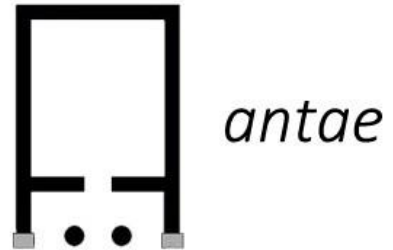


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antae, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Apr., 2019), 5-20

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Quest for the Origin of Primitive Myths: Revisiting Max Müller's Comparative Mythology

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‘In mythology, there is nothing which had not originally a meaning, that every name of the gods and heroes had a beginning, a purpose, and a history.’
—Max Müller, ‘Philosophy of Mythology’ (1871)¹

Introduction

Victorian intellectuals explored the notion of origin(s) and the growth of primitive myths in order to understand the early human mind and its evolution to its present state. During this era, three approaches to primitive myths were (and still are) heavily influential: Comparative Philology, as advocated by Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900); Cultural Anthropology, launched by E.B. Tylor (1832-1917); and lastly the Myth-Ritual School, represented by James Frazer (1854-1941) and Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928). Considerable research has focused on the latter two schools,² including their literary impacts;³ however, Max Müller's Comparative Mythology remains underrepresented,⁴ and this despite the fact that his two notorious slogans—‘solar myth’ and ‘(mythology is a) disease of language’—are frequently referred to.⁵

¹ Friedrich Max Müller, ‘On the Philosophy of Mythology’, in *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), pp. 335-403, p. 392.

² See, for instance: George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1987); and Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

³ On this, see: John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Fraser, ed., *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); Martha C. Carpentier, *Ritual, Myth and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Harrison on Joyce, Eliot and Woolf* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Michael Arthur Zeitler, ‘Representation of Culture: Thomas Hardy's Wessex and Victorian Anthropology’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 2003); and Mary Agnes Noble, ‘Primitive Marriage: Anthropology and Nineteenth Century Fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2010).

⁴ Müller's Comparative Mythology is referred to—out of necessity rather than its merits—as an outdated approach. While it is generally overlooked, two recent publications on Müller—though not focused on his Comparative Mythology—are worth noticing: Lourens Van Den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); and John R. Davis and Angus Nicholls, eds., *Friedrich Max Müller and the Role of Philology in Victorian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ See Tomoko Masuzawa, ‘Our Master's Voice: F. Max Müller after a Hundred Years of Solitude’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 15, (2003), 305-328, p.314; and Michael P. Carroll, ‘Some Third Thoughts on Max Müller and Solar Mythology’, *European Journal of Sociology*, 26, (1985), 263-290, pp.263-4.

A widely accepted view is that Müller's Comparative Mythology was eclipsed by anthropological approaches since the 1870s, falling into un-revisited darkness in 1900. In a general sense, this is true. It is, however, a reductive outline of Victorian mythography. As is noted by Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, Müller's theory of mythology is 'a great deal more subtle and interesting' than his critics assume.⁶ With all its errors and limits, it is based on Müller's insights into interactions between language and thought in history, especially through religious language and religious consciousness.⁷ Furthermore, it evolves as Müller's study on language and religion moves forward, inspiring the likes of George Eliot, G.M. Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, and many others.⁸ It also develops by selectively using anthropological materials and critically responding to anthropological interpretations of primitive myths, such as that of Tylor's 'animism'.⁹

In this ongoing process, three time spots correspond to the beginning, zenith, and finale of Müller's Comparative Mythology. In 1856, Müller published his first essay on 'Comparative Mythology'.¹⁰ In 1871, he delivered a lecture 'On the Philosophy of Mythology' at the Royal Institution; in the same year, E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* challenged his arguments.¹¹ In 1897, Müller made his grand finale *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. This paper revisits the rise and fall of Müller's Comparative Mythology, paying particular attention to these three time spots. In doing so, it attempts to present the changing, multi-faceted, and underrepresented roles Müller's Comparative Mythology played in the Victorian era.

⁶ Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p. 47. See also Ivan Strenski, 'Introduction', in *Four Theories of Myth in 20th Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1987), and Carroll, p. 264.

⁷ See Steven Connor, 'Conclusion: Myth and Meta-Myth in Max Müller and Walter Pater', in *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by J.B. Bullen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 199-222.

⁸ See Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 104-115; and Colin Kidd, *The World of Mr. Casaubon: Britain's Wars of Mythography, 1700-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 33, 145, 177, 199, 213-15.

⁹ See Max Müller, 'Philosophy of Mythology', pp. 361-362, 365; Friedrich Max Müller, *Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), pp. 411-518; and Friedrich Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume 1* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), pp. 1-233, esp. pp. 206-10.

