Max Müller: ' – we feel that we are – in the presence
of men who, if they lived with us --- would
be looked upon as giants [299] --- [We must]
guard against their memory being insulted'-
[304].

Müller: Lectures on the Science of
Language: 1864

A.A. Macdonell, the professor of Sanskrit at Oxford at the
beginning of this century said of Max Müller (Dictionary of
National Biography: XXII Supplement: 1909) that his name was as
famous as that of any other scholar of the nineteenth century.
Well he might, for Müller who died in 1900, besides his contribution
to Oriental scholarship, had pioneered in this country the
sciences of language and religion and had created the study of
comparative mythology. L.R. Farnell, a classicist and Rector of
Exeter College, on the other hand, was able to say in 1934 (An
Oxonian Looks Back) that 'Andrew Lang's Ballads on Blue China
may preserve his name.' Lang, of course, was Müller's most active
anthropological adversary, but besides that one may fairly presume
that the Ballads are even less frequently read than his other works.

Nothing of any depth or insight has really been written of
Müller. Pater Schmidt, a most learned man, gives a simply
erroneous account of his work (see The Origin and Growth of
Religion 1931) and Evans-Pritchard's Theories of Primitive
Religion (1965) whilst suggesting that Müller's work has been
unjustly decried (p.21) nevertheless is generally condemnatory.
In fact we have had to wait for the publication of Social
Anthropology and Language (ASA 10 ed. Ardener (1971); see remarks
by Ardener in the introduction and the paper by Henson) for even
a hint that Müller might be of value to us. Müller's works do not
form part of a standard anthropological education, and of course
he is not generally regarded as one of our founding fathers.
Indeed, for much of his career he was engaged in dispute with those
whom we conventionally take to be our disciplinary ancestors, and
were it not for Evans-Pritchard's scholarship we might not even
suspect that he existed. But in the present reflective and unsure
state of anthropology, there is much in his badly neglected works
that can be read with profit. More than that, and without wishing
to disparage the work of the Victorian anthropologists, I should
like to suggest that in certain respects he outranks them all.

This remark rests partly upon my own attitude to the present
state of our subject, and reflects also a vision of how it ought to
develop. My initial task, then, is to elucidate this view by
discussing the very general context of my thesis ! To Evans-
Pritchard, in large part, we are indebted for our consciousness
of a long line of distinguished scholars from whom we might claim
to be descended. The outlines of this lineage are well known -
thinkers of the Scottish enlightenment; in France, the
Encyclopaedists, Comte, Fustel de Coulanges, the Année school.
Others have continued this work and we can now add to our past
Van Gennep, and, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Needham, the
brilliant Hocart. Some have not shown any enthusiasm for this
type of reinstatement - Gluckman, as is well known, finds van
Gennep boring - but the scholars among us can well appreciate
the achievements of our forebears.

But I should like to suggest that, despite the work that has already been done, our past is still incomplete, and has in a sense only recently become so. Our interests are becoming linguistic and philosophical and it is now relevant to graft on to our conventional lineage a sub-branch of philosophers, philologists and linguists. Should all this seem decidedly unscientific and remind you of the way in which the Tiv manipulate their genealogies, I should say that the great Jacob Burckhardt defined history as what one generation finds of interest in another. And, if amending genealogies to fit present circumstances seems unhistorical, we have the testimony of Benedetto Croce that in a sense all history is contemporary history. History is not in any simplistic sense simply 'the past', and so I do not feel that I am departing too far from the normal methods of western historical science when I construct a past that has not previously existed. (These remarks, of course, have important implications for those who would contend that there is an absolute distinction between myth and history.)

Who appears in this new sub-lineage ? In order to make Müller chronologically central I shall start it in 1770 and end it in 1970. We may begin with Sir William Jones and Colebrooke, two Sanskritists of enormous learning who wrote much of general anthropological interest. A philosopher also appears at the beginning: Immanuel Kant. Now he appears not because he wrote a book on anthropology in 1787 or because he lectured on the subject at Königsberg, though both these are true. Rather, it is his 'Copernican revolution' as he styled it in his preface to the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, which entitles him to our consideration. The philosophical revolution was the opposite to that which took place in astronomy, for Kant placed man in the centre of the universe, so to speak, and for that reason his Critique is a profound anthropological treatise - possibly the most important that we possess. And yet it forms no part of our training. What Kant did was to examine critically the powers of the human mind itself, to assess what the mind itself, owing to its own nature, contributes to our knowledge. We may now speak of fundamental structures of the human mind (the Kantian flavour of Mythologiques is well-known) but Kants's investigation into our synthetic a priori knowledge was an enterprise in the same spirit.

