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0521836484 - *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin*

John Edward Toews

Excerpt

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*Philosophical Prologue: Historical Ontology
and Cultural Reformation: Schelling in
Berlin, 1841–1845*

“I feel the full significance of this moment, I know what responsibilities I have taken upon myself. How could I deceive myself or attempt to hide from you what is made evident simply by my appearance at this place.”¹ With these words, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling began his inaugural lecture for the course *Philosophy of Revelation* at the University of Berlin on November 15, 1841. Schelling’s conviction that his appearance in the Prussian capital as the spokesperson for philosophy and the “teacher of the age” was a moment of world historical significance was shared by many of his contemporaries. For months the major German newspapers had speculated about the cultural impact of Schelling’s move from a relatively peripheral position at the University of Munich to the influential academic center in Berlin, and about the public significance of his courtship by Prussian government leaders, including the recently installed king, Frederick William IV. In Berlin itself, excitement was high as Schelling stepped to the podium. The 290 official student places in his course had been immediately snapped up, and there was a rush on the 140 places reserved for auditors. Those denied entry by legitimate means became unruly and stormed both the office of the beadle responsible for entry cards and the lecture auditorium itself. One observer noted that the press of students around Schelling was so great when he began his lecture that many could read his notes over his shoulder.² Government ministers, military officers, and academic dignitaries filled the front rows of the packed hall. Reporting on this event for a Hamburg newspaper, the young Friedrich Engels asserted: “If you ask any man in Berlin who has any idea at all about the power of the spirit over the world, where the battle site for control over German Public Opinion in politics and religion, thus over Germany itself, lies, he would answer that the this battle site is at the University, and specifically in Auditorium Number 6, where Schelling is lecturing on *Philosophy of Revelation*.”³

¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung, 1841–42*, edited and with an introduction by Manfred Frank (Frankfurt: 1977), p. 89.

² The descriptions are taken from a report which a young theology student, Adolf Hilgenfeld, sent to his father, cited in Helmut Ploecher, “Schellings Auftreten in Berlin (1841) Nach Hoererberichten,” *Zeitschrift fuer Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 4 (1954): 93–94.

³ Friedrich Engels (under the pseudonym of Friedrich Oswald), “Schelling Ueber Hegel,” from *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), eds. D. Rjazanov *et al.* (Berlin: 1930), vol. I, part 2, pp. 173–74. Hereafter cited as MEGA.

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Many of Schelling's auditors in Berlin, as well as many cultural observers and pundits throughout Germany, thought they knew perfectly well what Schelling's call to Berlin in 1841 signified. The flood of articles, pamphlets, and books interpreting this event began before Schelling arrived in Berlin and continued through the next few years. Schelling's repeated refusal to publish any substantial portions of his lectures did not hinder the public debate. Schelling warned his audience that they should reserve judgment and not cast his positions in old molds. Suddenly transported to the center of public life, he was convinced that, even at the ripe age of sixty-six, his philosophical creativity had not ceased to develop. He suggested that his audience would have to shed their preconceptions of who he was and open themselves to discovering something about him, of which nothing was known.⁴ Schelling thus presented himself as a living embodiment of his new philosophy of freedom, in which every historical act disclosed new meanings about the past and opened up new paths to the future.

Schelling perceived his call as a reaffirmation of the central role of the post-Kantian philosophical tradition within German national culture. He self-consciously connected his task to the philosophical and cultural project that he had helped initiate during the period of German national humiliation, inner reform, and liberation during the first decades of the century. The expression of German national identity in philosophical knowledge was connected to the general awakening of German national feeling. Philosophy elevated this feeling to systematic knowledge, establishing common values in a secure knowledge of the ontological ground of all value. Philosophy was not just a concern of "schools," but also "a concern of the nation."⁵ "Because I am a German, because I have shared in feeling and bearing the pains and the joys of Germany in my heart," Schelling insisted, "that is why I am here, for the salvation of the Germans lies in systematic, philosophical knowledge."⁶