¹⁰ Müller's 'Comparative Mythology' was first published in *Oxford Essay* (1856). Later, it was reprinted in the first edition of his *Chips from a German Workshop, Volume 2: Essays on Mythology, Tradition, and Customs* (1867). It was also included in Müller's *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion, Volume 1* (1881). In addition, it was included in the second edition of *Chips from a German Workshop, Volume 4: Essays on Mythology and Folklore* (1894). Thus, it was accessed by a large reading public in the Victorian era. In 1909, A. Smythe Palmer edited and published it as a single book: A. Smythe Palmer, ed., *Comparative Mythology: An Essay by Professor Max Müller* (New York, NY: George Routledge and Sons, 1909). In this essay, all quotes from 'Comparative Mythology' (1856) are from the first edition of *Chips for a German Workshop, Volume 2* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867).

¹¹ 'Philosophy of Mythology' (1871) was later included in Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. It was also included in Müller's *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion, Volume 1* (1881). It is worth noting that the most recent selection of Müller's works also includes this lecture as representative of Müller's study on mythology. See Jon R. Stone, ed., *The Essential Max Müller on Language, Mythology, and Religion* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

Müller's definitions of 'myth(ology)'

Given Müller's concern with the changing meanings of words in history, it might be better to begin with his definitions of 'myth(ology)', which are distinct from yet associated with "religion". For Müller, 'religion' is 'the perception of the infinite';¹² at the beginning of human history, this is primarily intimated by the finite world characterised by natural phenomena.¹³ This perception of higher, infinite power is the essential germ of religion. It evolves and takes various forms in history, and one of its corrupted forms is the mythology of gods.

In a narrower sense, 'myth(ology)' means stories of Greek gods and heroes, most of which are narratively irrational and immoral; it also includes stories of gods and heroes of other cultures—for instance, the Indian myths in *Rig-Veda*.¹⁴ Such mythology, despite its antiquity, is a full-grown stratum of mythology; its original substratum can be traced to the poetic, personified language describing natural phenomena that elicits religious reverence for higher power.¹⁵ With the growth of language and thought, this substratum later transforms into myths of the gods. 'Mythology, in the highest sense, is the power exercised by language on thought',¹⁶ inducing misunderstandings of the original meanings of words. In this light, mythology is 'a disease of language', especially in the realm of religion.¹⁷

The Beginning of Müller's Comparative Mythology

In 1856, Müller published his first book-length essay on 'Comparative Mythology'. It starts with a question which has puzzled generations of Western thinkers from Socrates to George Grote: what are the original meanings of Greek mythology in Homer?

To this same question, previous answers are mainly speculations of philosophers, theologians, and classicists. Müller, in turn, proposes that, with the discovery of Sanskrit and ancient Indian literature, a new light is thrown upon the question. As is revealed by comparative philologists, Sanskrit,

¹² Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion delivered in 1878* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1880), pp. 22-25.

¹³ Later in *Natural Religion*, Müller qualifies this definition of religion: 'we qualify that perception of the infinite and restrict it to that class of perceptions which can influence the moral character of man', p. 190. This article mainly concentrates on religion as the 'perception of the infinite', because, for Müller, it is the foundational, primary element of religion, closely related to the original substratum of primitive mythology.

¹⁴ Max Müller, 'Philosophy of Mythology', p. 355.

¹⁵ Friedrich Max Müller, 'Preface', *Chips from a German Workshop, Volume 4* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), pp. iii-xliii, p. vi.

¹⁶ Max Müller, 'Philosophy of Mythology', p. 355.

¹⁷ '(Mythology is a) disease of language' was first forwarded by Müller in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* delivered in 1861 (first series) at the Royal Institution. Later, in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* delivered in 1863 (second series) at Royal Institution, Müller expounds 'disease of language'. See Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language delivered in 1861* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), p. 11; and Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language delivered in 1863* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864), pp. 334-580.

Greek, and Latin originate from a common source, that being the proto-Aryan language.¹⁸ History of these cognate languages sheds light on each other; following rules uncovered in Comparative Philology, scholars can trace certain words in cognate languages back to the same root, and thus discover their original meanings and later changes. The more ancient a text is, the more likely it contains words closer to their original roots. Compared with Homer's epics, *Rig-Veda* is older. It is the oldest Aryan work of literature known to nineteenth-century scholars, which Müller started editing in 1846.¹⁹ Moreover, *Rig-Veda* contains unsystematic and incipient myths.²⁰ In this sense, they can be regarded as primitive myths,²¹ distinct from and yet connected with the full-grown mythology in Homer and Hesiod. Therefore, *Rig-Veda* is a key source in understanding the origin and growth of mythology in Aryan dialects, including ancient Greek mythology.²²

