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The Absolute in History: The Philosophy and Theology of History in Schelling's Late Philosophy, by Walter Kasper, translated by Sr. Katherine E. Wolff. Mahewah. The Collected Works of Walter Kasper: New York: Paulist Press. 2018, 592 pp., \$79.95 (hardback), ISBN 9780809106295

The Ages of the World (1811), by F.W.J. Schelling, translated with an Introduction by Joseph P. Lawrence. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 2019, 276 pp., \$ 95.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781438474052

Philosophy of Revelation (1841-42) and Related Texts, by F.W.J. Schelling, selected & translated, with an introduction by Klaus Ottmann. Thompson, Conn: Spring Publications. 2020, 384 pp., \$32.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780882140667

Reviewed by SEAN J. MCGRATH

Two new translations of Schelling and a classic piece of German Schelling scholarship have appeared in succession in the past three years. In 2018, a translation of Walter Kasper's seminal 1964 study, *The Absolute in History: The Philosophy and Theology of History in Schelling's Late Philosophy* came out. In 2019, Joseph Lawrence's translation of the 1811 edition of *The Ages of the World* appeared. And in the spring of this year, a complete translation of the Paulus edition of *The Philosophy of Revelation* was published by Spring Publications. English readers no longer have any excuses for not knowing what happened to Schelling's thought after the 1809 Freedom Essay.



Walter Kasper's massive study of the positive philosophy deftly guides us through all of the main moves in Schelling's late work. What it lacks in attention to ontological and logical issues, it makes up for in its thorough exposure of the theological background of Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation*. Kasper's learned contextualisation of Schelling's work in terms of the history of 19th and 20th century theology alone makes this book essential reading for any serious student of the positive philosophy. The book belongs to a minor literature on the late Schelling in Germany and France in the 20th century—none of which has been translated up till now (Fuhrmans, Schulz, Tilliette). Presently a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, Kasper was a young theologian at Tübingen University when he published this massive study. The translation, completed by one Sister Katherine E. Wolff (whose name I had to work to find in small print on the copyright page), is volume 2 in the *Collected Works of Walter Kasper*, published by the American Catholic company, Paulist Press. One can only wonder what your devout American Catholic will make of Kasper's youthful enthusiasm for the speculative Trinitarianism and semi-Arian Christology of the late Schelling. Kasper leaves no stone unturned and fearlessly negotiates the nest of heresies that Schelling opens up in his philosophical re-thinking of the creation and redemption of the world by the Triune God.

In terms of the Schulz-Fuhrmans dispute, Kasper is on Schulz's side, although he purports to have struck a synthesis. Where Schulz argued that the late philosophy of Schelling was the logical culmination of his earlier work and the final fruition (*die Vollendung*) of German Idealism, Fuhrmans argued that the middle Schelling broke with idealism under the influence of Christianity, even if he back peddled on the decision in the *Philosophy of Revelation* and became an idealist once again in the end. Kasper believes with Schulz that the positive philosophy is continuous with identity philosophy and does not in fact succeed in overcoming idealism. While this claim has to be in part true, since the identity philosophy (re-conceived as "negative philosophy") is the non-dialectical presuppositions of the positive philosophy, I think Kasper overstates the point. In the end, the positive is that which resists idealisation and escapes every net which reason casts around it. But without idealism, the real could not be recognised as that which transcends the ideal. After Schelling, there was only one direction for philosophy to go: more deeply into existence, empiricism, materiality and historical facticity, which it of course did in the work of Kierkegaard, Comte, Fechner, and Marx, and on the theological side, Bultmann and Barth. On occasion Kasper insists on continuity at the expense of coherence. It is certainly not the case, as Kasper suggests, that Schelling was already a philosopher of revelation in the period of his identity philosophy. I suspect Kasper is attached to the Schulzian reading of Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation* because it allows him and his Catholic readers to admire Schelling from a distance and to more easily discern the lines of his significant deviations from orthodoxy. In the final analysis Schelling, according to Kasper, fails to keep creation and Creator distinct—he fails to respect the analogy of

being, which is always the litmus test of orthodoxy for Catholic thinkers. Schelling's Trinitarian theogony is still too essentially connected to cosmogony for orthodoxy. In spite of his best efforts, Schelling compromises the principle of divine aseity.

