

THE INNOVATIONS  
OF IDEALISM

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# SCHELLING'S DISCOVERY AND SCHLEIERMACHER'S APPROPRIATION OF PLATO

Forgive us, sacred Plato! We Have transgressed against thee.

Hölderlin, Preface to *Hyperion*  
(penultimate version)

## I. The Historical Background

The names of Plato and Aristotle have together accompanied the winding course of European philosophy from the beginning. It is true that Aristotle was regarded during the High Middle Ages simply as 'the philosopher'<sup>1</sup>, but the period between Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa also saw the survival of a Platonic tradition that attempted to interpret the relationship between the soul and transcendent reality in a Christian fashion.<sup>2</sup> The Florentine Renaissance celebrated the revival of a theology that, enlivened with the spirit of neo-Platonism, undertook to integrate Plato's treatment of love and beauty into a single doctrine. And a century later, the circle associated with Jacobus Zarabella was striving to renew the Aristotelian interest in the philosophy of nature.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the general discussion by Fr. Cheneval and R. Imbach in the introduction to their edition of Thomas Aquinas, *Prologe zu den Aristoteles-Kommentaren* (Frankfurt am Main 1993).

<sup>2</sup> On this, one should still consult Cl. Baeumker, *Der Platonismus im Mittelalter* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, 1927); also W. Beierwaltes (ed.), *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt 1969).

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Randall, *The School of Padua and the Emergence of Modern Science* (Padova 1961). On this, one can also consult the knowledgeable but largely summarising recent study by H. Mikkeli, *An Aristotelian Response to Renaissance Humanism: J. Zabarella on the Nature of the Arts and Sciences* (Helsinki 1992).

Modern scientific thought in general, however, soon began to turn against the verbal subtleties of Scholastic philosophy in favour of an increasingly empirical method of approach. Francis Bacon, the principal protagonist in this, expressly endeavoured in his *Novum Organon* to break with the conceptual hold of Aristotelianism, although he simultaneously appealed to the traditional rhetorical status of *epagogē* to secure the principle of induction so fundamental to empirical science.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, the Cambridge Platonists grouped around Whichcote and Cudworth subsequently represented a reaction against empiricism, returning to the explicitly theological orientation of the Renaissance and attempting to defend the claims of faith by appealing to Plato.<sup>5</sup> During the intervening period, the Scholastic Aristotelian heritage had passed into Protestant hands, and subsequently exercised a distinct influence on the established eighteenth-century philosophical schools upto the time of Kant.<sup>6</sup> During the same period, the Platonic heritage of the Cambridge School was also kept alive in the Earl of Shaftesbury's aestheticised concept of 'enthusiasm'.<sup>7</sup> The English thinker found a particularly vivid response in German eighteenth-century aesthetics precisely because he seemed to defend a new and versatile freedom in the domain of sensibility over against the still dominant influence of French classicism.<sup>8</sup>

These brief allusions to a number of familiar connections, all of which have been subjected to detailed research, already bring us to the threshold of German Idealist philosophy. It was this tradition of thought that discovered, in an original way of its own, the *authentic Plato* in place of the various mediated substitutes of before, and indeed saw him as a thinker who was to provide continuing inspiration to the needs of post-Kantian philosophy.

Kant's critical revolution had brought the classical metaphysics of the Aristotelian tradition to a decisive end precisely by demanding

<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. Jardine, *Bacon. Discovery and the Art of Discourse* (Cambridge 1974) and my outline of this story, 'Antike und moderne Wissenschaftstheorie', in R. Bubner: *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (Frankfurt am Main 1992), especially p. 120 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Patrides (ed.), *The Cambridge Platonists* (Cambridge 1969). The anthology also contains a very instructive introduction under the title, 'The High and Aiery Hills of Platonisme'.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the excellent and still unsurpassed study by P. Peterson, *Geschichte der aristotelischen Philosophie im protestantischen Deutschland* (Leipzig 1921; reprinted Stuttgart 1954).

<sup>7</sup> On this, one should still consult Ernst Cassirer, *Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge* (Berlin 1932).

<sup>8</sup> Also cf. M. Wundt, *Die Wiederentdeckung Platons im 18. Jahrhundert*, *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* 15, 1941.

self-conscious reflection upon the constitutive limitations of subjectivity in relation to possible experience. At the same time, Kant had discovered the spontaneous character of the synthetic achievements of self-consciousness. For the early idealist thinkers, this situation naturally suggested that the immediate task was that of going beyond Kant by recourse to Kantian means. This meant re-conceiving metaphysics on a quite new basis independent of the traditional approaches, constructing a metaphysics that could effectively present itself as the systematic completion of the philosophy of subjectivity. This itself required a new repertoire of concepts over and above the obsolete ones already discredited by the Critical Philosophy, one that was capable of finally realising the Kantian idea, anticipated but not accomplished by Kant himself, of a new metaphysics that could properly aspire to scientific status.

