a degenerate social order there could be no question of knowledge, leave alone any kind of spiritual enlightenment. Degenerate, since this philosophizing was meant for forest ascetics who had retired from active participation in social life. 'In a healthy state of society these questions were discussed in courts and camps: priests were contradicted by kings, sages confounded by children, women were listened to when they were moved by an unknown spirit' (304).²⁶

The Brahmanas, theological tracts, were related only distantly to the original faith and rituals of the Aryans. After a conscientious recounting of all the schools and teaching traditions, Max Müller comes to the following conclusions: 'No one could have supposed that at so early a period, and in so primitive a state of society, there could have risen a literature which for pedantry and downright

²⁶ Later, Max Müller's attitude to the Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy changed considerably; the latter was in any case not discussed in the *History*, since it was allotted to a period later than the one his book dealt with. He was to translate the Upanishads for the 'Sacred Books of the East' series, which he edited, but most of all, in *Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy* (1894) he was to speak of his admiration for the teachings of Badarayana and Sankara. He was also ready to settle his previous differences with the Upanishads: 'To us the Upanishads have, of course, a totally different interest. We watch in them the historical growth of philosophical thought, and are not offended therefore by the variety of their opinions. On the contrary, we expect to find a variety, and are even pleased when we find independent thought and apparent contradictions between individual teachers although the general tendency of all is the same' (33–4). However, when concluding he qualified this verdict: 'Remember that all this Vedanta Philosophy was never esoteric, but it was open to all, and was elaborated by men who, in culture and general knowledge, stood far below any one of us here present . . . should the wisdom reached by the dark skinned inhabitants of India two or three thousand years ago be too high or too deep for us?' (171).

absurdity can hardly be matched anywhere' (352). Moreover, 'These works deserve to be studied as the physician studies the twaddle of idiots and the ravings of mad men' (353). Or, he says, as an example of how 'the fresh and healthy growth of a nation is blighted by priestcraft and superstition' (353). He cites extensively from passages on the initiatory ritual *diksaniya* in the *Aitareya Brahmana*, a ritual once simple and spontaneous but now distorted beyond all recognition. In the beginning, all ritual was spontaneous and intrinsically significant. Apparently, the composers of the Brahmanas harboured the belief that all the Vedic hymns had been composed exclusively for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. Hence the development of Vedic exegesis in India, and the creation of new deities out of words which had never been conceived of as names for divine beings: mythology as the sickness of language, originating in the second Vedic period, and enthusiastically elaborated upon in the third.²⁷

Small wonder then that for Max Müller the Brahmanas presuppose 'a complete break in the primitive tradition of the Aryan settlers of India' (417). These tendencies did not exist in this age alone; they went back to the second Vedic period, in which the later hymns of the *Rgveda*—according to Max Müller the greater mass of them—had been composed. 'A spirit was at work in the literature of India, no longer creative, free and original, but living on the heritage of a former age, collecting, classifying and imitating' (*ibid.*). No longer the age of 'poets, but no priests, prayers but no dogmas; worship but no ceremonies' (*ibid.*). The vast number of priests needed for rituals was alone sufficient indication that the later hymns were composed in a period when there was no memory of the time when the patriarch, the father of the family, was priest, poet, and king all in one person. In order to distinguish between the first and second periods of Vedic literature, language alone did not suffice as criterion. Oral tradition

²⁷ Schlegel had called this 'worship of the wild forces of Nature', and this 'sinking from the Creator to his works': 'Oriental Materialism', in Schlegel 1976: 219. The Christian Occident could only distance itself from it, 'for it is always the highest and the noblest, which becomes hideously malformed, once it runs wild and degenerates' (*ibid.*: 221).

had levelled out all difference and created uniformity to an extent 'which baffles the most careful analysis' (454). The only criterion which could then be available was a kind of unerring intuition: 'We feel that we move in a different atmosphere . . . listening to priests rather than poets' (450).

Finally it was important to register that this period was innocent of any knowledge of script. As evidence Max Müller noted that in the Vedic pantheon no place was reserved for a deity responsible for the signs of a script. This corresponded well with all the other authentic mythologies of the Aryan world. Once again, distinct polarities were established. It was the Semites, Moses in the Old Testament, who had known of the script. Clearly, it was being implied that the written was a less spontaneous and less natural means of transmission than the oral.

The last section of the *History*, relatively short, based on little that admits of direct evidence, is devoted to the period towards which the reader's suspense has been directed all along: 'The three periods all point to some earlier age which gave birth to the poetry of the early Rishis' (481). We have now reached the depiction of the golden age of Aryan history. Max Müller speaks exclusively of the Aryans, no more of the ancient Hindus. The songs of the *rishis* lived and were understood, he says, by a simple, pious race. The rites of Vedic sacrifice, later spun out so monstrously, 'were dictated by the free impulse of the human heart, a yearning to render thanks to some Unknown Being, and to repay, in words or deeds, a debt of gratitude, accumulated from the first breath of life' (481). Here there was no trace of elaborate ritual—not as the later superstitious age knew it. As an example he cites a hymn to Ushas, the glow of dawn (*Rgveda* VII, 77). Here, no technical expressions for ritual operations were used, it was a 'natural vision of a visible deity' (505). Moral order reigned supreme here, not priestly craft. He quotes a hymn to Varuna, who watches over this order (489). In short, the kernel of all religion, whether natural or revealed, was preserved in these hymns. 'There is belief in God, the perception of the difference between good and evil, the conviction that God hates sin and loves the righteous' (492). These realizations almost deserved to be recognized as revelation: God

is gracious, He is judge, but also Father (495). Later this first, flexible, organic state of affairs became rigid, ossified into Mythology; the power of nature, behind which the Aryans had first discerned God, assumed the shape of independent deities. 'Dyaus' the luminous sky, was now worshipped as a divine being.

Finally, in the well-known hymn, *Rgveda* X, 121, which Max Müller accepts as late, the kernel of which he however dates back to the first period, he discerns the idea of one God—monotheism proper—clearly stated: 'it will make us hesitate before we deny to the Aryan nation an instinctive monotheism' (521). Max Müller has already taken the precaution of drawing a clear distinction between the primitive Aryans and the really barbaric tribes, such as the African negroes and the American Indians, to whom this instinctive monotheism was denied (511).

In conclusion, then:

1. Max Müller discovered the ancient age of the Aryans in the earliest Vedic period. Schlegel had supposed this to have preceded the tradition that the Indians preserved. The image of the prehistoric past, first envisaged by Herder, was thus confirmed by the findings of Vedic philology.
2. The difference was that Herder had been concerned with the universal history of the human race; Max Müller, however, just as Schlegel before him, was concerned primarily with the past of his own branch of the family of mankind. With philological evidence to support him, he sought to demonstrate that the ancient Aryans were in fact most akin to the ancient Germans as described by Tacitus, 'agricultural nomads . . . they had recognized the bonds of blood and the bonds of marriage; they followed their leaders and kings, and the distinction between right and wrong was fixed by laws and customs. They were impressed by the idea of a Divine Being, and they invoked it by different names.'²⁸

²⁸ Müller 1965: 245. For the Germanic ideology of the nineteenth century and the Tacitus-enthusiasm in the twenties of the twentieth century, see Roemer 1985: 85–102.