The book is a youthful work, and Kasper is hesitant and qualified in his critique. I'm sure the Cardinal would have written quite a different book. Kasper affirms as much as he can the genuinely Christian quality to Schelling's thought (by contrast with Hegel's) and he goes out of his way to defend the orthodox quality of some of Schelling's theories. Sometimes his critique is so veiled as to be incomprehensible. For example, he writes, "For this reason, Schelling turned against orthodoxy, for one may not make Christ into a teaching, since it must rather be understood as a history" (455). Now what exactly does this mean? That orthodoxy neglects the historical Christ? That what matters for orthodoxy is the teachings of Jesus and not the history of the Christ event? This was certainly not true of mainstream 19th century Anglo-Catholic orthodoxy as any reader of Schelling's contemporary John Henry Newman will know. And it is even less true of 20th century Protestant and Catholic theology. Nevertheless it was Schelling who said, before Kierkegaard repeated it, that the point of Christianity is the Christ, not the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is much more than a moral teacher or sage according to Schelling; he is God incarnate who offered himself for the redemption of the world. This was not a common emphasis in 19th century Protestant theology in Germany.

Kasper's book is thorough, accurate in its exposition, and heavily cross-referenced with now forgotten figures and texts from the history of theology. Some of the more arcane material on 19th century theology and philosophy of religion which appears in the footnotes is crucial for understanding Schelling's work and can scarcely be found anywhere else. Who knew that Schelling's Philosophy of Revelation was not entirely a lone wolf enterprise but belonged to a small, predominantly Catholic literature of philosophers of revelation in Germany, people no one reads nowadays, such as Johann Sebastian Drey, Franz Anton Staudenmaier, Friedrich Pilgram, Martine Deutinger, along with the better known but still under-researched Franz von Baader? It seems *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* was preceded a hundred and fifty years earlier by *Die theologische Kehre* in German philosophy, and the late Schelling's work was at the centre of it. In short, Kasper's *The Absolute in History* is the kind of meticulous scholarship Germans are justly famous for and from which the rest of us have so much to learn.

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Joseph Lawrence's translation of Schelling's 1811 *Ages of the World* and related texts offers English scholars the missing link between the philosophy of freedom of the middle Schelling and the positive philosophy. In this version, and only this version, Schelling explicitly relates the three potencies (the rotary motion of drives



that Žižek likes to think of evidence of God's psychosis) to orthodox Trinitarian theology. It seems that Schelling was tracking Christian revelation from shortly after the publication of the Freedom Essay. Lawrence's translation, and especially the "Notes and Fragments," makes it clear, at least to this reader, that the seven books of the Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation, which Schelling lectured on every year from 1827 to his retirement from teaching in 1844, is the culmination of *The Ages of the World* project. Contrary to popular belief, *Ages* did not simply 'fail,' with Schelling maniacally producing draft upon draft in a Dionysian fit of inspiration until he collapsed exhausted and silenced by the exertion for a decade; the *Ages* drafts were the first steps toward the Philosophy Mythology and Revelation, to which he turned with resolve and energy as early as his Erlangen lectures of 1821-1827.

Joseph Lawrence is one of the first champions of Schellingian philosophy in North America. He spent his career at Holy Cross College where he initiated countless undergraduates in Schelling studies, some of whom have gone on to distinguished academic careers of their own. He has published only sporadically, his dissertation *Schellings Philosophie des ewigen Anfangs: Die Natur als Quelle der Geschichte* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989) and more recently a study of Socrates as a teacher of wisdom in the light of world philosophy, *Socrates among Strangers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015). We have good reason to hope for more from him in the near future, for Lawrence is quite active in retirement. However, Lawrence, in the tradition of Socrates and Schelling himself, is pre-eminently a philosopher of the spoken word, as those who have had the chance to hear him speak know. He can be utterly spellbinding live, and can easily hold an audience in rapt attention for two hours as he connects everything from Goethe's Faust, to Schelling's reading of the taming of Cronus by the love of the Son, to Trump America, to the absurdity of contemporary progressivist politics, to the Church of St. John, to the Bhagavad Gita, to ... you get the idea. The first time I heard Lawrence, on Goethe at the second meeting of NASS, in London Ontario in 2013, I felt my soul activated, which is not something I am accustomed to feeling at an academic meeting. Lawrence lives in his words and his words are alive with his life.