The general outlines of this philosophical project were not placed in question. Schelling himself had played a prominent role in its formulation, and many aspects of his inaugural lecture in 1841 echoed a programmatic unpublished essay "On the Essence of German Science," which he had written in 1807, in direct response to the national humiliation by Napoleon's armies. In that earlier essay, the essence of German national identity was defined as a distinctively profound metaphysical hunger and metaphysical accomplishment. What distinguished Germans as a people was their need to test the depths and explore the boundaries of individual existence, and ultimately to produce a reconciling, "redemptive" comprehension of the apparently intractable contradictions between freedom and fate, individuality and community, finite existence and absolute being. The national quest for knowledge of individual existence as grounded in the "Absolute" and

⁴ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, p. 90. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

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integrated into the “totality of beings” was finally articulated in the creation of German philosophical science, which was peculiarly, in Schelling’s view, a science of the Absolute as “concrete” universal, as personal existence.⁷

Schelling interpreted his call to Berlin as a renewed recognition among political and religious leaders of the central role of philosophy in German national culture. By offering him an appointment as a public professor of philosophy, outside the confines of university regulations and compensation restrictions, the Prussian government had affirmed the special public role of philosophy as a guide to “life,” as a means to provide a secure ground for “those convictions that hold life together.”⁸ As a “superior privy counselor,” Schelling was responsible not to the faculty but directly to the Ministry of Public Instruction and Religious Affairs and admitted to the deliberations of the State Council, where major issues of government policy were discussed. In the role he ascribed to philosophy in his inaugural address, Schelling gave notice that he was not ready to relegate philosophical knowledge to the role of handmaiden to either religion or politics. Philosophical knowledge both framed and centered all other dimensions of culture and society. Schelling did note that his call to Berlin to resuscitate the national mission of philosophy was an indication that something had gone awry in the years since this mission had first been formulated. The historical hopes of the period of national cultural awakening had been dashed, and the consciousness of national identity that had fueled the resistance to Napoleon seemed to have dissipated.

Schelling understood the historical crisis that had brought him back to the center of the historical stage as a radical contradiction between life and thought, between the nation as an historically evolving association of existence in time and space and the conscious self-representation of that existence in the teaching of its cultural elites, particularly its philosophers. Recent representatives of the philosophical tradition had failed to satisfy the demand from “life” for a satisfactory grounding of its ethical convictions and religious beliefs, thus instigating a general repudiation of the cultural value of philosophy. “Never before has there arisen,” he claimed, “such a massive reaction against philosophy from the side of life as at this moment.”⁹ This reaction, which had shaken the public reputation not only of a particular philosophy but also of philosophy per se, was based on a perception of contemporary philosophy as a critical, demystifying power that undermined the traditional foundations of ethical conviction and religious belief. Philosophy had become an issue of national concern because it addressed “those questions of life to which no one should or even can remain indifferent.”

⁷ “Ueber das Wesen deutscher Wissenschaft” (1807), in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Manfred Frank (6 vols; Frankfurt: 1985), vol. 4, 13–28, esp. pp. 13, 19, 28.

⁸ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, p. 93. ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

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“Life,” that is, the vast majority of individuals in the nation who were not professional thinkers, judged philosophy by its results, not by the details of its demonstrations and arguments. And in this judgment, Schelling insisted, “Life in the end is always right.”¹⁰ If philosophy undermined “life” rather than enhancing it and bringing its potentialities to full expression, then something was wrong with philosophy. The estrangement of philosophy from national life could occur only if philosophy lost its bearings. It was not intrinsic to philosophical thinking *per se*. In fact, Schelling insisted that in the postrevolutionary, modern world, “life” could be sustained, and religious and ethical convictions grounded, only through the self-reflective knowledge of philosophy. The era of unquestioned custom and naive faith was irrevocably past.

