The scholars of the history of German philosophy have placed Schelling in the German Romantic movement that arose as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, even though throughout his philosophical career he continued to follow the philosophical path that took its starting-point from Kantian idealism, and like Hegel he regarded Spinoza as one of his most important guides.

Romanticism expressed a variety of motivations. It reflected, in part, the defensiveness of traditional social political and cultural institutions that had been attacked by the Enlightenment and were forced to modernize in order to fight back. It also represented the aspiration of society, that remained religious but in an enfeebled state, to renew itself and flourish. It voiced, too, the disappointment of sectors of the society, that had welcomed the proclamations of rationalism and secularization, with the actual achievements these had brought, or with the spiritual prices that one had to pay for them. Finally, it expressed the positive need to advance the progress of the new philosophy through in-depth grappling with the different aspects of the life of the spirit, which rationalism—and even idealism—had left as a “dead zone” because of their dogmatic dismissal of the supra-rational, existential aspects of human life.

Schelling belongs to the Romantics of the last type, and this seems to have been one of his advantages and a reason for his continuing influence. He did not arrive at Romanticism from disillusionment with rationalism and idealism, but from dissatisfaction with their achievements, which in themselves seemed to him valid and even important. He quickly came to recognize that the failure of idealistic philosophy in its attempt to overcome the limits of knowledge stemmed from its sweeping dismissal of the legacy of traditional religious philosophy. In his view, idealism neglected important positive elements of this legacy, which had incorporated into itself the truths of religion. Thus, idealism
stultified itself in carrying out its task as the philosophy of the culture. The conclusion was that it was necessary to reconnect the severed threads of continuity to the prior point of origin in order to overcome the stumbling-blocks.

Of course, in this way too, Schelling expressed the Zeitgeist of Romanticism: returning home, in order to reveal it in a more positive light than it had appeared when one first set out to the new vistas of modernity. Now the traditional home of religion looked like an attractive destination and a milestone of progress, while the capitals of secularity evinced sealed horizons and aroused a feeling of isolation and bereavement.

Traditional religion—and beyond it the memories of the pagan religions that had preceded Judaism and Christianity, that had been stored away in the attic of European cultural awareness—were now conceived as the burning fire on the hearth at the center of the home, the source of its light and warmth. Enlightenment rationalism had broken out from the fortress of religion as one breaks out of prison, with the desire to tear down the walls. Kant (and all the more Hegel) fought against religion “beyond the limits of reason”; whereas Romanticism discovered that this was no prison but a home, and that the treasures of the spirit, stored in its many stories, were sources on which Romanticism could draw in order to domesticate the secular space conquered by the Enlightenment.

Schelling was not the only one, and not the first, who expressed this spirit of the times in philosophy. At the start of his career of many stages and transitions, he was subject to the influences of his predecessors and colleagues. But all scholars of German philosophy agree that he was the most important figure of that school whose influence outlived his generation and bore the most fruit in the twentieth century, when the homecoming movement experienced a revival and continuation.

A number of qualities explain his stature and unique influence. First was the unusual creativity that poured forth from him, in quantity, variety, and inspiration. Second was the soul-satisfying architectonic beauty of his works. Finally, his unique biographical trajectory established his personality and teaching in a unique position in the history of modern philosophy.

Philosophers commonly work throughout their careers in the framework of a single system. They may introduce slight changes in their programs and views, but these are mostly piece-meal revisions that do