Lawrence is one of a very small, select group of scholars working in the English-speaking world today who genuinely understand Schelling's Johannine eschatological Christianity. He is possessed of an existential and sympathetic grasp of the philosophical power of the late Schelling's vision of the ultimate future, "an impossible hope, above all, the hope that nothing essential is ever truly lost" (Lawrence, introduction, 50). Or in more Biblical terms, which Schelling comes increasingly to prefer after 1811, the vision of the Christic end of history, when, as Paul says in one of Schelling's favourite passages, God shall be "all in all" (*panta en passin*, Cor 15:28), and pantheism will have become true (SW XIV: 66). Where many commentaries on the *Ages* founder at some point in theological ignorance, and dissipate in continental ambiguity, Lawrence soars in speculative theological flight. Where many hedge every

sentence with academic qualifiers meant to assure their woke audience that they don't actually believe this stuff, Lawrence steps in and challenges them all. What if Schelling is right? What if the world is destined to be united by love, not utopian progress, that thinly veiled secular Christianity of modernity, which Lawrence as much as Schelling rejects, but the love that each of us longs for in our innermost depths? This, for Lawrence as for Schelling, is the core of the Gospel, the promise that we shall find one another again, and be united under one God, but each having arrived there through his or her own path, with his or her own religious symbols not contradicted but validated by the revelation. What would it mean for our philosophy and politics now, if we lived out of this hope in a unity to come?

We are already familiar with God's agonistic break with eternity which inaugurates primordial time, the three archetypal ages of the world, the past that was never present, the present that never passes, and the future which never arrives. We have Norman's translation of the 1813 draft, with Žižek's commentary (University of Michigan, 1997), and Wirth's translation of the 1815 draft (SUNY, 2000). One might well ask, why do we need another version of *Ages*? My answer to this is threefold.

First, because the 1811 edition is the first draft, and as Schelling himself said in a letter when he was preparing it, "The first draft is usually the best."¹ Moreover, the 1811 draft is the only one that Schelling approved for publishing (even if he rescinded soon after it was typeset). The 1813 edition is quite different from both the 1811 and the 1815 drafts in tone and style. The 1815 version has been significantly edited by Schelling's son and editor of the collected works.² The 1811 version stands apart from both, for both its Trinitarian reference mentioned above, and for its more passionate and existential direction. As Lawrence says in his introduction, "What makes this version stranger than the later versions is that, unique among philosophical texts, it seems to have been written solely from the heart, and, just as those ancient scriptures that Faulkner calls 'His Book,' written *for* the heart. It is the work of a man in deep sorrow who expresses his hope that the anger and hatred so generally evoked by suffering can be transformed into compassion and love."³ The sorrow referred to here is the death of Caroline Schlegel in 1809, the love of Schelling's life. This translation, therefore, needed to be done for scholarly reasons.

My second reason for why we need this book is because it is Joseph Lawrence's translation. Lawrence has chosen a literary approach to the text, translating the *Ages*, as he says, as though it were a novel. As is often the case, a literary or poetic approach

1 Schelling to Pauline Gotter, his future wife, in 1811, cited in Lawrence, "Translator's Introduction," in F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World (1811)*, translated Joseph P. Lawrence (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2019), 11.

2 Walter Kasper, in the book also reviewed here, offers an interpretation of the three versions as progressing gradually away from the Bohemian theosophy of the Freedom Essay, with its God who is born of a cosmogonic process, towards the stronger doctrine of divine transcendence characteristic of his later work. See Kasper, *The Absolute in History*, 242-248, 308-315.