The crisis produced by the failure of philosophy to fulfill its cultural function was necessarily connected to its failure to reveal the foundations and purpose, or “ground” of existence. For philosophy to fulfill its calling it would have to provide systematic and positive knowledge of the totality of “beings” (*das Seiende*) because “in particularity nothing can be genuinely known.” But such systematic knowledge was not possible without an answer to the question: “Why is there being at all rather than nothing?”¹¹ Philosophy could accomplish the redemptive mission of integrating individual existence into the totality of beings only if it could provide knowledge of the primal ground and source, the point and purpose of all existing beings. Philosophy remained for Schelling a form of rational theology, or philosophical knowledge of God and his works. Human self-knowledge, philosophical anthropology, could not answer the questions it raised concerning the ultimate significance of human life. Human existence in history only made sense from a perspective that transcended this existence and enclosed it within the context of its origins and absolute ground. Post-Kantian German philosophy had taken this task on itself, and Schelling insisted: “Nothing shall be lost which has been achieved since Kant as genuine scientific knowledge.” His task was not to replace this philosophical tradition with another but to “re-establish it” on “true foundations.”¹²

For Schelling, the false turn that had betrayed the promising beginnings of modern German philosophy was easy to identify: It went by the names of Hegel and Hegelianism. Everyone in Schelling’s audience knew that he had been called to Berlin to oppose the power of Hegelian philosophy at the university and in the general public culture. When Schelling spoke of the opposition of “life” to philosophy, he meant the public outcry against the allegedly atheistic implications of Hegelian philosophy as drawn out by some of the younger Hegelians (like David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

¹¹ “Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung” *Ausgewählte Schriften* 5, (1842–43): 607–9.

¹² *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, p. 95.

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Ludwig Feuerbach), who had applied their philosophical acumen to critical analysis of the biblical narrative and Christian doctrine. But for Schelling, the current crisis was not simply a matter of partisan conflict pitting one philosophical school against the other. What was at stake was the role of philosophy in modern culture. Schelling felt that he was peculiarly qualified to address this issue because he had been present at the birth of modern German philosophy and because Hegelianism was his unruly “stepchild.” “Without me,” he wrote to a friend in September 1841, “there would have been no Hegel and no Hegelians as they presently exist.”¹³

Schelling’s critique of Hegel centered on one general claim: The Hegelian system, while purporting to be a science of the ultimate identity of reason and reality, thought and being, was in fact only a science of reason, a systematic analysis of the dynamically interconnected totality of mental categories. Hegel, according to Schelling, never broke through this closed circle of rational thought’s reflection on its own operations. His science was limited to knowledge of the a priori categories that constituted the essence, or “whatness,” of things, but did not encompass the sheer existence, or “thatness,” of things. Hegel’s writings were about the mental forms through which the mind shaped indeterminate existing being into the objects and subjects in space and time that constituted conscious experience of the world. Hegelian rationality shaped reality into a world of conceptual forms that defined experience but never penetrated beyond these forms to that prior ground of existence that made the shaping activity possible in the first place, and constantly threatened to break through the veil of concepts and reveal their contingent status. A science of thinking activity, Schelling claimed, could never reach those “things in themselves” (as Kant had called pure existence) that by definition were on the “other side” of thought’s categories.¹⁴

In the science of reason, thinking took itself as the object of thought and developed a completely a priori knowledge of reality as a logical possibility, as “the infinite potentiality of being.” This kind of rational knowledge, in Schelling’s terms, was merely “negative.” It might demonstrate how beings must necessarily exist if they did exist, but it could never explain why some logical possibilities actually existed and others did not. What eluded such a negative science of reason was that which was of greatest human concern – the meaning of finite human existence, the understanding of freedom as active choice, responsibility, and guilt about past actions, and hope and despair about the future.

In Schelling’s view, the whole Hegelian system was actually contained within Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. In this description of totality as the self-generating structure of rational reflection, the apparent otherness of real

¹³ Schelling to Dorfmueller, September 10, 1841, in *Aus Schellings Leben, in Briefen*, ed. G. L. Platt (3 vols.; Leipzig: 1869–70), vol. 3, p. 166.

¹⁴ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, pp. 107–10.

