3. No one will be surprised to learn that the δυάς expresses itself everywhere in all cultures as female and male. No one except perhaps anyone who lives in our own culture, where some of our institutions collapse into rampant paranoia at the very mention of the female. In his philosophy of nature, Schelling notes that even when reproduction appears to be sexless in evolutionary history, it is the female sex that prevails. In the evolutions of nature, masculinity is an afterthought. And if nature has any relation at all to deity, for example to what is called “Creation,” the same must be true of deity. In note 112 to his Deities of Samothrace , Schelling refers to “the fundamental opposition of masculine and feminine,” remarking that “all philosophy is led to such an underlying duality.” The duality is expressed not hermaphroditically as a blending, however, but as an enduring twofold, and, to repeat, not simply in nature and in human history but also in the development of deity. If deity is alive, it develops as a δυάς, or it is from the start undone. Not only is this developmental polytheism essential, however, but in every mythology that we know of, and Schelling studies the myths and religions of Persia, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Arabia, India, and China, to mention only a few, the female figures, as in nature, turn out to be the essential ones. Essential in what way? Whenever there is a further unfolding ( Entwicklung ) of deity, that is, whenever a higher stage or potency is reached in the development of the godhead, says Schelling, that progress is made, each time and in every culture, when a female deity overcomes the sclerotic male deity and replaces the Old Father with a daughter or a queen-like figure who has a male consort. In his completely astonishing lectures on the Philosophy of Mythology , delivered in 1842, Schelling shows that the higher potency in deity, when it comes to both infolding and unfolding, is invariably feminine: not Ouranos but Ourania, not Kronos but Rhea, not Ormuzd and Ahriman but either Mylitta or Zeruane Akharene, not Mithras but Mitra, not Allah but Alitta, the woman in childbirth — the feminine enacts the progress of deity in every case. But, surely, we might object, this ends with the Jewish and Christian traditions? Not so. Neither Yahweh nor Elohim nor Lord Zabaoth is Schelling’s focus in these lectures but Melakaeth Haschamaim, “the Queen of Heaven.” And Christ? and the Father of Christ, called by so many, ex cathedra , God? Schelling cites the Church Father Clement of Alexandria, who argues that precisely in Christ God “the Father” becomes a woman. Schelling formulates this as θηλύνεσθαι τῷ θεῷ , “the becoming woman [ das Weiblichwerden ] in God.” Clement himself writes, καὶ δι᾽ ἀγάπην ἡμῖν ἐθελύνθη , “and through love the Father became female.”

Two asides, if you will allow. First, Heidegger says that the poet Georg Trakl cannot be a Christian, because in his final hours he calls on not Christ but his own sister, presumably Gretl Trakl, for aid and comfort. Derrida astonishes his students in Paris in 1984–85 by arguing at some length, and quite convincingly, that Trakl’s sister Gretl and Christ are indistinguishable — or at least that they are somehow interlaced in a very fluid identity. Christ is the sister — or, if that may be overstating the matter, one may assert that to call upon one’s sister rather than God or Christ is not equivalent to rejecting Christianity. It is as though Christ and the sister form a δυάς. Second, one of the most endearing moments in the history of Church dogma, not famous for its endearing moments, involves a seventeenth-century Jesuit theologian, Denis Pétau (Dionysius Petavius), who in his work on the Trinity, which cites the authority of Augustine himself, concedes that, while God is immaterial and hence has no bodily form or function, he must have a womb, so that he may bring to term his only begotten Son. Obviously, since God is incorporeal, he can have no reproductive organs of any kind; yet Psalm 109 says that the birth of the Son is a true birth ex utero , so that the Father, at least in Petavius’s reading, willy-nilly gets a womb.

Some might wonder whether Mary was necessary at all for the birth of the Son, but of course it is precisely she who is most necessary, and right from the start, and that means the Mary within deity, the Mary who eternally complicates the Trinity. Recall the ancient Greek story that when Semele died and the incomplete gestation of Dionysos was endangered, Zeus inserted the infant into his “thigh” so that the twice-born god could develop to term. Even the little boys in Greece sensed that this “thigh” of Zeus was a euphemism for something far more intriguing. Petavius was more candid about God the Father than earlier theologians had been, and one wishes that his account of the Trinity had gotten a wider circulation and a friendlier reception than it did. Two thousand years and not a single new . . . goddess? But back to business.