Such concepts would have to be independent of experience, like Kant's synthetic *a priori*, and yet permit us, through the power of reason alone, to grasp that intrinsic relationship to the world that transcendental philosophy had derived from the *a posteriori* character of contingent experience. For all of his distrust of spurious 'enthusiasm' and irresponsible speculation, Kant himself had emphatically expressed respect, in Plato's name, for the original conception of 'Ideas'<sup>9</sup> in the transcendental dialectic.<sup>10</sup> In this matter, Kant claimed to have 'understood Plato even better than he had understood himself', and thereby provided the classical formulation for all attempts at retrospective reinterpretations of the philosophical past. It was thus quite natural from the post-Kantian perspective on the problem to regard the doctrine of Ideas, and the idea of a dialectic grounded in the latter and capable of producing real knowledge rather than purely apparent sophistical conclusions, as the appropriate point of departure for further intellectual development. And it is this path that the early idealists were in fact to pursue.

## II. The Emergence of the History of Philosophy as a Discipline

In this connection, it is important to understand that the early idealist rediscovery of Plato represented far more than a revival of the familiar

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kant's essay of 1796 that was explicitly directed against Schlosser, Goethe's brother-in-law, 'Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie'. On this, cf. my study, 'Platon, der Vater aller Schwärmerei', in R. Bubner, *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (loc. cit.).

<sup>10</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B 369 f. Cf. the general discussion in H. Heimsoeth, 'Platon in Kants Werdegang', in: H. Heimsoeth/D. Henrich (eds.), *Studien zu Kants philosophischer Entwicklung* (Hildesheim 1967).

and traditional amalgam of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Christian elements in a new form, since it effectively opened up the Platonic sources themselves for the very first time. The initial stirrings of an authentically philological attitude may have also played a certain role in this respect. But it was, above all, the project of a rationally grounded metaphysics of substance, as mediated through the thought of Spinoza and Leibniz, that helped to realise the possibility of overcoming the traditional philosophy of the Schools.

The contemporary consciousness of the history of philosophy, however, was not alone responsible for these developments. For considerable historical research had already been progressively undertaken by Brucker through to Tiedemann and Tennemann, and the historical scholarship of these writers certainly exceeded the occasional and extremely indeterminate references to the classical thinkers to be found in the works of Kant or Fichte. The revolutionary sense of renewal so characteristic of the early idealist philosophers derived rather from their conviction that they could decisively present the essential questions of philosophy now liberated from the dead weight of tradition, and from the fact that the necessary doxographical support had already been provided by their predecessors.

It is nonetheless the case that the rudiments of something like the history of philosophy in the modern sense had been developed during the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Yet the massive erudition of a Jacob Brucker, so appreciated by his contemporaries, did not prove to be particularly helpful for an actual understanding of Plato.<sup>12</sup> And the *Universal History of Philosophy*, which J.A. Eberhard presented as a 'pragmatic history' in terms of progressive development, dedicated only a few pages to Plato, and treated him in a rather condescending manner.<sup>13</sup> Dietrich

<sup>11</sup> Moses Mendelssohn's famous reworking of Plato, his *Phaidon* of 1764, simply presents the school of philosophy of his own time in antique garb. J.J. Engel's *Versuch einer Methode, die Vernunftlehre aus platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln* (Berlin 1780) is similarly designed as a pedagogical manual for school teachers that is supposed to introduce the contents of Aristotle's *Organon* in an easy and attractive manner: 'more as delightful play than as challenging labour' (p. 5).

<sup>12</sup> J. Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Leipzig 1742). On this topic, cf. A. Neschke (*Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Eberhard's compendium 'for use in the course of academic lectures' seeks rather laboriously to disclose the 'systematic structure' behind the 'dialogical form' and the 'poetic diction' (Halle 1788, p. 139). He thus sets 'dialectics' and 'physics' over against 'theology' and 'ethics'. A. Neschke is not entirely convincing when she attempts to trace Schleiermacher's understanding of Plato's system back to Eberhard. It is true that Eberhard was Schleiermacher's teacher in philosophy, and the synopsis of Platonism as handed down

Tiedemann's history of 1791, which surveys *The Spirit of Speculative Philosophy from Thales to Plato* in the firm conviction of narrating an 'uninterrupted progress of reason', represents a certain advance on Eberhard. Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann's *History of Philosophy* of 1798 produced an even more thorough examination of the subject.<sup>14</sup> As his four-volume *System of Platonic Philosophy* of 1792–95 already reveals, he was himself a Kantian, and regarded the history of philosophy very much in the spirit of the final chapter of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which brings the 'history of pure reason' to an end with its emphatic announcement that 'the critical path alone now lies open before us'.<sup>15</sup>

### III. The Earliest System Programme of German Idealism

The early idealist appeal to Plato, however, takes place quite independently of all these still rather modest efforts. We know that Plato was already being read in the original at the Tübingen Theological Seminary, the *Stift*, at the beginning of the last decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The famous and much-debated text generally known as the *Earliest System Programme of German Idealism*, probably composed around 1796–97, is a kind of summary that emerged from an immediate exchange of views between Hegel, Schelling<sup>17</sup> and Hölderlin. It addresses

by Alkinoos may also have exerted a remote early influence upon him, as Neschke surmises ('Platonisme et le tournant herméneutique au début du XIX. Siècle', in: A. Laks/A. Neschke (eds.), *La naissance du paradigme herméneutique*, Lille 1990, 139 ff.). But the few pages that Eberhard dedicates to the subject are so arid and schematic that it is impossible to find any interesting traces of this treatment in Schleiermacher's own interpretation of Plato.

