In this volume, Bernard Freydberg examines Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s (1775-1854) Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände (1809), or, as it is often called, the Freiheitsschrift (Freedom Essay). Freydberg aims to demonstrate the historical foundation of Schelling’s work as well as its relevance, even importance, in contemporary philosophy. A love of Schelling’s thought pervades Freydberg’s writing, which contributes to the kind of energy that the book possesses. Over the course of the text, Freydberg argues compellingly that Schelling took German philosophy to a new location, beyond and with metaphysics. Nonetheless, Freydberg’s tone leaves the work a mixed success.

Throughout the interpretive chapters, which comprise the bulk of the volume, Freydberg’s method is that of close textual analysis and exegesis, whether he is focusing on Schelling’s text or those of, for example, Kant, which he uses in his arguments. The book’s project is to show how Schelling is “crucial to the pursuit of wisdom,” particularly in four main areas: namely, Schelling’s relationship to system, logic, darkness, and divinity (1-2). In the Freedom Essay, Schelling seeks to show that freedom is the basis for everything; freedom and the world are expressions of each other.

One of the most provocative elements of Freydberg’s treatment of Schelling’s Freedom Essay is his repeated allusion to dual characteristics in Schelling’s system, in which the possibility of evil is dependent upon pairs of, for example, ground/existence, absolute identity/gravity, and night/light (e.g., 31-34). Freydberg points out Schelling’s originality in these conceptions yet helpfully draws links to earlier philosophy in charting the progression of these powerful ideas. This twofold nature or dialogue is present not only in Schelling’s essay but also in Freydberg’s interpretations and explanations, which is one of the book’s strengths.

As Freydberg notes at multiple points, his writing arrives in a period of burgeoning interest in Schelling. Such works as The New Schelling (2004) and Schelling Now (2005) represent what Freydberg calls “a hurricane of activity” in Schelling scholarship, in contrast to the more customary, greater occupation with the works of Kant or Plato (112). In the first section of his two-part conclusion, Freydberg returns to the questions with which he began the study and offers succinct responses. In the second part, Freydberg takes a more familiar
tone and advocates the utilization of Schelling’s thought when the well of contemporary philosophical imagination has run dry, or as is happening now, according to the author, “most major movements seem eviscerated, seem to be playing themselves out, however thoughtfully” (113). He makes some surprising negative comments about other scholars’ work within the philosophical discipline, from both camps of Anglo-American and Continental philosophy.

The book is written with a communicable passion that will strike any reader. Unfortunately, Freydberg’s interpretations are sometimes incompletely explained. See, for example, the idea of the separability/inseparability of light and darkness in God (33-34). It is doubtless a case of the author’s having thought he was completely clear and not a lack of development. Freydberg has provided copious endnotes, which offer extensive commentary on his sources and ancillary points. The occasional clarification of translated terms with parenthetical German originals is useful, although they leave the German scholar wanting more. In many ways provocative as its object of study, Freydberg’s volume will encourage readers to delve further into this area, whether it is to learn more about Schelling or to investigate Freydberg’s interpretations.

KYLE FRACKMAN, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Dr. Kyle Frackman
German & Scandinavian Studies
Herter Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003-9312
USA