4. Yet why should the dual gender of deity — or even deity’s dynamic and therefore uncertain gender, which is forever n + 1, cause Schelling discomfort? Why should Schelling be alarmed by what Derrida in that same lecture course calls the “universal homosexuality” of Christ the sister? or by what in an earlier interview Derrida calls the multiple “choreographies” of sexes and genders in general? Nothing interests Schelling more than the widespread cross-dressing of priests in many cultures and the acknowledged femininity of both Herakles and Achilles in Greek culture. If there is cause for discomfiture, then perhaps for two reasons. First, why and how has our entire tradition by and large obscured the vital role of the female and the feminine in the development of deity, when every culture that we know affirms it? Is this obfuscation the price that monotheism has had to pay? Or is this attempted yet failed obfuscation — since the repressed always returns — the declaration of bankruptcy of what Nietzsche will soon deride as Mono-tono-theismus , monotonous theism? Second, once the bankruptcy of our monotheism has been declared, and once the full force of the feminine has been felt and thought through, does this not somehow rattle the entire structure of an “otherworldly” religion and every philosophy of transcendence? Are we not very close to conceding that deity is a projection of a confusingly gendered humankind — Feuerbach and Nietzsche are waiting just around the corner — and that the projected deity, like the rest of mortality, is destined to die? In other words, is there something about polytheism that dashes the hope in deathlessness? Is there something about the goddess that introduces us to our mortality? For even though the initiates in the ancient cults felt compelled to observe the rites of their gods, says Schelling, they were aware of the ambiguity of the rites and the transience of the deities themselves; the feeling that these revered gods and goddesses were finite was a crucial part of the service to them. That is the very meaning of tragedy , the trait of mournfulness and even despondency in the ancient mysteries. Roberto Calasso notes that, for those who are not initiated in the ancient mystery cults, those cults seem to be about the immortality of the human soul and the deity; for those who are initiated, however, the cults are about the realization that the gods themselves get entangled in death, to which they are invariably drawn. Indeed, when the gods appear, says Hölderlin, they announce themselves in and as figures of death. Theophany always advenes “ in der Gestalt des Todes .”

5. Yet Schelling has something else to be ill-at-ease about, something having to do with the traces of history that his philosophical work, especially his work on “The Past,” requires him to find and to follow. He failed three times to formulate that first volume of his grand project, so that not only “The Past” but also “The Present” and “The Future” never saw the light of day. Why this initial failure, with regard to “The Past”? Are there not archives and libraries full of traces of the past? Is not time like a film strip or an audio tape that we can spool back and replay? If I ask readers to make present to themselves the persons who raised them, can they not do so? If I ask them to make present to themselves the taste of Dijon mustard, which in the past they have presumably enjoyed, are not the mouth, nose, and eyes already watering? Edmund Husserl believed that a chain of “retentions” connects us to our entire past, so much so that we may consider the past a mere segment of “the living present.” But what for Husserl was the solution to a problem, the problem of long-term memory, was for Schelling a nightmare: he did not want to write about the present, not even the living present, at least not until volume two. There is an “elevated past,” as he calls it, that absolutely resists our access to it. The past is gone, utterly bygone; it is vorbei , it is vergangen . Yet the problem is whether on its way it passed us by? Were we there at all when it passed? Or was it always and from the start remote from us? At one point Schelling even says that no stories have come down to us from that remote past, from that unprethinkable time before time began. It is no accident that both Hegel and Heidegger dislike the word Vergangenheit . They prefer the word Gewesenheit , which expresses what has been , to wit, the present perfect , which expresses the continuing impact that the past presumably has on the “present,” as though the past were indeed a part of that “living present.” But Schelling wants access to the bygone, remote, “elevated” past, not the perfections of the present. He is made ill-at-ease by something that recent philosophers in France — Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida — have analyzed as the “trace structure.” A complicated story, one that I have been evading from the beginning. Let us merely remember that this structure requires our confronting what the three thinkers mentioned call le passé absolu , which designates a past that has never been present. Schelling, I believe, is aware of something like that: a past so remote, so elevated in its distance, so far beyond the rings of Saturn, that it never was or ever could have been present. He rejects all three of his versions of “The Past” because he feels he has not gained access to the elevated past.