Nearer to the present day this lineage contains such linguists - some of them already accorded a recognition in our past - as de Saussure, the Prague structuralists and Chomsky. But I suggest that anthropology will be similarly fertilised, perhaps more so when it realises the brilliance and anthropological nature of the thought of Wittgenstein and those he has, though in different ways, influenced. I am thinking of Waismann, Strawson and Hampshire in particular. If anthropology were only to recognise the direct relevance of the sensitive type of conceptual inquiry in which these men are experts, anthropology could become a real academic discipline instead of merely a social science. We could also honour our Emeritus Professor who so long ago claimed that our real attachments were with history and philosophy.

But I have begun and ended with Kant and Wittgenstein for a very special reason, for, between them these two men represent firstly, Müller's main intellectual problem, and secondly a major aspect of its solution. I can speak in such general terms

because one senses in all that Müller wrote a strong unity of
purpose and assumption. (Coherence is another matter. Müller's
books are long and rambling and less than consistent, but
generalisation is still possible). Let me return to Kant. It
was in 1881 on the centenary of its first appearance that Müller
published his English translation of the Kritik der Reinen
Vernunft. In the translators preface to this work he says that
the Veda [2] was the first arch of the bridge of thoughts that
spans the whole history of the Aryan mind and that Kant's
critique represents the perfect manhood of that Aryan mind.
'Having once learnt from Kant what man can and what he cannot
know, my plan of life was very simple, namely to learn, so far
as literature, tradition and language allow us to do so, how
man came to believe that he could know so much more than he
ever can know in religion, in mythology and in philosophy'.
The problem, and so what remained to be done after Kant, would
require a 'Critique of Language'.

This brings me to Wittgenstein. Now I should like to make
it perfectly clear here that I intend in no way to suggest that
Müller is the historical source of Wittgenstein's notion
regarding language and philosophy[3]. Anyone with the slightest
acquaintance with the history of philosophy will know that many
have discoursed on the relation between language and thought and
the place of language in philosophy. Even the Greeks, so little
conscious of language as compared with ancient India, produced
men who berated the evil influence of language on thought. To
show the resemblance of Müller's thought to that of Wittgenstein
I shall quote several passages from his book The Science of
Thought (1887). He there quotes Hamann – a friend of Kant's –
as saying, 'Language is not only the foundation of the whole
faculty of thinking, but the central point also from which
proceeds the misunderstanding of reason by herself'. Earlier,
in the preface to his 1861 Lectures on the Science of Language
at the Royal Institution, he wrote that it was his aim to attract
the attention of 'the philosopher, the historian, and the
theologian, to a science which concerns them all, and which
though it professes to treat words only, teaches us that there is
more in words than is dreamt of in our own philosophy'. And he
goes on to quote Bacon: 'Men believe that their reason is lord
over their words, but it happens too that words exercise a
reciprocal and reactionary power over our intellect. Words
shoot back upon the understanding of the wisest, and mightily
entangle and pervert the judgment.' This is the background to
Müller's own phrase 'disease of language'.

In his preface to the Science of Thought, Müller states that
it is written for a few friends who share his interests and that
it will not be popular. 'There is a fullness of time for
philosophical as there is for political and social questions'. Now
the theme of the book is this, that the interdependence of
thought and language places philosophy on a new basis (514), an
obvious basis but perhaps for that very reason overlooked, namely
an investigation of language itself. The history of philosophy is
a battle against mythology, he claims (217) and philosophical
problems must be solved by a study of language. Thought lives in
language and 'philosophy must learn to deal with language as
history deals with events'. (550). True philosophy, then, consists
of its examination and correction. (573). It seems to me that this
is nothing if not a clear enunciation of the 'bewitchment and