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being was sublimated into the process of thinking and reemerged as a product or manifestation of reason. But at both the beginning and the end of Hegel's *Logic*, Schelling claimed, there was a conflation of the concept of being with actually existing being. The pure undifferentiated being with which the dialectical development of categories began was actually the most abstract of concepts, and the determinate, concrete, universal "idea" at the end of the process was not the really existing highest being (God) but simply the concept of God. That Hegel implicitly recognized that his *Science of Logic* had failed to unite thought and being was displayed in the inconsistent additions of philosophies of nature and historical culture to his *Science of Logic* in order to complete the system. If the rational really encompassed the real, then natural and historical existence should have been contained within the *Logic*.

The haplessness of Hegel's panlogism in the face of reality, Schelling claimed, was especially evident in the inability of rational reflection to ground its own activity of thinking. Reason might be able to articulate its own inner structure, but it could never explain how or why it itself existed: It could not answer the question of why there was reason rather than no reason. The dialectical structure that Hegel attributed to the self-movement of concepts themselves only made sense as the real thinking activity of a living subject, the really existing being that the whole process of rational self-reflection presupposed. The existence of this thinking subject never entered into the process of rational reflection itself. However, if the process of reflection was carried a step further than Hegel was willing to pursue it, the result would be recognition that reason was ultimately dependent on something totally other to itself: It would produce an encounter with being as actual existence that made thinking possible in the first place. Thus Schelling argued that the Hegelian conception of thought as self-relating reflection could not maintain itself against the power of reflection itself. Rational reflection led to the edge of an abyss that revealed reason's own limitations, instigating a self-transforming experience that forced the rational subject to realize it was not self-sufficient but dependent on its other, on the sheer "thatness" of existence.

From Schelling's perspective, therefore, Hegel had not thought far enough. Reason was finally driven to recognize its dependence on an existing being that could never be fully, transparently appropriated in conceptual form, and thus to seek wisdom in receptivity to "revelation," in experience that was not self-generated but instigated by something beyond consciousness. Hegel's inability or unwillingness to take this extra step beyond rational thought had produced a philosophy that had to fail miserably when faced with the critical life questions of existing human individuals. The experience of unconscious powers that transcended conceptual understanding or control, the unique nature of historical events and actions, and thus the open-endedness of the historical horizon, the need for a personal god with the power and will to redeem finite human existence – none

of these “realities” were addressed in Hegelian philosophy. Despite Hegel’s disclaimers, his system finally dissolved concrete freedom into rational necessity, historical openness into the eternal cycle of rational reflection, real existence into abstract being, a personal god into a conceptual possibility. In its Hegelian version, philosophy had become abstract, deterministic, fatalistic, atheistic, and thus radically estranged from the needs of life as lived by real human beings.¹⁵

By misconstruing his merely negative philosophy of rational self-reflection as a positive comprehension of reality, Schelling believed, Hegel had vitiated his considerable achievements in logical analysis and condemned his system to the status of a mere episode in history. Hegel’s detailed explication of the logic of self-reflective rationality was merely a prolegomena to the construction of a “positive” and “historical” philosophy of existence, a philosophy that would not only grasp what Hegel had omitted but would also transcend and encompass rational self-reflection within a larger perspective. Pushing self-reflection to its own boundaries opened consciousness to the abyss of prereflective, “blind” being, the pure existence that preceded language and consciousness. This primal prereflective being was the absolute starting point for any comprehension of actually existing beings, all of which achieved their specific essence on the ground of a sheer “thatness” of existence.

A philosophy that began with “the being that precedes thinking” (*unvor-denkliches Sein*) could not of course take the form of a logical process pursued by negative philosophy. It demanded a method appropriate for relating consciousness to that which was not only other (as in objective worlds), but other and prior to the world of experience in which consciousness was constantly defined as a subject facing a world of objects. The production of the world of being from this *prius* could not proceed as a logical emanation, but only as “a free deed transcending being and the inert, that can only be known *a posteriori*.”¹⁶ Positive philosophy did not begin in sense experience, but with the *a priori* of all experience in “blind being.” Positive philosophy was “empirical” in the sense that the deductions it developed through an analysis of this starting point could only be validated by experience, through documentary knowledge of the free acts that emerged from primal being. Philosophy, however, did not abstract from experience but moved “toward” experience, revealing the “what” of the “that” of existence. Such “*a priori* empiricism” or “metaphysical empiricism” actually consisted of two operations. First, Schelling speculatively “constructed” the nature of absolute being or God from the fact of God’s ground in pure existence. Then he “proved” the validity of this construction through an interpretative analysis of the historical manifestations of absolute being in human religious consciousness.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–53. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