3 Lawrence, "Translator's Introduction," 3.



to a text by a gifted translator such as Lawrence proves to be more faithful to the original than a more technically precise translation. Further, Lawrence's substantial introduction constitutes an important work of scholarship and interpretation in its own right. Among other fascinating points, Lawrence argues that the mytho-poetic prophetic writing of the *Ages* needs to be correlated with science, that is with modern physics and evolutionary theory, and the fit, as Žižek has also noted, is surprisingly good. God's decision that contracts infinity and expands into time stands in nicely for the Big Bang, and the Schellingian idea that "each thing has its own time ... in terms of its relationship to its own beginning and end" resonates with Einsteinian relativity.⁴

My third answer: we need this book because of what Lawrence included in the translation, notably Schelling's unpublished writings associated with the preparation of the text, "Notes and Fragments to the First Book: The Past," and "Notes and Fragments to the Second Book: The Present," which together constitute a third of the whole book. These notes from 1811-1813 were assembled by Schelling himself but were first published in German by Manfred Schröter, who had transcribed them, along with the existing three drafts of *Ages* (selected from the over twenty that existed) before the whole Munich archive in which they were stored was destroyed by the Allied bombing of 1944. They not only offer us a rare glimpse into Schelling's creative process, they also give us a clear view of the religious direction of Schelling's thought at this pivotal point of his career. As Lawrence points out, they fill out what Schelling intended to do with the Book II (the present) and Book III (the future). I had never read them before and I was overwhelmed by them. The *Ages* is an ambiguous work: it lends itself to multiple interpretations, psychoanalytic, neo-Pagan, gnostic, Kabbalistic, etc. But Schelling's intentions with the work were anything but ambiguous. In the fragments we listen in on Schelling's inner monologue as he conceives the plan for a great systematic work, and we witness the very turn to the positive in him, which began in 1809 and was more or less confirmed by 1815. Anyone who reads these fragments can no longer doubt that (a) Schelling is, at this stage of his career, a deeply religious thinker, and (b) that that which is most religiously thought worthy for the later Schelling is Christianity as such, not Kant's and Fichte's Christianity edited for learned and morally upright Europeans, nor Hegel's speculatively sublated Christianity, but Christianity in history, creed and cult. At the foundation of Schelling's middle thought lie the mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation of the Logos. What Schelling struggled to do in the *Ages*, and only succeeded in doing in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, is to apply these traditional Christian doctrines, which he held to be reasonable interpretations of historical facts, to what was for him from his earliest works in nature-philosophy the central problem of philosophy: namely, the question, How does the infinite give rise to the finite without ceasing to be infinite? Or in words more familiar to readers of *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy*, Why is there something and rather not nothing?

⁴ Lawrence, "Translator's Introduction," 18.

Why is there order and rather not chaos? Schelling combs through the Church Fathers, the Scholastics, the Kabbalah, and theosophy for clues as to how to explain the fact of divine creation from nothing, and in 1811 settles on the answer which he will refine but not reject in the *Philosophy of Revelation*. Creation is God's productive dissociation from eternity, the finitization of spirit for the sake of the production of love. More concretely, creation is the manifestation in time and space of a process which God has already undergone. Cosmogony repeats theogony—that is the point of the rotary motion of three drives, and the decision with contracts the divine being. What happens in God—the achievement of love between the three persons of the Trinity—is externalised in nature, and will be complete when humanity is united with one another through their unity with the divine. The mystery of the Trinity and the historical consequences of its eternal achievement are visible at every level of material existence, from the play of the irreducible components of the natural world, to the dynamics of consciousness and unconsciousness in the human psyche. Joseph Lawrence's 1811 edition of *Ages* is a crucial piece of the puzzle for understanding how Schelling the *Naturphilosoph* and objective idealist become Schelling the Philosopher of Revelation.

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Klaus Ottmann's translation of the Paulus edition of the Berlin lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation of 1841/42 is without exaggeration a game changer. I can only imagine the boom in doctoral dissertations it will precipitate. And it is also a lovely book, in an attractive elongated format, with a stylish font, on good paper. Every student of Schelling will want to own one.