therapy' view of philosophy[4]. In 1888 Müller had said (Natural
Religion) that the dictum 'we think in words' must become the
chapter of all exact philosophy in future. But he reflected in
his 1878 paper 'On the Origin of Reason': 'What should we say if
biologists were to attempt to discover the nature and laws of
organic life without ever looking at a living body. And when
are we to find the living body of thought if not in language?
(467). But he goes on to remark gloomily that 'whenever the
philologist represents the whole history of philosophy as in truth
an uninterrupted struggle between language and thought and
maintains that all philosophy must in the end become a philosophy
of language, he is apt to be taken as an enthusiast'. I would
refer you here to a short article of Müller's in the very first
volume of _Mind_ (1876) where he points out some weaknesses in
Mill's writings on thought. (348) and suggests they would have
been avoided had he only taken care to look more thoroughly
into how his language was constructed and worked. He refers
there to the 'secret cunning of languages' and comments (349):
'Language, as I have often said, always revenges herself when-
ever we do violence to her or whenever we forget her antecedents'.[5]
In short, then, Müller's way to solve the problem that Kant left
is this. We think we know more than we can because we forget how
our language is built and so we use words in ways for which they
were not originally intended. This is the general background to
Muller's system of mythology, and the fact that none of the
commentators on his work have fully sensed that this area is but
a part of a larger scheme explains, in part, why his writings on
myth have been so sadly misunderstood.

    I ought to say something of Müller's central assumption that
thought and language are inseparable or identical. I am not
unaware of the problems this involves. If we take the statement
in a philosophical sense we become bemused immediately. What
does it mean; does it make any sense at all to ask _in general_
what the relation between language and thought is ? I cannot
address myself to this general issue here – Wittgenstein himself
advocates silence when one cannot speak clearly. But I should
like to suggest that whatever the validity of the assertion, it
is a stance that has very valuable consequences. Before briefly
indicating what I mean with a few examples, I must defend Müller
against one obvious objection. Possessed as we are now of a
semiological consciousness, we would immediately spot that his
equation is wrong. That he over-stresses language as against
other modes of symbolic thought I do not deny – as a philologist
one would hardly expect anything else. But we must see how Müller
uses the word language, and thought also, for it is clear that
his identity of thought and language is really the interdependence
of human reason (that is conceptual thought, _begriffe_ not
vorstellung) and any system of symbolic signs. (Saussure, of course,
points also to this dependence of definite ideas upon signs).
Language is the best, says Müller, but there are other types of
signs which may be substituted for the verbal, and he therefore
includes under the term language any system of signs which
embodies conceptual thought. As he says in his 1870 lectures on
the _Science of Religion_ (1873:356): '-we do not exclude the less
perfect symbols of thought, such as gestures, signs or pictures.
They, too, are language in a certain sense and they must be
included in language before we are justified in saying that dis-
cursive thought can be realised in language only.' We have signs
and signs of signs. Thus, not only gestural language, ideographic

signs, but such systems as algebra standing in the place of
numbers. Language can abbreviate itself, he says, and so we have
signs which stand for whole trains of reasoning (ibid: 49). It is
clear that what Müller means is that human beings must think in
symbols. 'All I maintain is that thought cannot exist without
signs, and that our most important signs are words.' (ibid: 58).
This surely is not objectionable. What he means is made clear by
his discussion of a game of chess. Müller does not say that when
we play chess we need to talk to ourselves, but chess pieces are
names, they are signs. One can silently play chess without
consciously stating rules, but the pieces are concepts and the
game is a set of rules about how to move pieces. This is clear,
he says, in that we can talk about these rules in the eventuality
of someone making a mistake. If the pieces were not concepts there
would be no game, only chaos.[6]

I should add briefly here that Müller was a fierce opponent
of Darwin over the nature and origins of language, though he, like
many German scholars, was an evolutionist long before the Origin
of Species was published. Müller wanted to insist upon there being
a difference of kind between human language and animal communication
and his arguments would benefit the naiver type of ethologist that
exists today. Müller, quite rightly, says that human language is
more than a medium of communication, it is also a complex conceptual
structure. For this reason, the question of the origin of language
cannot be tackled in isolation, but must be viewed as part of a
larger problem (see 'Origin of Reason':1878). He says in his
lectures on Darwin's philosophy of language (Fraser's Magazine
1873: Vol VIII) that 'our concepts and our words are produced by
a faculty or by a mode of mental action which is not simply a
barrier between man and beast, but which creates a new world in
which we live.' In other words: 'We live in concepts.' (Three
lectures on the Science of thought: 1887). As a Kantian Müller
accepted that we must acknowledge that the world must accept our
terms of knowing. To this extent we do create our own symbolic
world. (I commented on this fact in my essay 'Anthropology and
the Philosophy of Science' (JASO Vol II No.I). Müller's remarks
in fact come close to the central ideas in Langer's Philosophy
in a New Key - an inspiring anthropological philosophy). Müller
said in 1861 that man possessed a specific capacity for forming
general ideas and using general names, and that this put him,
uniquely in a human world of symbols and concepts. (see Frazer's
Magazine, Vol. VIII: 11). 'Through reason we not only stand
above the brute creation, we belong to a different world.' (1861:
364). There is a point here of great import for the humane
sciences, namely that there are concepts necessary to and
specific to the description of human phenomena. When this is
realised and its methodological consequences fully grasped, the
social sciences will begin to be useful.