Even so, however, from that point on, from 1815 up to the end of his life, he goes in search of traces, traces in the form of the oldest stories — his word is Erzählungen , “narratives,” “tales,” “recountings.” He eschews dialectic for the most part and goes in search of myths and stories — in the history of hermeneutics, I believe, a decisive move. True, when he is most ill-at-ease with his “system” he collapses back into dialectic and formula, as though conceptual manipulations will save him and his system. Schelling can dazzle us with dialectic and algorithm as adroitly as the next academic philosopher. But he senses that he is merely stumbling. He complains at one point in The Ages of the World about the abstrusities that plague our stories about the past. Why cannot history become a science, and why cannot science become clear and straightforward? In his very first sketch toward The Ages he tells us what he is dreaming of:

Science would thus be the content of our first part [on the past]; its form would have to be narrative [ erzählend ], because it has the past as its object. The first part, namely, a science of the preworldly time, would speak to everyone who philosophizes, that is, everyone who strives to cognize the provenance and the first causes of things; but why is that which we know not narrated with the candor and simplicity with which everything else we know is narrated; what holds back the Golden Age, when science will be story [or history: Geschichte ] and the fable will be truth?

It will not be long before Nietzsche reflects on why and how the “true world” finally became a fable, but that is not the fable for which Schelling is searching. Yet there are reasons for supposing that Schelling is disquieted about the precarious relation of truth and fable in philosophy.

Precisely at that point, however, Schelling picks up some traces from fabled Samothrace, scanty traces, traces so friable they are like that pile of ashes Derrida used to talk about, ashes that any wind can blow to oblivion. There are many mentions of the Samothracian mysteries in the ancient literature, but almost all the writers who tell us something about the cult say that they themselves are initiates and that therefore they dare not speak or write about them. Only one writer tells us the names of the Great Gods who were honored on the island, and that writer is Mnaseas of Patara — a name that not even specialists in Greek literature and culture generally recognize. How can you construct a candid narrative about this moment of the elevated past that is so obscure and even sealed in secrecy? Yet Schelling does try to construct a narrative. We know this because Goethe, an admirer of the young Wunderkind , created a spoof of Schelling’s dream of Samothrace. Let me start with the spoof, because it is so famous and so funny. And, as always, when Goethe seems to be kidding around, he is invariably getting to the heart of the matter. Goethe is a monster.

6. Goethe’s narrative about Samothrace — scholars say he continued to work on it up to the time of his death — comes at the end of scene 2 of the Klassische Walpurgisnacht of Faust II . The setting: a rocky cove of the Aegean Sea. Enter a throng of mythical figures — Naiads and Dryads, Sirens and Tritons, sea-horses and sea-dragons, led by the mythical Proteus and the historical philosopher Thales, who murmurs something about “water” being “full of gods.” The dramatic problem is this: the spirit or seed of humankind, Homunculus, hovers in a glass retort fresh from Wagner’s laboratory, but this seed of humankind is immaterial spirit, and, shades of Petavius, it wants a body. Note that the problem is not how to spiritualize humanity, even if that has been the goal for two thousand years of ascetic metaphysics and morals, two millennia without a new god or goddess. The problem is how to materialize spirit. Goethe knows as well as Schelling does that this is the fateful and even fatal problem for Western humankind and its exhausted God. Old Thales too understands the problem, at least in Goethe’s version of him. Thales says of Homunculus:

He needs advice on how to come to be.

He has, as he relates, most wondrously

Come into the world quite skimpily.

He possesses all the spiritual properties,

But is bereft of material capacities.

Till now the glass alone lends him weight,

And he’d be delighted to incarnate.

[Es fragt um Rat, und möchte gern entstehn.

Er ist, wie ich von ihm vernommen,

Gar wundersam nur halb zur Welt gekommen.

Ihm fehlt es nicht an geistigen Eigenschaften,

Doch gar zu sehr am greiflich Tüchtighaften.

Bis jetzt gibt ihm das Glas allein Gewicht,

Doch wäre er gern zunächst verkörperlicht.]