Based on *Rig-Veda*, Müller employs the well-credited Comparative Philology to trace original meanings of Greek mythology.²³ For Müller, while the plots and details of myths grow more complex over time, their storylines are originally simple. For instance, the myth of Apollo and Daphne can be described as follows: Apollo chases Daphne; Daphne transforms into a laurel. Müller is aware that this reductive anatomy of Greek myths is unwelcome among poets, but it is crucial to exploring original meanings in Greek myths.²⁴ Such storylines consist of principle actors (gods and heroes) and their actions (verbs). As is indicated by *Rig-Veda*, verbs in ancient Aryan languages were active, concrete, and anthropomorphic, applying to almost everything—natural phenomena, human actions, and vague ideas of divine power. For instance, contemporary English has it that “the sun sets”, while ancient Aryans might say “Endymion (the sun) sleeps”.²⁵ Given the ubiquity of personified verbs, a master key to unlock a myth is the original meanings of its principle actors' names. Accordingly, Müller endeavors to trace the etymological meanings of gods' names in both Homer and *Rig-Veda*.

Before discussing Müller's etymological interpretations of gods' names, it is worth noting the pioneering and liberating role of Müller's approach to mythology in Victorian Britain. Although Müller is not the first to compare Greek mythology with Indian mythology, he is the first to conduct it in a non-Bibliocentric manner in Britain. As is noted by Bruce Lincoln, Sir William Jones's ‘On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India’²⁶ is widely acknowledged as a beginning of Comparative

¹⁸ See James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). The memorable Proto-Aryan language is also called Proto-Indo-European language, but Müller uses the word “Aryan” much more frequently.

¹⁹ See Georgina Max Müller, ed., *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller, Volume I* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), pp. 48-69.

²⁰ Max Müller, ‘Comparative Mythology’, p. 82.

²¹ See Friedrich Max Müller, ‘Meaning of “Primitive”’, in *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume 1*, pp. 12-13.

²² Max Müller, ‘Comparative Mythology’, p.75.

²³ In ‘Comparative Mythology’, Müller makes use of Grimm's Law and Bopp's *Comparative Grammar* (1833-52), referring to them from time to time. See ‘Comparative Mythology’, pp. 35, 53-55, 63, 76-7, 82-4, 97, 100-1, 105-6.

²⁴ See Max Müller ‘Comparative Mythology’, p. 60.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 79-84, esp. 83.

²⁶ Sir William Jones, ‘On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India’, *Asiatick Researches*, 1, (1788), 221-275.

Mythology.²⁷ After Jones, British scholars continued investigating Greek mythology along with Indian mythology and other ancient Oriental mythologies. However, as Colin Kidd points out, both Jones and other scholars' Comparative Mythology, before Müller, are deeply structured by Bibliocentric worldview.²⁸ In addition, their etymological tracing of gods' names has neither scientific Comparative Philology nor solid primary materials to rely on.²⁹

In contrast, as is emphasised by Michael Carroll, Müller 'can be regarded as the first person who tried to study myth using anything that even remotely resembled a scientific procedure,' initiating the study of Mythology in modern academic disciplines in Britain.³⁰ For one thing, as a deeply religious man, Müller endeavours to be neither an apologetic, nor an enemy of Christianity.³¹ In questing for original meanings of Greek mythology and Vedic mythology, he regards them as historical phenomena having their own origin(s) and growth, commensurate with the evolution of Aryan languages.³² For another, based on the affinities between Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, Müller uses *Rig-Veda* as a major source text to compare with Homer and Hesiod's works. Müller was the first to edit and publish a commented *Rig-Veda* in Sanskrit. By the time 'Comparative Mythology' (1856) appeared, Müller had been concentrating on editing *Rig-Veda* for nearly ten years, having published two considerable volumes, with the third volume forthcoming.³³ In this regard, his primary source rests on a more secure basis. Moreover, his principle key to unraveling etymologies of gods' names is Comparative Philology, especially that of Bopp's Comparative Grammar and Grimm's Law, both of which he had studied in a reverent, critical spirit. As Müller later asserts in 'On False Analogies in Comparative Theology' (1870), without grammatical rules discovered by comparative philologists, comparison of gods' names and stories becomes more a guess-work. It is even so when it was driven by a zeal for corroborating Biblical narratives. In summary, in three aspects—a more scientific attitude, more reliable primary sources, and more scientific tools—Müller's 'Comparative Mythology' is 'epoch-making'.³⁴

Making use of Comparative Philology and *Rig-Veda* in a more scientific spirit, Müller traces original meanings of gods' names and their stories. He concludes that principal gods' names—such as Zeus, Athena (Athene)³⁵, Daphne, and Apollo(n)—are originally appellatives for natural phenomena, especially those associated with the sun. Correspondingly, myths of these gods are originally personified narratives of natural phenomena. "Athene", for instance, can be traced to its

²⁷ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 76-101.