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Although the starting point of Schelling's positive philosophy was the sheer existence or blind being that preceded consciousness, he vehemently rejected the claim by his critics that his philosophy was a form of irrationalism. The path that led to the recognition of sheer existence as that which was prior to all thought and being was a path of rational reflection that proceeded inexorably to the conclusion that reason's own activity could only be grounded in a being "absolutely outside of itself." In recognizing its own radical contingency, rational reflection gained the possibility of genuine self-understanding through an open relation to its own ground. Moreover, Schelling was convinced that in this turn beyond itself, rational reflection regained the possibility of grasping the world of real beings as a rationally structured totality, but in an a posteriori, rather than a priori fashion. Although blind being was not comprehensible, could not be transparently absorbed into the conceptual structure of rational reflection, it could open itself to comprehension by revealing its implicit structure through the actions in which it made itself explicit in nature and history. As much as Hegel, Schelling claimed that the absolute totality was ultimately knowable as a systematic rational structure, but only "empirically," through an interpretive understanding of its "revelation" as a world of beings. "Positive philosophy can also be called a science of reason," he insisted.¹⁷

The peculiar rational irrationalism of Schelling's positive philosophy was displayed most obviously in his speculative constructions of God as the absolute ground of being and of the act that created the manifest world with which he introduced his Berlin lectures. Sheer undifferentiated existence or blind being was not in itself God, but the ground from which the Absolute generated itself as absolute spirit or self-relating, reflexive personality. The self-production of a personal divinity had a dialectical structure. Pure existence shaped itself into a spiritual being through a free confrontation and synthesis with its other – differentiated being. The principle of undifferentiated will (subjectivity) combined with the principle of differentiated form (objectivity) to create the subject–object unity of the Absolute in possession of itself, as the "Lord" of its own being. In doing so, it revealed that the deeper, absolute ground of the apparent ground of being in sheer existence was the "abyss" (*Ungrund*) of freedom. In the miraculous act through which undifferentiated chaos was shaped into differentiated form was revealed the truth of our deepest reality as absolute freedom. Schelling designated the three moments of this divine self-genesis as powers, or "potencie," which only became God when they joined together in an organized unity. God freely made his essence on the ground of his existence. This theogonic process, or "history" whereby existence was transformed into the absolute spirit, occurred prior to the creation of the actual world that had evolved in space and time. Through his speculative construction of God's dynamic self-making before creation, Schelling asserted his belief that the dynamic of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

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historical development, the movement from unconscious to conscious will, the formation of personality as free agency, the division of existence into a “past” of undifferentiated existence, a “present” of differentiated form and a “future” characterized by the personal identity of existence and form, was built into the very structure of being itself during the “proto-time” before existence in time. History was not just an external and thus contingent form in which being manifested itself in the created world, but the very essence of being. In this sense, Schelling believed that his philosophy was a philosophy of freedom and of history in a deeper sense than any previous philosophy. The nature of being per se was that of a narrative of free actions culminating in the creation of spiritual, personal identity.