<sup>14</sup> Plato is extensively discussed in the second volume, which appeared in 1799.

<sup>15</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B 884.

<sup>16</sup> As a small example, one might compare the way in which Schelling casually weaves a reference to the *Meno* (70c) into a letter of 1795 to Hegel, who had just moved to Bern. 'You wish to know how things are with us? – by God in Heaven an *auchmos* has come upon us which will only give renewed succour to the ancient weeds. Who will pull them up?' This learned allusion to that 'dearth of wisdom' lamented by Socrates in the opening scene of Plato's dialogue, delivered *en passant* in a personal letter to a friend with shared interests, surely presupposes an extraordinary familiarity with the text in question. Schelling's commentary on the *Timaeus* also refers a number of times, and always affirmatively, to the Latin paraphrase of Plato by D. Tiedemann, *Dialogorum Platonis argumenta* (Zweibrücken 1786), which also discusses the *Timaeus* on p. 302 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Some knowledge of Plato on Schelling's part is documented even for his time in Bebenhausen before he took up his university studies in 1790 (according to the biographical fragment by his son K.F.A. Schelling, as cited by G.L. Plitt, *Aus Schellings Leben in Briefen*, Leipzig 1869, I, p. 25). Schelling also mentions Plato in the dissertation he wrote in Tübingen, *De malorum origine* (AA I, p. 83, p. 128).



all the themes that would be involved in the ensuing rise of systematic idealist thought, and concludes by placing the Platonic 'Idea' at the centre of attention.

Beginning with the ego as an 'absolutely free being', there 'simultaneously emerges an entire world out of nothing'. This new philosophy of nature, which attempts 'once again to give wings to the physics that slowly and laboriously advances by means of experiment', requires certain 'ideas' that can only be supplied by a philosophy that poses the fundamental and systematic question, 'How must the world be constituted for a moral being?' After the domain of nature, we confront the 'work of man' – the issues of the state, peace and history. This is followed by the 'moral world' of free spirits in which God and immortality represent more than the mere postulates permitted at the end of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

'Last of all the Idea that unites all the rest, the Idea of beauty, taking the word in its higher Platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of Reason [*Vernunft*], through which it encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness only become sisters in beauty. The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. Men without aesthetic sense is what the philosophers-of-the-letter of our times are. The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. [. . . .] Here it ought to become clear what it is that men who understand no Ideas properly lack. [. . . .] Poetry thereby acquires a higher dignity, and she becomes at the end once more what she was in the beginning – the teacher of humanity; for there is no longer any philosophy or any history here, and the art of poetry alone will survive all other arts and sciences'. This ardent appeal concludes by turning to contemplate an 'idea which, so far as I know, has never yet occurred to anyone else', namely that of a 'new mythology'.<sup>18</sup>

This is not the appropriate place to discuss the numerous questions provoked by this textual fragment, which, like a prism, casts a refracted light upon the entire subsequent development of systematic idealist

<sup>18</sup> Cited from the text in *Hegel-Studien*, Beiheft 9, 1973. For the recent state of research, cf. Chr. Jamme/H. Schneider (eds.), *Mythologie der Vernunft. Hegels 'ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus'* (Frankfurt am Main 1984). The authors follow their teacher Otto Pöggeler in ascribing the still-contested authorship of the fragment to Hegel. F.P. Hansen has published an entire book on the 'Systemprogramm' (Berlin 1989), which thoroughly documents the history of previous interpretations. Cf. also Section IV, and K. Düsing, 'Ästhetischer Platonismus bei Hölderlin und Hegel', in: Ch. Jame/O. Pöggeler (eds.), *Homburg vor der Höhe in der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Stuttgart 1981).

thought through to its culmination in Hegel, and beyond this into the post-Hegelian debate surrounding the question of 'theory and praxis'. The grounding of the ego in a theory of subjectivity provides the perspective from which both nature and the realm of spirit are to be reconstructed. In this process, it is aesthetics that comes to represent the culminating point of this unifying approach since it is precisely in beauty that the natural and the spiritual merge indistinguishably into one another.

This involves a central claim quite unparalleled in the previous Kantian tradition of aesthetic thought – namely, that the task is to develop, under the aegis of Plato, a form of philosophy so fused with poetry that art and science will no longer have to travel separately upon their divided ways as they have typically done since the beginning of the modern period. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, therefore, the true *telos* of modernity leads us back to the very beginning of the tradition. According to the ancient way of thinking, Homer and Hesiod represented teachers for the Greeks precisely because they had helped to make the world intelligible by creating that collective fabric of explanation mediated by images and imagination that we call a 'mythology'.