²⁸ Kidd, *The World of Mr. Casaubon*, pp. 131-175.

²⁹ See Lyle Campbell, 'Why Sir William Jones got it all Wrong, or Jones' Role in How to Establish Language Families', *ASJU*, 40, (2006), 245-264.

³⁰ Carroll, p. 264.

³¹ See *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller* (especially Müller's letters to his mother).

³² Max Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 13.

³³ *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller, Volume I*, p. x.

³⁴ A. Smythe Palmer, 'Introduction', in *Comparative Mythology: An Essay by Professor Max Müller (1856)*, pp. v-xxix, p. v.

³⁵ Müller tends to use 'Athene' rather than 'Athena'. See Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 93.

cognate word “Ahanâ” in *Rig-Veda*,³⁶ which preserves the meaning “dawn”;³⁷ “Zeus” can be traced to its counterpart “Dyaus” in *Rig-Veda*, which sometimes means “the bright sky”.³⁸ Based on such correlations and more textual evidences in *Rig-Veda*, Müller conceives the myth that Athena is born from Zeus’s head as one that can be traced to personified description that “the sky (Zeus) gives birth to the dawn (Athena)”. In addition, “Dyaus” sometimes is also invoked as “father” and “heaven” in *Rig-Veda*.³⁹ This meaning further proves that “Dyaus” corresponds with “Zeus” as the father of heaven in Greek mythology. As to the myth of Apollo and Daphne, Müller traces “Apollo chases Daphne” back to “the sun (Apollo) chases the dawn (Daphne)”, which is vividly portrayed in *Rig-Veda*.⁴⁰ “Daphne transforms into a laurel” was, however, unique in Greek, as “Daphne” was a name for laurel in ancient Greek, and not so in Sanskrit.⁴¹

Müller’s tracing of such Greek myths back to personified narratives of natural phenomena may seem reductive and fanciful despite his attempts to adhere to the grammatical rules in Comparative Philology. However, viewed as part of Victorian intellectual growth, Müller’s analysis ‘reoriented all previous thinking on the origin of myths. The treatise astonished and delighted philologists, classicists, and literary scholars’.⁴² With hindsight, it is worth noting his insight into the evolving meanings of words such as names of gods, and the power of words over thought in myth-making. Aware of words’ power, Müller takes words—especially gods’ names—as a clue to travel back to a substratum of mythology, where natural phenomena—especially solar phenomena—are expressed in personified language. At this point, Müller turns into an ancient man facing the sun, leaving his scholarly etymology behind in the modern times. In Romantic idealistic spirit, Müller visualises how the ancients responded to the sun:⁴³

There is no sight in nature more elevating than the dawn [...] in ancient times the power of admiring was the greatest blessing bestowed on mankind; and when could man have admired more intensely, when could his heart have been more gladdened and overpowered with joy than at the approach of the Lord of light, | Of life, of Love, and gladness! [...] the

³⁶ Max Müller, ‘Comparative Mythology’, p. 93, footnote 44.

³⁷ Müller’s etymological tracing of Athena and other words are challenged by classicists, Sanskrit scholars, and comparative philologists. For instance, John Ruskin traces the original meaning of Athena back to “breath” or “air”, as is revealed in his *Queen of the Air* (1869). Müller himself is also aware of the possible errors in his etymological tracing. Nevertheless, he emphasises that many gods’ names have their etymologies in more ancient names for solar phenomena such as the dawn, sunrise, and sunset.

³⁸ Max Müller, ‘Comparative Mythology’, pp. 72, 92, 139.

³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 23, 136.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.92

⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 93.

⁴² Richard Dorson, ‘The Eclipse of Solar Mythology’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 68, (1955), 393-416, p. 394.