I should now like to talk briefly about some of the
consequences of his assumption that thought and language are
identical. Firstly, though I cannot here develop it, language
for Müller is a social institution and it follows that thought is
social too. I have time for one quotation only, which of course
raises its own problems. It is from the lectures on Darwin's
theory of language: 'Though the faculty of language may be
congenital, all languages are traditional. The words in which we
think are channels of thought which, we have not dug ourselves,
but which we find ready made for us.' (1873: 528). We must

remember the individualistic associational psychology which so
influenced the work of his contemporary anthropologists and to
which the French sociological school, including Lévy-Bruhl quite
legitimately took such strong exception. Secondly, consider this
remark from his preface to the Science of Thought (1887): '...
there is no such thing as intellect, understanding, mind and reason
...all these are only different aspects of language'. No one should
be upset,however, for - (and giving us a Wittgensteinian comfort) -
he says that these philosophical remarks leave the world exactly as
it was before; we simply have a more valid understanding of our-
selves. Now whatever we think of this particular assertion several
important facts follow from his view that language is the embodi-
ment of mind - and indeed in its historical aspect is the
autobiography of the human mind. Many philosophers had complained
that they had no reliable evidence with which to talk about mental
phenomena. With an incredible blindness they had overlooked the
fact that the evidence they needed was language itself. As Müller
says later in the same book (290-5) 'the true philosophy of the
human mind - is the philosophy of language'. It is well known that
psychology in our century has retreated to a nonsensical
experimentalism or unrealistic behaviourism even, afraid of the
'problem of other minds'. But language is surely the means of
access to, and the proof of, our knowledge of other minds (see
Müller: Chips IV 1875: 460). It is the most important medium in
which our intersubjective understanding lives. Müller said on so
many occasions that the investigation of language had a central role
in psychology and the fact that social psychology has still not
fully realized this fact will stand as one of the most absurd
methodological errors committed by any social science. Thirdly,
(and I must make this my last example) logic for Müller was a
general grammar. Now whilst his philological work was outdated
before his death, the fact that Müller's interest in language was
part of a larger problem means that he displayed that consciousness
of the relevance of linguistics to philosophy that Chomsky possesses.
Müller, in fact, considered (see Three Lectures on the Science of
Thought: 4) comparative philology as a means towards the investi-
gation of larger problems, as a severe apprenticeship to be served
before the wider questions of the science of language could be tackled.
He writes in 1885 ('The Lesson of Jupiter' in Chips IV 1895 ed:
380) that the widest comparisons in philology could show what was
essential to language as such, and therefore to thought. It would
be possible to construct a general grammar, not speculatively as
philosophers had done in the past, but empirically. Though I must
leave the issue here, I should just add that Müller was extremely
interested in universals, as indeed were many of the Victorian
ethnologists. But Müller, for reasons which I shall shortly discuss
was extremely conscious of the abuses of this type of wide comparison;
the method might lead us to think we had definite conclusions when
we had not understood any of our evidence. But, discussing the
ethno-psychological approach to mythology he says this: 'If that
motive turns out to be due to our common human nature, the
ethnological method assumes quite a new interest, and may in time
lead to very important results'. Such statements on direct
expressions of the human mind are not infrequent.

    I should now like to turn to another problem altogether - the
question of 'ethnological-isms'. which arises from Henson's essay
in ASA 10 ('Early British Anthropologists and Language'). There she
criticises quite justifiably the naive way in which native
categories such as tabu, totem etc. were used as technical terms
by C19 anthropologists. I shall add here as a similar error the
promiscuous utilization of such terms as fetishism and animism,

native terms - in a sense - from our own culture. Now we would
possibly be wrong to suggest that the anthropologists were
completely unaware of the problems involved, but beyond the
difficulties involved in any one of these terms is the simple fact
that their employment at all involves a very general error
concerning the way in which we should seek to understand meaning.
But Müller must be exempted from a general indictment, for it was
precisely over these terms that he was most censorious of his
contemporaries. He, a translator and philosopher showed in this
respect a sensitivity to conceptual problems which they lacked, and
which most anthropologists today even cannot match.