The ambitious early idealists wanted to restore this original and transfigured condition of a shared relationship to the world, where people and priests, the many and the wise, were not yet separated one from another. Thus the wounds inflicted by the abstract and alienating reflection of an age now remote from its origins could in future be healed again by recourse to the most advanced means available to thought. The hope was precisely to re-establish through philosophy that connection between life and thought whose loss the Germans felt so keenly in the wake of Rousseau's influential critique of culture. An intellectually independent and publicly effective philosophy would be the specific agent for transforming the shattered reality of the post-revolutionary present into something better. That is precisely what the promised new mythology would help to achieve. But even the more sober conception of a philosophy that seeks to comprehend its time in thought, as Hegel had always demanded from his first publication right through to the mature expression of his thought in the *Philosophy of Right*, also has its origins in this constellation of early idealism.

The central concept that is to unlock the treasures of all these previously sealed chambers of thought is the 'Idea'. The latter names a content that can only be grasped through the dedicated commitment

to rational insight beyond the domain of empirical data and sensible experience, that presents the essence of something in its perfect form as determined through the untrammelled exercise of reason in accordance with its own intrinsic character. The *System Programme* itself gives as yet no inkling that the methodical art of dialectic will eventually be required here. The relevant insight in this respect represents Hegel's true breakthrough, which thereby brings him into a proximity with Plato with which none of the aforementioned historical variants of the Platonising tradition can bear comparison.<sup>19</sup> Since the relationship between Plato and Hegel with regard to the 'dialectic' has often been treated before, and I have already contributed to this debate in detail elsewhere<sup>20</sup>, this complex of questions will be relegated to the background in the following discussion. This difference of emphasis, determined by the present context, does not of course affect the real importance that must still be ascribed to the question of the dialectic.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. A Return to Schelling's Beginnings

The *System Programme* arose from a confluence of ideas shared by the three famous students – Hegel, Hölderlin, Schelling – at the Tübingen *Stift*. We have simply recalled some of the elements involved in this synthesis here, but the task now is to take *a further step back* into the origins of Schelling's thought. Alongside the various early student pieces relating to Plato and Aristotle, all of them corrected by a foreign hand, and some elementary studies of Fichte's thought, Schelling's literary remains

<sup>19</sup> We are particularly indebted to the contributions of French scholarship for comprehensive clarification of the role played by classical Greek thought in German idealist philosophy. Cf. J. Taminiaux, *La nostalgie de la Grèce à l'aube de l'idéalisme allemand* (The Hague 1967), D. Janicaud, *Hegel et le destin de la Grèce* (Paris 1975), and the thorough investigation by J. Vieillard-Baron, *Platon et l'idéalisme allemand 1770–1830* (Paris 1979). Vieillard-Baron has also edited a transcript of Hegel's lectures on Plato and provided a relevant explanatory introduction: G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Platon 1825–1826* (Paris 1976/ Frankfurt am Main 1979). Further studies concerning the German reception of Plato are gathered in Vieillard-Baron's *Platonisme et interprétation de Platon à l'époque moderne* (Paris 1988).

<sup>20</sup> 'Dialog und Dialektik oder Platon und Hegel', in: R. Bubner, *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (loc. cit.).

<sup>21</sup> As far as Schleiermacher is concerned, we are principally interested here in his translation of the Platonic dialogues. In this context, I shall ignore Schleiermacher's own later concept of 'dialectic' as the 'skilful art of dialogue in the domain of pure thought'. The most careful and committed study of Schleiermacher's concept of dialectic – one that is even more detailed and elaborately differentiated than the original under examination – is F. Wagner's *Schleiermachers Dialektik* (Gütersloh 1979).

also comprise a previously unknown manuscript that significantly enhances our understanding of the beginnings of idealist philosophy. This well-ploughed field of research could indeed hardly have been expected to promise such an important find at this stage. Yet Schelling's Berlin papers include a bundle of manuscripts comprising around 230 pages<sup>22</sup>, which was obviously later given the title *Typical Conceptions of the Ancient World on Sundry Subjects as Gathered from the Works of Homer, Plato and Others*. The piece largely consists of numerous more or less systematically arranged notes and excerpts on Gnosticism and various preparatory materials for Schelling's 1795 dissertation, *De Marcione*.<sup>23</sup>

Right at the beginning of the collection, we discover approximately twenty pages of excerpts that are more synoptically connected in relation to the later material, expressly dated by Schelling himself to 'August 1792' and designated as follows: 'On Poets, Prophets, Poetic Inspiration, Enthusiasm, Theopneumatics and Divine Influence upon Mankind in general as Related by Plato'. As far as I am aware, this textual source has never been seriously examined before.

Schelling begins with a motto from Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*<sup>24</sup> on the subject of necessary and divine causes. It is the latter that require our particular attention if we are ever 'to accede to a blessed life'. And Schelling himself has expressly underlined the passage in the Greek text where Plato exhorts us to follow this path to blessedness. It is also rather surprising to discover that Schelling's exegetical labours are directed towards the dialogue *Ion*, which is centrally concerned with the kind of knowledge ascribed to the rhapsode. This was regarded at that time as an extremely marginal dialogue that hardly belonged amongst the preferred texts as far as the contemporary literature on Plato was concerned.