⁴³ Müller laments that such poetic reverence for higher power dwindles, with language and thought growing more abstract. Only ‘modern ancients’ like Wordsworth preserve such poetic power, whose poems are full of ‘life and blood’, resonating with hymns in *Rig-Veda*. He quotes Wordsworth’s poems in an appreciative tone. See ‘Comparative Mythology’, pp. 56-8, 105, 120.

pious worshipper [...] stammers words which express but faintly the joy that is in nature and in his own throbbing heart.⁴⁴

Here, Müller has the vicarious experience of an ancient poet's admiring of the dawn, which elevates his heart and elicits simple language for inexpressible joy at the sunrise. Thus, it echoes German and British Romanticism, emphasising the sublime, reverence-evoking power of natural phenomena. As phrases like 'the Lord of light, | Of life, of Love, and gladness' and 'pious worshipper' indicate, the dawn is not simply a natural phenomenon. It evokes ancient people's religious reverence for higher powers, a crucial point that Müller's 'solar mythology' stresses:

If the people of antiquity called these eternal lights of heaven their gods, their bright ones (deva), the Dawn was the first-born among all the god—Protogeneia—dearest to man [...]. Thus sunrise was the revelation of nature, awakening in the human mind that feeling of dependence, of helplessness, of hope, of joy and faith in higher powers, which is the source of all wisdom, the spring of all religion.⁴⁵

In these exuberant lines, religious feelings are overwhelming and poetically expressed, distinct from yet based on Müller's etymological deciphering of gods' names. In other words, after a comparative etymological investigation of gods' names, Müller reaches an original substratum of mythology: poetic, personified narrations of the solar drama—especially the dawn—eliciting man's reverence for higher powers. In this light, the full-grown Greek mythology is a later form growing (or decaying) from a religious germ expressed in personified language.

The same argument is developed in his *Lectures on the Science of Language Delivered in 1863*, especially in the lecture on 'Jupiter, the Supreme God'.⁴⁶ Again, Müller begins with etymological deciphering of "Zeus (Greek)" as "Jupiter (Latin)" as "Dayaus (Sanskrit)". He reveals that the three names of the supreme god derive from the same Aryan root, originally a personified name for both "the bright sky" and the higher power beyond the sky. Müller observes, with language and thought growing more abstract, how these originally personified names for natural phenomena and higher power are taken literarily. Consequently, these three names change into substantial beings, namely, becoming gods who assume human forms and become principle actors in mythology. In Müller's words, 'names have a tendency to become being, *nomina* grew into *numina*, *ideas* into *idols*'.⁴⁷ To emphasise the overshadowing influence of language on thought, then, Müller terms such mythological transformation as 'disease of language'. On the one hand, mythology is a symptom, or, a result of 'disease of language'. For instance, "Zeus", the name for higher power and sky, later turns into "Zeus" the supreme god in Greek mythology. On the other hand, after coming into being, mythology also becomes a cause of 'disease of language', inducing more mythological language and misinterpretations. For instance, since most Europeans are

⁴⁴ Max Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp. 94-5.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 95-7.

⁴⁶ Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language delivered in 1863*, pp. 413-461.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 447.

familiar with mythology of Zeus, knowing little about “Zeus” as the name for the sky and divine power, Greek mythology encroaches on the true Greek religion. In a word, mythology is both a symptom and a cause of this ‘disease of language’. In the sphere of religion, mythology corrupts religious language and misleads religious conceptions.

This sounds pessimistic: as ‘disease of language’, mythology endangers true religion. However, Müller stresses that the mythology of gods did not exist at the beginning of Greek language; rather, it came into being only later in ancient Greece. Despite the literarily unholy content of Greek mythology, ‘we shall be surprised to find how much more of true religion there is in what we called Heathen Mythology’.⁴⁸ Indeed, ‘[t]he first germs of Zeus and Jupiter which lie below the surface of classical mythology’⁴⁹ can be traced back to ‘Dayaus’ in *Rig-Veda*, a name for the sky and the divine agent behind the sky—‘the unseen and incomprehensible Being that had to be named’.⁵⁰ As is witnessed by ancient Greek literature, while myths of Zeus’s immoral acts were prevalent, genuine appeals to Zeus for divine help are also recorded.⁵¹ Thus, uneasily acknowledging the encroaching power of mythology, Müller highlights the vitality of religious germ as that which exists prior to the full-grown mythology:

By Zeus the Greeks meant more than the visible sky, more even than the sky personified. With them the name Zeus was, and remained, in spite of all mythological obscurations, the name of the Supreme Deity [...]. Sky was the nearest approach to that conception which in sublimity, brightness, and infinity transcended all others as much as the bright blue sky transcended all other things visible on earth.⁵²

These lines on ‘the sky’ resonate with the romantic lines on ‘the dawn’ in ‘Comparative Mythology’. For Müller, both ‘the dawn’ and ‘the sky’ evoke in ancient people intense, unspeakable reverence for higher powers. Once gain, Müller changes into a ‘modern ancient’ poet, communing with the sublime sky that intimates more sublime power beyond. In other words, Müller starts with scholarly etymological analysis of the full-grown stratum of mythology and arrives at a Romantic-Idealist view of a substratum of mythology, which records religious reverence for transcending power intimated by natural phenomena like the visible sky.