The theogonic process of divine self-determination was not logically necessary, not a manifestation of a rational order to which God had to conform; it was a process of freely willed action. The product of this free activity, however, was the transformation of formless and speechless existence into the fully articulated trinitarian structure of the divine word, or *Logos*. Moreover, the first act, in which pure existence somehow produced the distinction between existence and potential form, must have been an unconscious act. For Schelling, self-conscious individuality, and thus personal identity – “character,” or “personality” – emerged first through a “free” act that occurred within the sphere of unconscious being. Like Goethe before him and Freud after him, Schelling affirmed that “in the beginning was the deed.” The “word,” the realm of language, consciousness, and individuated personal identity, emerged from this “deed.”¹⁸

Through the creation of the world, the Absolute was once again fragmented into its three modalities, the potencies were “perverted” into separate forces and thus lost their “divine” status. Only as dimensions or modalities of absolute spirit as personal identity were the potencies “divine.” As separate, nonintegrated powers, they could even resist their “divinity” by opposing integration into spiritual identity. Thus pure existence could be either the ground of God or the opponent (as chaotic passion and undifferentiated desire) of divine purpose and unity. In human history, the potencies had to go through a struggle within finite human consciousness in order to reconstitute their original unity in a form freely willed by created beings. Sheer existence became the chaos or vortex of will, which needed to be disciplined by form in order to create the inner self-possession of spiritual being. Although the development of these potencies from fragmentation to ordered identity in human history was not logically determined, Schelling

¹⁸ The connections between Schelling’s conceptions of the origins of the symbolic world of historical culture from the prehistoric, silent, and never fully conceptualizable realm of things in themselves to the psychoanalytic theories (especially those of Jacques Lacan) of the origins of language, meaning, and culture have been recently discussed with great brilliance and verve in two books by Slavoj Žižek: *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London and New York: 1996) and *The Abyss of Freedom/The Ages of the World: An Essay by Slavoj Žižek with the Text of Schelling’s Die Weltalter* (second draft, 1813), in English translation by Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: 1997).

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was convinced that the historical development of mankind's original indeterminate freedom ultimately replicated the rational totality of the divine personality. In history, the divine identity freely fragmented itself into its constituent, separate, potencies and recreated its identity within human consciousness in the progressive production of human culture. The documentary traces of mankind's historical spiritualization in mythology and revealed religion validated empirically the hypothetical construction of God's "eternal" nature prior to the act of creation. At every level of Schelling's positive philosophy, the self-relating unity of personality emerged from a sequence of freely willed acts that disciplined and spiritualized the primal indeterminacy of unconscious desire, blind-being, or sheer existence. Although Schelling's constructions, deductions, and empirical reconstructions moved from the real to the rational, from existence to essence, from indeterminate will to spiritual form, the final result appeared to be an affirmation of the identity of reason and reality as confident as Hegel's.¹⁹

Schelling, however, was more cautious than Hegel in his claims about the completion of the historical process, about the "end of history." The documentary record that registered the transformation of existence into essence was not yet complete and could, after all, not be logically predetermined, since it developed not as a rational emanation of existence from essence but as a freely formed shaping of existence into essence. Yet, much like Hegel, Schelling often seemed convinced that his own philosophy marked an epochal turn to the final moment of reconciliation. This eschatological dimension was evident not only in Schelling's messianic posturing, but also in his descriptions of the historical development of religious consciousness.

The history of mankind could be understood as a meaningful narrative, as something more than a litany of human vanity or a cycle of despair, in Schelling's view, only from a perspective that transcended it, that is, within the context of the evolution of being as a theogonic process. Human history was a story of freedom in the sense that temporal development was instigated by mankind's voluntary act of rebellion against the divine order of integrated being, an act that released the first potency, indeterminate desire or will, from its proper place as the ground of divine personality and set in motion a conflict-ridden relation of the three potencies in historical time.

¹⁹ During the 1950s, there was a broad scholarly effort to rehabilitate the positive philosophy of the late Schelling as a fulfillment of the program of German idealism to fully grasp the conditions of existence in rational reflection. See Horst Fuhrmans, *Schellings Philosophie der Weltalter* (Duesseldorf: 1954); Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus in der Spaetphilosophie Schellings* (Stuttgart: 1955); and Emil Fackenheim, "Schellings Begriff der positiven philosophie," *Zeitschrift fuer philosophische Forschung* 8 (1954): 321–35. The focus on existential will and radical freedom, which distanced Schelling from the Hegelian ambitions for a rational system, has attracted the attention of twentieth-century existentialist philosophers and theologians like Martin Heidegger, Paul Tillich, and Karl Jaspers.