The dialogue is usually overlooked because it does not seem to represent any of the essential ideas associated with Platonism. Herder quotes it occasionally<sup>25</sup>, but the histories of philosophy compiled by Brucker, Tennemann and Tiedemann clearly pay no attention to it whatsoever. The first German translation of the dialogue, by Graf Stolberg,

<sup>22</sup> The manuscripts are preserved in the archives of the newly established Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences.

<sup>23</sup> For detailed clarifications of the text and background, cf. the editorial report provided by J. Jantzen in the new critical edition of Schelling's works (AA II, p. 195 ff.).

<sup>24</sup> *Timaeus* 68c.

<sup>25</sup> *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (1767), in: J.G. Herder, *Frühe Schriften*, ed. U. Gaier (Frankfurt am Main 1985), for example, pp. 315, 339 f.

appeared in the *Selected Dialogues of Plato*, which was published four years after the compilation of Schelling's notes.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the first early research into Homer, F.A. Wolf discussed the status of the rhapsode, and touched briefly upon the *Ion* in his influential *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795.<sup>27</sup> Wolf attempts to extract valuable information about the nature of the rhapsode from what he describes, far from any appreciation of Socratic irony, as a highly entertaining dialogue ('ex iucundissimo illo sermone Platonis'). A similar interest will reappear in Schelling later, and thus open a field of research that is far removed from the topic of philosophical 'enthusiasm'. And C.J. Bardili, a relative of Schelling's who was active at the *Stift* until 1790, had also drawn upon the *Ion*, a few years before Schelling's engagement with the text, in order to provide a complementary learned discussion on the Christian conception of the importance of prophecy. Schelling cites this short study by Bardili<sup>28</sup> at the beginning of his own piece, briefly taking up one of its suggestions before proceeding to develop his own ideas. Bardili himself makes only a passing reference to Plato's passage concerning the 'interpreters of the interpreters'.<sup>29</sup>

It is true, however, that the *Ion* actually plays the major role in Goethe's short text *Plato as Partaker of a Christian Revelation*, a piece from 1796 that was occasioned by Stolberg's translation of the dialogue, but only published in 1826 in Goethe's journal *On Art and Antiquity*. Goethe writes as follows<sup>30</sup>: 'How has it come about, for example, that the *Ion* is cited as one of the canonic writings, given that this little dialogue is nothing but a species of pastiche? Probably because there is some talk of divine inspiration at the very end! But unfortunately Socrates expresses himself here, as in several other places, in a merely ironic fashion'. This evaluation, which was unknown to Schelling, is a significant one. It is all the more remarkable, then, with what sureness of purpose the young idealist Schelling seeks out the themes that interest him most amongst these ancient texts, and finds just what he can use in material that was largely ignored or despised in his own time. 'But Plato always regards poetry as a sacred mystery that calls for further clarification' (page 2 of Schelling's original).

<sup>26</sup> Vol. 1 (Königsberg 1796).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. chapter 22.

<sup>28</sup> C.G. Bardili, *Significatus primitivus vocis prophētēs ex Platone erutus cum novo tentamine interpretandi I. Cor. Cap. XIV* (Göttingen 1786). I am grateful to Dr. M. v. Perger in Freiburg and Dr. M. Franz in Bremen for a number of important suggestions in this regard.

<sup>29</sup> *Ion* 535 a.

<sup>30</sup> J. W. v. Goethe, *Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe), XII, p. 245.

Undeterred by the highly sceptical irony expressed by Socrates in the *Ion*, Schelling reads the relevant Socratic remarks in an *affirmative* fashion. Socrates is trying to show that the rhapsodes who interpret the great poets do not themselves possess the appropriate art or skill (*technē*) for this task. Hence they do not understand what they are doing, or why they are doing it. The rhapsode Ion is only really familiar with the poetry of Homer, and confesses to a loss of interest and attention where other styles and voices of poetry are concerned. It is the Muse who prompts the rhapsodes in their songs, who lifts them beyond the everyday to the heights of inspiration and possession. Socrates compares the divine power that communicates its influence so mysteriously from the poet through the rhapsode to the listener with the power of the magnet. If the poets are 'messengers of the gods', those through whom the latter find utterance, then the singers who perform their poetry are themselves 'messengers of messengers' (*hermēnēon hermēnēs*)<sup>31</sup>, representing thus a doubled hermeneutic with a sublime divine origin.