As an introduction to this particular section of my paper I
had better perhaps say something general on Müller's conflict with
the ethnologists. Müller was the representative of German scholar-
ship in England, but we should not exaggerate his hostility to the
new science. After all, it was he who in a review in the Times in
1865 first brought to the public attention the profound importance
of Tylor's Researches. We should also remember that he was
attending lectures on anthropology at Leipzig as a student in the
early 1840's a generation before the science existed in England.
And he was using savage evidence in mythology before most of the
ethnologists, but became disillusioned. He also attempted to
establish a journal called Ethnological Records of the Colonies, for
which no finance was forthcoming. However, he did send directives
through the Colonial Office to begin the collection of linguistic
and cultural data. We have been told that the value of field work
was only realised in this century, even that Malinowski invented the
new method. So let me refer you to a passage which Müller quotes
in an address of 1891. They were written by Codrington, himself a
Melanesian expert who was in the field for a vastly longer period
than the few years of Malinowski during the First War. 'When a
European has been living for two or three years among savages, he
is sure to be fully convinced that he knows all about them; when
he has been ten years or so amongst them, if he be an observant
man, he knows that he knows very little about them, and so begins
to learn'. (Let us remember also that Radcliffe-Brown one of the
founders of modern anthropology never did any real field-work. He
could not speak the language of the Andaman Islanders, and worked
through interpreters for the whole duration of his stay there.)
Codrington was just one of a group of real Victorian field-workers -
other names are Callaway, Bleck, Gill, Hahn - and it was almost
exclusively on their evidence that Müller relied. He refused to use
evidence from those who could not speak the relevant languages.

But whilst Müller was enthusiastic about anthropology in these
ways, he urged many cautions of method and assumption, which we
should now accept as absolutely sound. He of course shared many
assumptions with the ethnologists such as developmentalism, for
instance, but he could not tolerate nursery psychology, nor the
crude suggestion that savages were primitives. This later equation
was of course, fundamental for the anthropologists, for it
generated from a taxonomy the supposed historical time into which
progress and survivals could be fitted. But Müller's main
objection was a question of language. For him, as a philologist
aware of the difficulties involved in deciding the meaning of
Greek texts and acquainted with the problems of translating
Sanskrit manuscripts he could not accept the way in which
anthropologists drew such bold conclusions about societies whose
languages they did not understand at all. For him it was simply
obvious that if you knew nothing about a people's language then

you could know nothing about its culture. Anthropologists he
thought could learn some caution from scholars: 'what I have
ventured to say on several occasions is, let us wait till we know
a little more of Hottentots and Papuans, let us wait till we
know at least their language, for otherwise we may go hopelessly
wrong'. (Natural Religion: 216). Müller reflected in his 1891
presidential address to the anthropological section of the British
Association that anthropology 'has been raised to the dignity, but
also to the responsibility of a real science'.(5) He said that the
time would come when an accurate knowledge of language would be
regarded as a sine qua non of anthropological work, when the need
for a 'scholarly conscience' would become clear. He concludes the
address with these words: 'If anthropology is to maintain its
high position as a real science, it's alliance with linguistic
science cannot be too close'.