⁴⁸ Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language delivered in 1863*, p. 423.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.449.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 446-7.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 444.

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 453-4.

The Zenith (and Fall) of Müller's Comparative Mythology

The same approach and argument is theorised in Müller's lecture 'On the Philosophy of Mythology'. To a great degree, it marks a transition point in Müller's Comparative Mythology and Victorian Mythography. As is noted by scholars such as Dinah Birch and Frank Turner, Müller's 'solar mythology', based on Comparative Philology, remained dominant around early 1870s.⁵³ This is not to say it went without challenge. Perhaps the best-known criticism comprises R.F. Littledale's 'The Oxford Solar Myth', E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, and Andrew Lang's 'Mythology and Fairy Tales', each igniting critiques of Müller's theory of Mythology.⁵⁴ Much has been said about its eclipse since the early 1870s.⁵⁵ However, little attention is paid to the multifaceted feature of Müller's 'On the Philosophy of Mythology'.

As regards the principal approach and argument, this lecture reiterates and theorises Müller's idea on Mythology. As in 'Comparative Mythology', he begins with the question that Greek mythology demands interpretations, but in a philosophical manner: 'Was Mythology a mere accident, or was it inevitable' in the history of mankind?⁵⁶ Unlike his previous works, which answered this question through case studies, Müller turns to more philosophical thinking on the formation of mythology. For Müller, mythology is essentially part of language and thought. To solve the riddle of mythology, then, it is necessary to situate it in the history of language and thought which, according to Müller, are inseparable yet not commensurate with each other.⁵⁷ Therefore, their corresponding relations change in history, inevitably leading to misunderstandings. For instance, the word "soul" (ψυχή) originally means "breathe"; it also acquires the meaning of "spirit" within body, and it also comes to mean "ghost".⁵⁸ Gradually, ψυχή loses its original meaning of "breath". Moreover, language and thought tend to grow more abstract yet still anthropomorphic: from "breath", a more material meaning, to "spirit", which is more metaphysical, and subsequently to "ghost", which is both immaterial and assumes personified forms. It is worth noticing that, in illustrating the changing meanings of "soul", Müller also uses examples from Tylor's 'The Religion of Savages'.⁵⁹ In so doing, Müller tries to reveal that such phenomena are not limited to Greek but likewise exist in other languages. Owing to such evolution of language and thought, people—both ancient and

⁵³ Dinah Birch, "'The Sun is God': Ruskin's Solar Mythology", in *The Sun is God*, pp. 109-24, p. 117; and Turner, 'Greek Mythology and Religion', p. 104.

⁵⁴ R.F. Littledale's 'The Oxford Solar Myth' was originally published in *Kottabos* in 1870; it was reprinted in *Comparative Mythology: An Essay by Professor Max Müller*, edited by A.S. Palmer. It was referred to in Feldman's *The Rise of Modern Mythology* (1972) and Frank Turner's *Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1984), among many other works mentioning the eclipse of Müller's solar mythology. See also Andrew Lang, 'Mythology and Fairy Tales', *Fortnightly Review*, 13, (1873), 618-631; see E.B. Tylor's 1871 *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom, Volume 1* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1883).

⁵⁵ See Dorson, all; Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, pp. 33-36; and Turner, 'Greek Mythology and Religion', pp. 111-115.

⁵⁶ Max Müller, 'Philosophy of Mythology', p. 353.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 356-58

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 360-61

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 360.

modern—tend to misunderstand language spoken by their predecessors. Mislead by surviving language forms—whose original meanings are forgotten—people attach new meanings to words, making up stories pertaining to surviving words. In a broader sense, language which itself forgets its older meanings and acquires new one is the definition of mythology.

Based on the above philosophical thinking on the formation of mythology in a broader sense, Müller turns to the narrower sense of mythology, namely, Greek mythology of gods. Unlike his previous works that begins with full-grown mythology and traces it back to its substratum, Müller starts with the substratum, imagining the sun evoking religious reverence in primitive man's heart: the sun is 'the first revelation, the first beginning of all trust, of all religion'.⁶⁰ He then turns to scholarly etymological following of names for the sun that later evolves into gods' names, as is illustrated by the story of "Apollo (the sun) chases Daphne (the dawn)". While this might sound like a repetition of 'Comparative Mythology', it is now situated in a philosophical framework of language and thought as it changes throughout history.