A 'divine dispensation' (*theia moira*)<sup>32</sup> holds sway in all things, but it remains unclear whether the rhapsode's miraculous inspiration removes the exercise of poetic talent from all rational enquiry, or whether the appeal to divine intervention merely serves to conceal the rhapsode's ignorance and incompetence, to excuse his reluctance or inability to give an account of what he is about. Schelling generalises this ambivalent appeal to inspiration and turns it into a fundamental principle. According to him, Plato is not merely talking here about the art of poetry but about 'all the operations of the understanding'. And Schelling refers in this connection to the famous passage in the *Meno* where it is claimed that the possession of virtue is not something that can be taught or learned since it arises from 'divine dispensation'.<sup>33</sup>

'When Plato describes the prophets and seers who read the future as an example of such divine power, he is not thinking of those later practitioners of deceit, the fantasts and soothsayers of his own time, but rather of those ancient sacred prophets and hierophants of the original world, as these were spoken of by sacred tradition, and of whom those later seers can be regarded only as a degenerate scion – he was thinking upon the very first origin of the prophetic gift in that original world, an origin that tradition has shrouded in holy darkness, and in which *art* actually possessed less share than *divinior quaedam in sapientibus animi vis*, if I may quote here the words of another ancient' (10).

<sup>31</sup> *Ion* 535a.

<sup>33</sup> *Meno* 99e.

<sup>32</sup> *Ion* 534c, 535a, 536c, 542 a/b.

Schelling subsequently touches upon the ‘mythology of the Greeks’ and the ‘sensuous philosophy of all peoples’ (13), themes that are also familiar from Schelling’s other early writings<sup>34</sup> and that would once again come to occupy the centre of his interests during the final phase of his thinking.

But we still have to explain the motivation behind Schelling’s essentially affirmative interpretation of the *Ion*. He may have been directly influenced, amongst other things, by the Kantian conception of ‘genius’.<sup>35</sup> This was supposed to represent an innate gift, one that could not be rationally explained or technically acquired, and was capable of producing something in accordance with the rules of nature itself. The ‘divine dispensation’ referred to by Plato corresponds to just this kind of deep insight into nature enjoyed independently of all human theoretical reflection. The aesthetic character ascribed to the origin of those products of the spirit that appear as if they were products of nature is now transferred by Schelling to the secret operations of the understanding itself, which, because it creates in accordance with nature, is never fully transparent to reflective theoretical investigation. We must therefore develop this gift, which is analogous to genius, within the human spirit, and thereby help to bear post-Kantian speculation beyond the limits officially laid down by the Critical Philosophy and towards a philosophy of nature based upon Ideas.

‘Genuine poetic power operates according to laws of which the poet himself is not entirely clearly conscious, and which are even less intelligible to other human beings; the product of the poet rather resembles a miraculous effect for which we are quite unable to discover the natural causes – an effect, which of a sudden simply stands there before the eyes of the astonished creator who has called it forth from out the overflowing stream of images and feelings, just like a god who calls forth the world from out of chaos [. . . .] You may ask as long as you would

<sup>34</sup> Schelling, *Über Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der ältesten Welt* (1793), AA I.

<sup>35</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement* §346 ff.; cf. A 181/2: ‘. . . but one cannot learn to write inspired poetry, however elaborate all the precepts of this art may be, and however superb its models. The reason for this is that Newton could show how he took every one of the steps he had to take in order to get from the first elements of geometry to his great and profound discoveries; he could show this not only to himself but also to everyone else as well, in an intuitively clear way, allowing others to follow. But no Homer or Wieland can show his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know this and hence cannot teach it to anyone else either’.

what genius is, so Rousseau, if I am not mistaken, has said, but if you do not already possess it, you will ask in vain.<sup>36</sup>

'This power at work in the individual human being, incomprehensible as it is to most, is active not only in poetry but also in every accomplishment of the human understanding, active in such a way that precisely the person quite unaware of any such power within himself may be astonished at many of these accomplishments, at all the unanticipated connections and combinations, at the daring turns and conclusions of the human understanding, whereas another may simply cling unmoved to his maxim of 'nihil admirari'. And if every great man were honestly to confess the truth, would we not learn in many respects how many of his powerful thoughts, which exercised the most far-reaching effects in the realm of science, were neither more nor less than such a *hermaion*, which some benevolent spirit had bestowed upon at a fortunate moment' (7/8).

This remarkable text, whose concluding sentence is clearly intended as a rhetorical question concerning such unexpected and fortunate discoveries, is already beginning to efface the strict distinction that Kant had drawn between the *methodical* approach of science and the *poetical* process of invention. Schelling here places the scientific investigator of nature alongside the artist and explicitly recognises the privileged operation of genius at work in the connective and synthetic efforts and accomplishments of the human understanding in general, something that cannot itself be explained in a purely explicit and reflective manner. Schelling thus combines the epistemologically crucial synthesising capacity emphasised in the Kantian theory of knowledge with a creative aesthetic capacity that points beyond the Kantian position, thus suggesting a new source of intellectual and spiritual productivity. Fichte would soon develop Kant's *intuitus originarius* into a new notion of intellectual intuition as the appropriate model for such productivity, a line of thought that Schelling himself was also later glad to follow. But we can already recognise in Schelling's early position, as yet untouched by Fichte's further influence, the source for that systematically fruitful early idealist conception of philosophy in which Kant's third Critique and Plato's vision of the gifts divinely bestowed upon poets and singers enter into a mutually illuminating relationship with one another.

<sup>36</sup> The remark in question is to be found in Rousseau's article on 'Génie' in the *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris 1767).