I shall start my discussion of Müller on 'ethnological-isms'
by exposing a lost chapter in the history of totemism. By this
I mean to indicate my annoyance that Lévi-Strauss nowhere make
any reference to Müller's precocious remarks. We remember that
Lévi-Strauss talks of a totemic hysteria, Müller talks of a
tolemistic epidemic - and he lived through much of it. In Natural
Religion, he says this: 'There seems to be a peculiar fascination
in strange names...in order to secure clearness of thought and
honesty of reasoning in the study of religion I am afraid these
terms (animism, fetishism, totemism) ought to be sent into exile.
They have become dangerous...' (159-60). In an appendix on
totemism in Anthropological Religion, he adds: 'All this is
thoroughly unscientific: to take a foreign word without accurately
defining it and then to add to it the magical termination of ism,
may save a great deal of trouble, but what is here called trouble,
is in reality accurate thought'. (409) Müller claims (Nat. Relg.
159; 522) that a totem is what it means to certain groups of Red
Indians. There it is a clan-mark, a visible symbolic sign, an
emblem such as primitive societies frequently used. And 'totem'
should not be promiscuously used or made a general term of
comparison. Indeed, even the word totem itself is wrong. Müller
claims, on the authority of Father Cuoq, a Canadian philologist,
that the proper word for family mark is ote (genitive otem)
(Biography of Words and the Home of the Aryas 1888: 249 n. 1). He
quotes Brinton commenting on 'the animate symbolism employed
with such marked preference by the red race to express abstract
ideas'. (Anthr. Relig: 407-8). All this was written in the early
1890's, and if it does not make totemism unreal, at least its
superiority to what contemporary anthropologists were saying is
absolutely clear. For Müller, totemism was a civil institution
among some Red Indian tribes by which groups in a village chose
emblems to distinguish themselves. The beliefs in the sacredness
of the animal, in descent and so on were secondary and grew up,
as he says, 'naturally'. The sign chosen 'became surrounded as the
colours of a regiment are even now, by a halo of many recollections'.
(Nat. Relig: 522). An uncanny parallel, for Lévi Strauss makes
exactly the same point referring to Linton's 'Rainbow' Division.
(Le Totemisme Anjourd'hui: 10). I will bring this little discussion
to a close by saying that Müller was not alone. Winternitz,
another orientalist was asked by him to compile the massive index
which forms Vol L of Sacred Books of the East. It was published
in 1910 after many years labour and in an introductory note
Winternitz remarks on the errors that had been made in constructing
theories on the origin and development of religion before adequate

materials were to hand (XIV).He goes on to say that in his index
such familiar terms as totemism, animism, tabu and fetishism are
all excluded because they refer to the theories not to the facts of
religion. Likewise the mythologist Robert Brown Jnr. who in
1898 wrote a book defending Müller against Lang's journalism says:
'the totemism of the 'untutored anthropologist' is necessarily
destined to an absolute collapse'. (Semitic Influence in Hellenic
Mythology: 203).

The superiority of the scholars over the anthropologists on
totemism is impressive, but I should not have given it such
prominence had it been an isolated incident. I have space here
only to outline Müller's attitude to one more ethnological-ism:
fetishism. As a stage, some said the first in the evolution of
religion, it rested on the testimony of Portuguese sailors who
came back from West Africa with stories of strange beliefs among
the negroes. Comte misunderstood de Brosses, he misunderstood the
sailors, and they never understood the negroes. Fetishism, says
Müller has 'become a panacea for all mythological troubles, and
the acme was reached when more recently a fetish - an African charm -
was defined as a totem (an American emblem) inhabited by an
ancestral spirit (an Indian concept)' (Contributions to the Science
of Mythology: 1897: 195). And for Müller anyway it was quite
obviously a 'grammatical' error to talk of anyone worshipping a
material object. The object must clearly symbolise something else.
Müller's astuteness, however, resided not solely in his caution over
these terms referring to what is conventionally called religion;
it extended to social organisation also. Witness the following on
caste (Six Systems of Indian Philosophy: 1899: 11-2). He says that
the word casta is a misleading term for understanding the social
conditions of ancient India because it was invented by Portuguese
sailors who used it to describe any social divisions that struck
their fancy; to ask therefore what casta means in India is like
asking what it means in England or what feitiço means in Portugal.
What we really want to know is what was implied by such Indian words
as Varna (colour) Gâti (kith) Kula (family), Pravara (lineage);
otherwise we shall have once more the same confusion about the
social organisation of ancient India as about African fetishism or
North American totemism . Each foreign word should always be kept
to its own native meaning, or, if generalised for scientific
purposes, it should be most carefully defined afresh. Otherwise
every social distinction will be called caste, every stick a
totem, every idol a fetish'. Or let me take another custom, the
couvade. Müller did not like folklore method, for it seemed to
him nonsense to attempt wide comparisons of beliefs or institutions
before any of the examples used was really understood - the
similarities, for instance, might be merely superficial. He says
 (1897: 226) 'a comparison of savage and civilised customs might
be useful', but, he maintains that 'we must possess a complete
insight into the one as well as into the other, before we can hope
that our comparisons may be of real scientific value'. Speaking
specifically of the couvade he says: (ibid:290) 'Unless the motive
is the same, the custom is not the same; unless the motive is
discovered the facts themselves are curious, but no more'. For
motive we should read meaning, and there is a great deal in this
perceptive remark on 'sameness' that I cannot go into here. This
quote will have to suffice. 'It may be said that anybody can
describe what he sees, even though unable to converse with the
people. I say, Decidedly no -' (1891 Address: 10). One of Müller's
chief reasons for disliking folklore was that it assumed to under-
stand you needed first to compare. Müller never denied that