The translation comes a bit out of left field. Ottmann is known in name at least in Schelling circles for his 2010 translation of Schelling's *Philosophy and Religion*. Spring Publications is a bit of a mystery. It was founded by the popular mythologist Joseph Campbell and is mostly known for books on Jungian philosophy. Perhaps Ottmann, who manages the press, discerns a relationship between archetypal psychology and the Philosophy of Revelation, which is hardly far fetched. Schelling's thesis of a primordial consciousness of the forms of God which constitutes the mythological age is clearly analogous to Jung's collective unconscious.⁵

5 We know that Jung read Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology*; a copy of it can be seen in his library in Küssnacht, complete with Jung's own marginalia. Jung references Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology in his early work which marked his break with Freud, the 1911 *Symbols of Transformation*. See C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, in *Collected Works of CG Jung*, vol. 12 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 29n. Jung's references to Schelling have been surveyed by Paul Bishop in his "Jung's Red Book and its Relation to Aspects of German Idealism," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57, no. 3 (2012): 335-363, at 337-340. I have examined the systematic relation of Jung's thought to Schelling's in S.J. McGrath, "The Question Concerning Metaphysics: A Schellingian Intervention into Analytical Psychology," *International Journal of Jungian Studies* 6, 1 (2014): 23-51.



Ottmann's translation is elegant and highly readable, if occasionally idiosyncratic ("potence" instead of "potency" for *Potenz*). I hate quibbling with translations, however. It is usually a cheap shot levelled at one who has laboured on the text for countless hours by one who has not. Ottoman has done Schelling studies a great service. The source text itself has its limitations. Paulus' infamous transcript, which was published without Schelling's consent, is rough and fragmentary. Some of this will be incomprehensible to newcomers to Schelling's late philosophy. Ottmann has anticipated this and generously supplemented the text with translated passages from other transcripts of the lectures (eg., Kierkegaard's) and other versions of the *Philosophy of Revelation*.

The story of how this transcript came about is worth re-telling. Schelling kicked off his royally appointed Berlin Professorship in October of 1841 with these lectures, and everyone who was anyone in German academia was there, listening eagerly to what Schelling was going to say. They longed for a new turn in philosophy after German Idealism. When Schelling started in on the three potencies and they heard something that sounded like a version of Hegel's dialectical appropriation of Christian theology, most of them groaned and left. They were wrong: Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation* is not merely an alternative to Hegel's philosophy of religion (although it is surely that), and those who stayed, such as Kierkegaard (at least until the end of the semester), went on to change the course of philosophy under the influence of Schelling's revival of the Scholastic distinction between essential, logical knowledge and existential, historical knowledge. The text was first published in 1843 without Schelling's permission or knowledge by H.E.G. Paulus, a fierce critic of Schelling, and a Hegelian theological revisionist who denied revelation as a possibility altogether. Paulus intended to humiliate Schelling by exposing the folly of Schelling's last system to the world—he thought it enough to simply publish Schelling's words verbatim without comment and let the old man hang himself with his outrageous claims. Schelling unsuccessfully attempted to sue Paulus for publishing his work against his wishes (the first lawsuit in the history of the German university), but to no avail. The book went to press and was widely read. Paulus only succeeded in ensuring that Schelling's Berlin lectures had the widest possible reception, and that the only reason anyone remembers his name is because of them.⁶

Ottmann's translation includes, along with the whole of the Paulus *Nachschrift*, a solid-enough introduction and several other pieces of Schelling. The book opens with an early writing, "Revelation and Public Education" (1798: SWI: 472-482), a new translation of the chapter on Christianity from the 1803 lectures, *On University Studies*, and the inaugural Munich lecture of 1827. It concludes with a new translation of the opening lecture of *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy*, and, as an appendix, a translation of one of the speeches Schelling gave at the Bavarian

⁶ The first lecture was even translated in an American transcendentalist journal in 1843. See "Schelling's Introductory Lecture in Berlin," *The Dial* 3, no. 3 (January): 398-404.