## V. Schelling's Commentary on the *Timaeus*

In the following discussion, I should like to examine another document from the hand of the young Schelling, one that can be regarded as the 'preliminary step' towards the published and generally well-known philosophy of nature that found its first programmatic expression in his *Ideas towards a Philosophy of Nature* of 1797. It was always previously assumed that Fichte's identification of the theoretical and practical aspects of reason through the posited principle of original self-activity directly suggested the project of a philosophy of nature on comparable principles as the next stage of development. And Schelling has rightly been credited with following through this project in a deliberate and consistent fashion. It was thanks to this original achievement in substantially extending the idealist position to incorporate the philosophy of nature<sup>37</sup> that an academic career in Jena, through Goethe's intervention, was first effectively opened up to Schelling.

Now, there is another manuscript, subsequently given the title of *Commentary on the Timaeus*, that also gives evidence of Schelling's early independent philosophical thinking. The text provides a cursory commentary upon certain passages from Plato's *Timaeus* in the interest of securing the principal aims and intentions of the new idealism. Schelling is particularly concerned with the passage in which Timaeus speaks about the beginning of the world and the constitution of the 'elements' (*Timaeus* 53c). Schelling makes use of this ancient document expressing a conception of the world compatible with his doctrine of *Ideas* quite explicitly in the name of the new idealism and without the slightest concerns about anachronistic interpretation. He allows no philological doubts to obstruct his access to the text. This manuscript, which in contrast to the one we discussed earlier, was published some time ago, has also enriched the scholarly labours, already bordering upon the forensic, that have been so painstakingly dedicated to clarifying the origins of idealism over the last few decades.<sup>38</sup> Schelling's *Commentary on the Timaeus* itself predates the *System Programme* and its explicit call for a philosophy

<sup>37</sup> For more on the specific local and general historical background here, cf. M. Durner, 'Die Naturphilosophie im 18. Jahrhundert und der naturwissenschaftliche Unterricht in Tübingen. Zu den Quellen von Schellings Naturphilosophie' (Arch. Gen. Phil. 73, 1991, especially p. 88 ff.).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. the seminal work by D. Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewusstsein* (Stuttgart 1992), which represents a major synthesis of his numerous earlier studies in this field, and essentially interprets the development of German idealist philosophy in terms of a conception originally formulated, though never fully elaborated, by Hölderlin.

of nature based on Ideas, as cited and discussed earlier. The manuscript reveals that Schelling, about two years after composition of the text documenting his early reception of the *Ion*, was already pursuing the idea of a philosophy of nature *independently* of his intellectual engagement with Fichte.

It was K.J. Windischmann who first published a German translation of the *Timaeus* as an 'authentic original document of true physics' in 1804. He dedicated the work to 'Prof. Schelling, the rediscover of the true and most ancient physics' in the 'firm conviction of the harmonious agreement between two great men': the 'magnificent original document of physics, which the world spirit has preserved in Plato's *Timaeus* for the benefit of all posterity' can only adequately be comprehended and appreciated by contemporary philosophers of nature. The philologist A. Boeckh commented that Windischmann's 'empty and confused phantasies' had merely 'performed an unwelcome service for the world spirit'.<sup>39</sup> Schelling himself responded to Windischmann's dedication of the translation in a letter of thanks of 1 February 1804 as follows: 'I am most delighted to read the *Timaeus* in German given that I have read it so often before in the Greek. But what would you say if I were to tell you that the *Timaeus* is not actually a work of Plato's at all. It loses nothing of its true value if it fails to bear this name, but this insight itself provides us with an entirely new perspective of judgement and a new document for our understanding of the difference between the ancient and modern worlds. Despite the fact that Aristotle and other writers cite the *Timaeus* as a genuine Platonic work, I would even be prepared to regard it as a very late Christian work that was intended to make good the loss of the genuine original work, if it did not indeed cause that loss'.<sup>40</sup>

Just why the sedulous Schleiermacher, so careful in his ordering of the dialogues, so ready to preface each translation with its own specific introduction, should have chosen to omit the *Timaeus* when he came

<sup>39</sup> *Über die Bildung der Weltseele im Timaeus des Platon*, in Boeckh, *Gesammelte Kleine Schriften*, III (Leipzig 1866), p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> In H. Fuhrmans (ed.), *Schelling, Briefe und Dokumente* III (Bonn 1962). For other similar expressions of caution regarding the question of authenticity, cf. Schelling, *Philosophie und Religion* (1804), SW VI, p. 36, and *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), SW VII, p. 374; but cf. *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, SW XIII, p. 100, where Schelling assumes the authenticity of the dialogue and appeals to Schleiermacher in this connection. C.G. Bardili, as mentioned earlier, had wondered (in his *Epochen der vorzüglichsten philosophischen Begriffe*, I, Halle 1788, p. 193) whether the entire dialogue was itself based upon an 'original text' by Timaeus of Locri 'to which Plato had merely added his own elucidations, thoughts and remarks'.

to produce his German version of Plato's writings is difficult to say. There is repeated mention of this dialogue in his correspondence with Schlegel. As late as 5 May 1804, Schlegel reports from Paris in a letter to Schleiermacher that he himself will be offering a translation of the *Timaeus* in one or perhaps two years time.<sup>41</sup> As is well-known, all of these work plans eventually came to nothing, and Schleiermacher was reluctantly compelled to take over the remaining burden of work on his own. In the event, his translations of Plato do not include *The Laws* or the *Timaeus*, although Schleiermacher's general introduction refers repeatedly to both dialogues. It was presumably simply the lack of time that accounts for this omission.