Furthermore, Müller applies his solar mythology to primitive myths across the world.⁶¹ Müller is aware that such expansion has a danger of conjecturing the origin of primitive myths without etymological analysis of words in cognate languages. Meanwhile, Müller notes that it also points to new perspectives of understanding myths:

[T]here is in a comparative study of languages and myths not only a philological, but also a philosophical, and more particularly, a psychological interest, and though even in this more general study of mankind, the frontiers of language and race ought never to disappear, yet they can no longer be allowed to narrow or intercept our view.⁶²

It is worth noticing—as early as 1871, when anthropological approaches to primitive myths were rising⁶³—how Müller already adopts an open and cautious attitude to new materials of mythology and alternative approaches, aware of the limits of philological approaches. Meanwhile, he maintains his principal method and his argument on solar phenomena as what awakens religious reverence in primitive people. Such mixed features are later fully developed in his *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*.

⁶⁰ Max Müller, 'Philosophy of Mythology', p. 368.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 381-90.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 391.

⁶³ It is widely known that E.B. Tylor published his *Primitive Culture* in 1871, marking the beginning of Cultural Anthropology. In this book, Tylor elaborates his animistic interpretation of Primitive Mythology. Before 1871, Tylor also published some works pertaining to Primitive Mythology. See E.B. Tylor, 'Preface to the First Edition', in *Primitive Culture, Volume 1*, pp. v-vi.

The Finale of Müller's Comparative Mythology

In 1897, more than forty years after 'Comparative Mythology' appeared, Müller published *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. With the hindsight of an old soldier in the battle of mythography, Müller is aware that his etymological school is discredited as heresy and with only a few followers.⁶⁴ As Müller states in 1870—when he sympathetically criticised his predecessors' errors —'it is the fate of all pioneers, not only to be left behind in the assault which they had planned, but to find that many of their approaches were made in a false direction, and had to be abandoned.'⁶⁵ Unfortunately, this prediction applies to himself. In the 1890s, his method was almost abandoned, eclipsed by anthropological approaches initiated by Tylor and developed by Andrew Lang and others.⁶⁶ With all their individual differences, they divert from Müller's prioritisation of language in the study of primitive myths; moreover, their arguments are generally opposite to Müller's. They tend to regard primitive myths as a symptom of lower intellect, superstitions, and savage sentiments. Such arguments counter Müller's idea that primitive myths have a substratum of religious reverence evoked by natural phenomena such as the sun. In a word, both their approaches and their arguments greatly contrast with Müller's. With their potency growing more dominant, Müller's limits and errors are exaggerated, especially by Andrew Lang, who 'was to some extent guilty of constructing a caricature of solar mythology'.⁶⁷ Consequently, in this battle of mythography, Müller is defeated, leaving an impression of Müller as a beaten adversary of Victorian anthropologists.

However, in a certain sense, Müller is not an adversary of the Anthropological school. Neither is his Science of Mythology completely wrong. As Müller says, 'there are few errors which do not contain some grains of truth'.⁶⁸ For one thing, Müller credits anthropologists' approaches and new materials. As he recollects in this final book, 'I believe I was the first to explain the importance of Dr. Tylor's works to a larger public. I have always felt most grateful for the work which he has done.'⁶⁹ As many other instances in the book indicate, Müller regarded Tylor and other anthropologists as 'allies' or 'fellow-laborers' using different yet compatible tools to explore mythology.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Friedrich Max Müller, 'Preface', in *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume 1*, pp. v-viii, p. vi.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Max Müller, 'On False Analogies in Comparative Theology', in *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, pp. 283-334, p. 292.

⁶⁶ Under the umbrella term "anthropologist", Victorian anthropologists have their own uniqueness when studying mythology and religion.

⁶⁷ Wheeler-Barclay, p. 118.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Max Müller, 'Preface', in *Chips from a German Workshop, Volume 6*, 2nd edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), pp. iii-xliii, p. iv.

⁶⁹ Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume 1*, p. 27. Cf. footnote 1, originally written by Max Müller: 'See my article on Manners and Customs, published in the Times, 1865'.

⁷⁰ Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume 1*, p. 27.