Academy of Sciences, the 1833, “On the Significance of One of the Newly Discovered Wall Paintings at Pompeii.” Ottmann’s point in this eclectic assemblage of texts seems to be to demonstrate the consistency of Schelling’s interest in the Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation over his long career, a view which he maintains in his introduction. Unfortunately, some of the texts Ottmann has chosen prove exactly the opposite point. Take for example, the 1798 “Revelation and Public Education.” This article was occasioned by Schelling’s reading of Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, *Versuch einer Begründung des vernunftmäßigen Offenbarungsglaubens* (Leibniz and Jena: Freidrich Frommann, 1798). Both Schelling and Niethammer agree that revelation should not be rendered ‘rational’ through philosophical justifications, and that philosophy should have nothing to do with anything purported to be revealed. “The concept of revelation cannot claim scientific dignity,” Schelling writes, a claim he will directly contradict thirty years later. “This concept, if raised to the level of a principle, would destroy all use of reason.”⁷ What more proof do we need that Schelling the *Naturphilosoph*, not only had little interest in Christianity, he was in fact opposed to introducing Christian themes into philosophy?⁸ Still, there are tantalising harbingers of what is to come. At one point in the 1798 essay, Schelling defines revelation in precisely the same terms he will use in the Berlin lectures. The concept of revelation, the young Schelling writes, signifies “a real effect of the highest essence [i.e., God] on the human mind.”⁹ Compare this with the definition offered in the official version of the lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation over forty years later: “Revelation ... is expressly conceived as something which presupposes an *Actus* outside of consciousness.”¹⁰ However, the conditions for receiving revelation are totally re-conceived in the late work. In 1798 revelation, if it existed would reduce the mind to “absolute passivity.”¹¹ According to the early Schelling, who was deeply influenced by Fichte, the mind is pure, infinite activity; any passivity which might appear to it, such as the passivity of sensation, intuition, or the encounter with the real, is a passivity that is underwritten by an unconscious (“transcendental”) act of positing that which appears to limit it. The early Schelling objects to the very idea of revelation because of his idealist commitment to reason as a productive activity of generating the world. Revelation for the late Schelling no more reduces the mind to absolute passivity than does a sensory encounter with the physically real, or a personal

7 F.W.J. Schelling, “Revelation and Public Education (Jena 1798),” trans. Klaus Ottmann, in F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation (1841-42) and Related Texts*, selected, trans. with an introduction by Klaus Ottmann (Thompson, Conn: Spring Publications, 2020), 3-11, 10.

8 All of this supports the now unpopular claim that something indeed changes in the late Schelling, and the change occurs in 1809, but this is a matter for another time. See my forthcoming, *The Turn to the Positive: The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2021).

9 Schelling, “Revelation and Public Education,” 10.

10 Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung, Zweiter Teil*, SW XIV: 1-334, 3.

11 Schelling, “Revelation and Public Education,” 5.



encounter with the will of another. In fact, the very presupposition of revelation is freedom, the freedom of the one who reveals his or her self, and the freedom of the one who receives the revelation as a revelation. The definition cited above from the SW version of the Philosophy of Revelation significantly adds the following: “Revelation ... presupposes ... a relation which the most free cause, God, grants or has granted to the human consciousness not out of necessity but in complete freedom.”¹²

The Paulus is not the definitive version of the Philosophy of Revelation, and it needs to be supplemented by the other versions. I think it is safe to announce that a translation of the much more substantial *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung* is being prepared as this review goes to press. The great advantage of the Paulus over the much more complete two volume version of the Philosophy of Revelation in the Collected Works, or the more polished 900 page *Urfassung*, is that one gets the whole sweep of the Philosophy of Revelation in less than three hundred pages. The triadic doctrine of the potencies, the critique of Hegel’s logicism, the monotheism treatise, the semi-Arian doctrine of the Trinity, the speculative Christology, even the doctrine of the three ages of the Church—it is all here, now rendered in graceful English by a skilled translator. I can hardly wait to see what new readers of Schelling will say about it. My advice to them: read it with Kasper in one hand, and the memory of Žižek effaced by Lawrence’s *Ages* translation.

12 Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, 3.