## VI. Kant and the Demiurge

Let us now consider Schelling's commentary, written at a time when he still took the *Timaeus* to be an authentic Platonic text. The principal interest that guides Schelling's selective reading of this dialogue, that presents Plato's 'philosophy of nature' in the form of a learned myth, is directed towards the central notion of the 'Demiurge' and the 'presuppositions' of its creative activity in shaping the world. Schelling interprets Plato's remarks as an attempt to explain the unity of the intelligible world, and one that, for all the immediacy of its initial character, nevertheless corresponds to Kant's project of transcendental philosophy.<sup>42</sup> Thus the Ideas, 'which Plato understands to

<sup>41</sup> *Aus Schleiermachers Leben in Briefen*, III, ed. W. Dilthey (Berlin 1861), p. 342. Cf. also the relevant notes on Plato, which are thought to date from before 1803, and have now been published in the new critical edition of Schleiermacher's works (I 3, Berlin 1988, p. 359 [No. 56] and p. 373 [No. 118]).

<sup>42</sup> This text of Schelling's, which the Munich editors date to 1794, is found in a notebook under the heading: '7) Concerning the spirit of the Platonic philosophy'. For further details, cf. the editorial report provided by H. Buchner: 'Timaeus' (1794), in *Schellingiana* IV, ed. W.E. Ehrhardt (Stuttgart 1994). This edition was produced in the context of the new critical edition of Schelling's works. The manuscript in question, with certain interruptions, numerous insertions, and some marginal emendations and elucidations, discusses parts of Plato's *Timaeus* found between 27d 5 and 53e 1, together with some excerpts from the *Philebus*. Instead of the Stephanus numbering with which we are familiar today, Schelling refers to the text as laid out in the Zweibrücken edition (Bip. IX, p. 301 f.). This edition provides the dialogue with the subtitle *ē peri phuseōs* and adds: 'cum Marsilii Ficini interpretatione'. This refers to the Latin translation, which appears in parallel at the bottom of the page throughout. The subtitle is further explicated as: 'sive de natura vel de universitate'. On a few occasions, Schelling refers explicitly to Ficino's translation. This text is also to be found in the archives of the former East Berlin Academy of Sciences (NL 34). The remarkably difficult circumstances in which

include all the pure concepts belonging to the faculty of representation' (20, note), are directly contrasted with the realm of sensuous intuition. The Platonic distinction between being and becoming<sup>43</sup>, which possesses an essentially ontological status, is here interpreted with reference to the world-producing creative God as a direct parallel to Kantian epistemological distinction between the *a priori* forms of the understanding and the sensuous reception of the empirical manifold (the *noēsis meta logou* over against the *doxa met'aisthēseōs alogou*). According to Plato, the ontology of the unalterably self-same in contrast to the changeable character of that which comes to be and passes away provides the appropriate point of orientation for creative activity of the Demiurge. Schelling takes over this idea by interpreting this creative agency in terms of the critical conception of subjectivity.<sup>44</sup>

'For here it is already presupposed, as it were, that the Demiurge should have had a certain ideal before its eyes and in accordance with which it undertook to produce the world. If this ideal was indeed an eternal and ungenerated one, that is, a pure ideal entirely independent of everything sensible, then the creative product that the Demiurge formed in accordance with the former would inevitably itself be perfect, for all perfection is nothing but the harmonious agreement with ideals. If, on the other hand, the world was copied from a sensible image, then it would inevitably become something imperfect and irregular for irregularity is the very character of everything sensible' (20 R). The productive relationship between paradigm and copy is translated here into a transcendental perspective upon the conditions of possibility of experience. [Plato] could not possibly have regarded the form of the world, its regularity and its law-governed character, as a form simply inherent in matter itself or as one that could itself be produced by

I tried to get access to the text in the early 1980s not merely provides the stuff of anecdote with regard to conditions at the time, but also provides an exemplary illustration, in miniature, of a certain chapter of modern German history. One can only be grateful that such things now belong to the past.

<sup>43</sup> *Timaeus* 27d 6 ff.

<sup>44</sup> For the new Munich edition of Schelling's works, H. Krings has provided a detailed interpretation of the manuscript under the programmatic title of 'Genesis and Matter', which the author has kindly made available to me in advance of publication. Krings goes so far as to interpret Schelling's 'Kantian' inspiration as already essentially Platonising in character: 'On closer examination we can see that Schelling guides the critical-transcendental approach of Kant more strongly into the current of Platonic thought than the other way around' (p. 7).