comparison could be illuminating, but he did suggest it was absurd
to explain Vedic ceremonies from savage customs before attempting
to explain them from the veda itself (1897: 210): we need an
explanation from within not from without (ibid: 225) as was involved
in ethnological comparison. Müller disliked the way savages seemed
to perform for anthropological theorists and advises (ibid 292):
'If we wish to make the study of savage races really useful we must
try to free ourselves from all preconceived ideas and instead of
looking for idols or for totems or fetishes, learn to accept and
to understand what the savages themselves are able to tell us.'
Later (ibid: 451) he adds: 'I am bound to say, I know, as yet,
of few cases only where Tasmanians, Mincoupies, or Blackfeet have
proved half as useful to us as even Sayana's much abused
commentary'. Müller, in his publication of the Rig-Veda-Sanhita
included, not without the criticism of others, the vast 14th
century commentary of Sayana. Though I cannot present any of the
evidence here7 Müller and other Orientalists had rehearsed our
problem of the use of native models. Should one translate and not
consider the native exegesis, or should one slavishly follow the
native understanding ? Neither, says Müller, (Sacred Books of the
East: 1867 Prospectus) the native commentary is absolutely the
essential beginning to comprehension, but we should expect it to
contain errors, even a systematic bias, so that the scholar
should begin with the native understanding and construct a
translation based upon a critical interpretation of that.

Appendix V to _Anthropological Religion_ is called 'On the
Untrustworthiness of Anthropological evidence'. Müller disliked
'anecdotic' anthropology, which took fragments of evidence from
societies whose languages were unknown and from sources whose
reliability could not be assessed. As Müller said (1897: 205)
'I know what our dangers are nearer home -' He, a translator
and philosopher could not imitate the fearless anthropologist. Of
them he said - and he was right - (ibid: 193) 'They thought that
their task was much easier than it really is'. Now if a
philosopher - MacIntyre, Hampshire, the ghost of Wittgenstein,
were to charge us today in exactly these terms, it would be
equally true. We cannot simply dismiss it as a comment from
another discipline. We have, in short, as an academic subject
failed; we have not appreciated the extreme complexity of our task.
We have not yet truly grasped what is involved in doing
anthropology well. That 'neo-anthropology' will be demanding is
very clear from Ardener's Malinowski Lecture, but as we incom-
petently attempt to establish universals or simply try to
comprehend something particular, we should look back to see what
has already been achieved. The purpose of this paper was to suggest
that Müller belongs to a past which we did not know we possessed
and that these achievements and this history are 'good to think
with'.

Fortes was able in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge to
exclaim that we at last had a true science of anthropology. The
predecessors of Malinowski seemed merely to get in the way of this
achievement. I can only express my complete disagreement. Compared
to the significance of the problems with which our Victorian
predecessors grappled, I regard much of the work of British social
anthropologists in this century as trivial; it could have been
left to sociologists. And besides their own obvious theoretical
failings, I regard it as the greatest insult of those who have
dominated our discipline to have ignored their history, to have
pretended that they have done better by not continuing the concerns

with which their ancestors wrestled. But conventionally we are
descended from Frazer, and scholar though he was, he was the least
original of them all (see Leach: 1965). It is a nonsense to accord
him such a place of honour when there are others of Müller's
stature not accorded any recognition at all. Many of our important
notions within recent decades have come from outside the
discipline, and the suggestion here is that Müller belongs to a
'past' of which we ought to be more conscious. We have, in brief,
robbed ourselves of valuable insights by not thinking about this
lineage of men who were similarly outside our discipline, and who,
in Müller's case, would not have wished to have been called an
anthropologist. It is now many years since Jarvie's 'Back to
Frazer' slogan was voiced.[8] Apart from Frazer being the worst
possible choice, I shall conclude with this remark. This
historical essay looks forwards not back. One does not simply
want to give a man a place in our history. The 'return' is no
more real than that of de Saussure who, reflecting on the classical
grammarians claimed that linguistics 'retournera....mais dans un
esprit nouveau et avec d'autres procédés -' (119). One wishes
merely to suggest that in certain ways Müller's astuteness exceeds
that of many of our professors, that many of his views belong to
the very present of our discipline. If I have glanced back, it
should be clear that my mind has really been on our future, and the
immense problems with which we shall require much assistance in
creating an anthropology that deserves to exist.