Furthermore, Müller takes a cautious stance, maintaining that understanding the language of primitive tribes is indispensable in interpreting their mythologies.⁷¹ Based on a large number of case studies, Müller argues, without reliable knowledge of language spoken by primitive tribes, how scholars tend to use 'such general terms as Animism, Totemism, Fetishism, & c., as solvents of mythological problems'.⁷² As Müller tellingly illustrates, such 'general terms' are 'vague', not really accounting for the origin of primitive myths. Müller acknowledges that, for instance, terms like 'Animism' or "personification" are 'very good names for the various processes by which inanimate objects have at all times and in all places been changed into animate subjects'.⁷³ However, 'it [Animism] requires an explanation and very careful definition. If Animism means the ascribing of a soul to soulless objects, this is a very vague and unmeaning answer'.⁷⁴ As Müller observes, "soul" denotes different meanings in primitive myths of different cultures, and therefore, it is likewise with "Animism". For instance:

[W]hat is classed as Animism in ancient Aryan mythology is often no more than a poetical conception of nature which enables the poet to address the sun and moon, rivers and trees, as if they could hear and understand his words.⁷⁵

Thus, in his critical responses to anthropologists' 'general terms', Müller proves the indispensable role of language in tracing the origin of primitive myths. Based on his etymological interpretation of myths, he insists that the original substratum of primitive myths is personified narration of natural phenomena that evokes religious reverence for higher powers, while maintaining an open attitude to alternative approaches:

Mythology is a compound of many and very heterogeneous elements[...]the foundation of mythology was physical[...]the beginning of mythology came from a poetical and philosophical conception of nature and its most prominent phenomena; or, if poetry and philosophy combined may claim the name of religion, from a religious conception of the universe. Its later development, however, seems to exclude nothing that can touch the hearts of men. Hence arises the great difficulty, nay the impossibility of applying the same key to all the secret drawers of mythology.⁷⁶

However, as a contemporary book review in *Academy* indicates, Müller's cautious openness to alternative approaches and his insightful critiques of anthropological approaches are overshadowed by his 'outdated', 'faulty' interpretations of myths.⁷⁷ It turns out that, while *Contributions to the Science of Mythology* comprehensively demonstrates Müller's contributions

⁷¹ Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop, Volume 6*, pp. 242-268.

⁷² Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume I*, p. 7.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 208.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Max Müller. *Contributions to the Science of Mythology, Volume I*, p. 210.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁷ 'Reviews: The Study of Mythology. Reviews on *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. By the Right Hon. Prof. Max Müller, K.M., Membre de l'Institut. Kongman & Co.', *Academy* (March 13, 1897), pp. 297-8.

to the Science of Mythology, it appears in an unfavourable context and situation, marking the end of Müller's 'unfashionable' theory of mythology.

Conclusion

Having examined Müller's works on Mythology in 1856, 1871, and 1897, alongside other relevant works of his such as *Lectures on the Science of Language* delivered in 1863, this paper argues that Müller combines the comparative etymological method in a scientific spirit conjoined with Romantic Idealism to trace Greek mythology—and, by extension, primitive mythology—back to its origin: personified narration of natural phenomena, especially solar phenomena that evoke religious reverence for higher powers. With the evolution of language and thought in history, this origin later grows (that is, decays) into fully-grown myths of gods, owing to fundamental misunderstandings of originally personified language. In Müller's term, mythology is a 'disease of language'; while thus disease of language encroaches humans' understanding of religious reverence for higher powers, it presupposes a healthy, religious substratum—a 'perception of the infinite' intimated by nature and embodied in personified language.

With all its flaws, Müller's theory of Mythology maintains and develops its above theses, forwarding multi-faceted contributions to British Mythography. In the 1850s and 1860s, it played a pioneering and liberating role. It sketched his theory of mythology and marked the beginning of scientific research on world mythology—based on Comparative Philology and *Rig-Veda* as the oldest Aryan literature known at his time—in academic disciplines in Britain.

In the early 1870s, with the rise of Cultural Anthropology, his Comparative Mythology reaches its zenith and starts to descend in academic popularity. However, it is worth noting Müller's cautious open-mindedness to anthropological materials and alternative approaches to primitive myths. Müller incorporated anthropological materials to expand his theory of mythology and envisioned the psychological study of primitive myths as transcending his comparative philological approach.

In the 1890s, Müller's Comparative Mythology arrived at its tragic ending, eclipsed by the anthropological study of mythology. Müller is generally portrayed as a defeated enemy of Victorian anthropologists, but Müller's insightful responses to anthropological conjectures are overlooked. It is true that Müller's comparative philological interpretation of mythology has its limits and errors; however, it is Müller who starts the modern academic study of mythology in Britain, which later takes new tracks, leaving its pioneer forgotten and satirised. In criticising Müller's flaws, critics tend to overlook his insights into the interrelation between language and thought, one which reveals conjectural errors in such anthropological terms as "savage" or "Animism", and thus anticipates twentieth-century scholars' rethinking of Victorian anthropology.

In the finale of Müller's Science of Mythology, there are the beginnings of a reconsideration of Victorian anthropology in the future.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ See Dorson, p. 402: 'So Müller anticipated the lethal shafts modern anthropology would direct at comparative ethnologists such as Frazer.'

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