Schelling’s System of Freedom

Martin Heidegger. Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit (1809). Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1971. 237 pages.1

Even before his death Schelling was already consigned to “the dustbin of history” by certain self-styled successors of Hegel. This judgment, in which only a faint echo of Hegel’s philosophical confrontation with Schelling still sounded through the polemics, served to enshrine Hegel’s pronouncements regarding Schelling while, simultaneously, emptying them of their genuine content. For more than a century the ban of this judgment has remained effective.

Yet, Heidegger’s study of Schelling is hardly just an attempt to compensate for the violence which Schelling suffered at the hands of post-Hegelian philosophers. Heidegger’s intent is not to set the account of history in order, as though the relation of thought to history were only a matter of settling accounts; rather, confessing its own peculiar violence (201), Heidegger’s study provides even an apology for the violence done to Schelling’s thought inasmuch as it brings to light at the heart of Schelling’s philosophy an intention and a movement that was intrinsically inaccessible to Schelling’s contemporaries—inaccessible even to Hegel who, most remarkably, could discern in Schelling’s central work only an “isolated” element extrinsic

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1The body of this work consists of the text of lectures delivered by Heidegger at the University of Freiburg during the summer semester, 1936. The text was edited for publication by Hildegard Feick. An appendix to the work contains excerpts from manuscripts done in connection with a seminar on Schelling which Heidegger conducted in the summer semester, 1941. These excerpts were selected by Feick from the manuscripts as prepared by Fritz Heidegger. The appendix also contains some seminar notes from the years 1941-43.
to systematic development (15). This element is freedom, and Heidegger's study is, more fundamentally, an apology for Schelling inasmuch as its intent is to vindicate Schelling's own insistence that freedom stands at the center of the system. And in bringing to light the all-determining directedness of Schelling's thought towards the "system of freedom," Heidegger's study seeks to reveal Schelling as "the genuinely creative and farthest reaching thinker of this whole age of German philosophy" (4). Thus, Heidegger's study, by its way of penetrating Schelling's essay on human freedom, opens out into an attempt to understand German Idealism as a whole, which, in turn, means that the more fundamental intention of Heidegger's Schelling interpretation is to set in motion a confrontation of seinsgeschichtliches Denken with metaphysics in that fulfillment which it reaches in German Idealism (230). It is the peculiar form which this fulfillment takes in the case of Schelling, in contrast to Hegel, that gives to the confrontation its philosophical richness, for Schelling proves to be the one thinker within German Idealism whose thought runs aground in such fashion as to portend the need of another beginning. Schelling is "the genuinely creative and farthest reaching thinker" of German Idealism, not just because he brings it to its completion, but rather because "from within German Idealism he forces it beyond its own fundamental position" (4). In this respect Schelling's essay on human freedom is "an answer" to Hegel's Phenomenology (231), and Heidegger's efforts to let this answer be heard constitute an apology, not so much for Schelling, much less for his critics, but rather for die Sache des Denkens that shows itself in the movement of which Schelling's thought is the locus.

The whole of Schelling's thought—and especially his Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit—is directed towards the system of freedom. This directedness is perhaps must explicitly stated in Schelling's Munich lectures on the history of modern philosophy:

A system of freedom—but in just such great lines, in equal simplicity, as the perfect counterpart of the Spinozistic system—this would be genuinely the highest.²

²Zur Geschichte der neuren Philosophie, Sämtliche Werke (Stuttgart, 1859), 1/10, p. 36. Cited by Heidegger (25).