                                            Malcolm Crick.

                              Notes

1.   This article is a shortened version of a paper read at a
     research class at the Institute of Social Anthropology,
     Oxford, during Hilary Term 1972. It represents the first-
     fruits of six months research on Max Müller. The essay is
     dedicated to Exeter College, Oxford, and her talented sons
     A.M. Hocart and E.E. Evans-Pritchard.
2.   On the production of the editio princeps of the Rig-Veda,
     Müller spent the first half of his academic life.
3.   Because his mode of composition, it is difficult to know
     exactly what Wittgenstein read, but it may be interesting to
     note that Wittgentein's phrase 'family likenesses' or
     'resemblances' is used frequently in Müller's work. It is
     used firstly, with regard to the organisation of various
     versions of manuscripts according to the distribution of
     errors, and secondly to refer to features shared by
     the members of a language family. Müller's use predates
     the appearance of the term in Galton's essay 'On Composite
     Portraits' in J.A.I. 1879.
4.   I am conscious of the fact that I have only given part of
     Wittgenstein - the intolerant, and sociologically less
     interesting aspect. On the other hand, this brief discussion
     represents only a part of Müller. He - and unlike his
     anthropological contemporaries - displays in his work on
     religious thought some of those 'charitable' aspects which
     characterize the later Wittgenstein and which do not appear
     in the literalist anthropologists.

5.   See also (1) 'My Predecessors' 1888: 492-3 where he speaks
     of utilitarian moral philosophy as 'jugglery'. He points
     out that 'good' like other words has a range of meanings.
     It has one sense in moral philosophy, but also can mean
     'effective'. This latter sense is not one with which
     ethics has any concern; utilitarianism is a simple
     confusion of these two senses. (2) Three Introductory
     Lectures on the Science of Thought 1887: 79-84 where
     he says that 'true philosophy is a constant katharsis
     of our words -'. He refers there to somersaults in the
     history of philosophy and calls materialism a 'grammatical
     blunder'.

6.   See the correspondence appendix to Three Lectures on the
     Science of Thought 1887 especially the last letter by
     Müller and his letters to Galton. Readers of de Saussure's
     Cours will know the great use to which he puts the chess
     analogy, and its appearance, and the discussion of signs
     in general by Müller may have a significance for the history
     of ideas. Saussure, like Müller was an Indo-European
     philologist and de Saussure refers to his 1861 lectures on
     language as brilliant, but goes on to add, rightly,
     'mais ce n'est pas par excès de conscience qu'il a péché
     (1949: 16). One should further say that Müller defines
     mythology (1897: 35) as the result of a pathological reaction
     of the 'sign' on the 'signified'. For Müller, as for de
     Saussure the 'signified' is a psychological reality. To
     these remarks one must add that the term 'sign' has a long
     history in philosophy. Locke in his Essay (called by F.
     Lange in his History of Materialism a 'critique of language')
     asserts that words are signs of concepts and not of things.
     Also, it must be said that components of Saussure's thought
     - language as an institution, for instance - would more
     likely have been derived from the writings of the Yale
     Sanskritist W.D. Whitney, whom de Saussure rated above
     Müller.
     See also William Thomson's book Outline of the Necessary
     Laws of thought (3rd ed. 1853) to which Müller appended his
     'Essay on Indian logic'. In this work, Thomson has a
     chapter on language, in which there is a discussion of
     different types of signs. He also suggests that verbal
     language is analytic - from which 'Whorfian' conclusions
     are drawn, whereas the signs in the language of art are
     'compositive' and have to be 'unfolded'.

7.   The evidence is mainly in; S.B.E. Prospectus; Müller's
     History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature (1859); prefaces
     to Vols III (1856) and IV (1862) of the Rig-Veda-Sanhita.
     Briefly, the issue revolves around Müller's inclusion of the
     native commentary in his editio princeps, and his critique
     of the principles adopted by H.H. Wilson in his translation
     of the Rig-Veda.

8.   See Jarvie: The Revolution in Anthropology (1964).
     Subsequent debate - see esp. Leach (1965) show that Jarvie
     knew very little about Frazer or Malinowski.

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