



**Brad Prager.** *Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism: Writing Images.* Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture Series. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. viii + 287 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781571133410.

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### Romantic Vision and Imagination

In this lucidly written and well-researched volume, Brad Prager investigates the thematization of visual perception in canonical works of the Romantic period (texts by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, Clemens Brentano, Heinrich von Kleist, and Joseph von Eichendorff) and in relation to various Romantic painters (Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Anton Koch, and Phillip Otto Runge). Inspired in part by Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), Prager identifies the post-Kantian generation as the locus of a turning point in visual discourse, corresponding to a problematization of the subject as defined by the Enlightenment. Drawing on an eclectic mix of theorists of the word, the image, and visibility in general, Prager subjects the texts to close readings that, in their mutual interaction, delimit an area of romantic perception of perception. The close readings are supported by copious biographical and intellectual historical information. One comes away both informed about the traditional spectrum of interpretation of particular works as well as their relevance in an intermedial theoretical context.

Following the inspiration of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in the *Literary Absolute* (1978), Prager's goal is not to analyze these authors in terms of their explicit philosophy (which is perhaps why he omits the most famous theoreticians of the early romantic period, Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel), but rather, to give a philosophical reading of implicit themes in these authors, illustrating a range of romantic reactions to the "crisis" precipitated by Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. In the introduction, Prager describes this philosophical context. Using a psychological interpretation of Kantian idealism and its Fichtean continuation, he emphasizes how post-Kantian philosophy concentrated upon the ultimately subjective (that is, individual) essence of perception. In this reading, the Romantics and F.W.J. Schelling have removed the Kantian transcendental limitations from

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's project, and make the "I" into a metaphysically absolute subject, at times conflated with the self of the artist. Thus, the Romantic crisis is the entrapment of subjects in their own points of view, hence the loss of ability to distinguish between imagination and perception. To compensate for this loss and to provide for a stable self, it is in turn necessary to construct some other distinction within perception to substitute for that between perceiver and perceived. The work of visual art, itself an external product of an artist/creator, provides a privileged locus for reflection on this everyday construction of the perceptual world. Prager's Romanticism is one which in thoroughgoing skepticism cuts off all connection to the outside world—a nightmare Fichteanism à la Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (who famously compared Fichtean idealism to a thread, which by reflecting on itself has knitted itself into a stocking which could unravel at any time, yet it thinks it has produced a universe)—hence his focus on the darker texts of Romanticism.[1] The real strength of this book lies in its individual readings of these texts, and even more so, in the connections and associations, which go from chapter to chapter which bring out the richness of the initial thesis.

As a foil to his analysis of Romanticism, Prager begins with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766). *Laocoon* is ostensibly an objective drawing of boundaries between the representational possibilities of art vis-à-vis those of poetry, but Prager describes it, following recent research, as Lessing's defense of his own theater of emotive identification in contrast to the neo-Classical stoicism championed in Johann Jacob Winckelmann's interpretation of Greek culture. Lessing criticizes visual representations both for their inability to portray more than one moment of time as well as their materiality, which stifles the action of the imagination, especially as it attempts to represent the immaterial. Visual works of art, for Lessing, inherently atemporal and using fixed spatial relationships,

are particularly literal and not subject to interpretation as linguistic works are (parallel, I might add, to a common critique of television's effect as a medium on the imagination as opposed to, say, reading). Prager treats *Laocoon* as an example of how one might conceive of visual artworks and their reception when committed to a pre-idealistic theory of matter and perception, that is, a theory based on a stable and given reality outside of the perceiver. Prager, following the Romantics, critiques Lessing by means of the Kantian claim that the imagination always intervenes, even in the perception of an image (for example, in the sequentiality of perception), and thus the distinctions Lessing wants to draw between visual art and poetry, analogous to those between natural sign and conventional sign, cannot be maintained.

In the second chapter, Prager considers Wackenroder and Tieck as transitional figures between Lessing and the Romantics. According to Prager's reading, in the *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (1797), especially the sections on the painter Raphael, Wackenroder attempts to address the same questions as Lessing through the perspective of Renaissance neo-Platonism, resulting in an inversion of Lessing's evaluation of the arts: here the "inner vision" (which Prager discusses in terms of Giorgio Agamben's notion of "phantasmology") of the artist can only be expressed through painting and can be understood by the appropriately inspired observer, whereas the language of words proves inferior to this "language of art," as it cannot transcend the earthly purposes of everyday communication. Going beyond Wackenroder, Tieck's prototypical artist (the central character of his "Künstlerroman" *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* [1798]) is subject to inner division and fragmentation through the plurality of inner images, which, rather than possessing the objective clarity of neo-classical ideas, exhibit the instability of the modern subject. The work of art appears as a compromise between the artist's inner vision and his experience of the real world but a compromise in the form of a fetish. As a fetish, its interpretation far transcends its material reality; hence, a Romantic painting is necessarily fragmented, simultaneously viewable from multiple perspectives, in other words, in opposition to Lessing, readable or demanding of interpretation. This is Prager's notion of the romantic artwork.

The third chapter is an interpretation of Brentano's early "verwildeter Roman," *Godwi oder Das steinerne Bild der Mutter* (1801); "verwildet" in the sense, for example, that the presumed author of the novel dies in its second part and the narration is taken over by the title figure), representing the full emergence of the romantic dis-

course of visuality. Brentano's work, while purporting to be about classical art (the sculpture mentioned in the subtitle), is, as Prager maintains, really about the necessary failure of classical art to do what it claims to do: to preserve the ineffable moment of subjective experience into all eternity. As Prager illustrates through a deconstructive analysis of the first sentences of the work, Brentano's work partakes of the "allegory" theorized by the early Romantics and the later deconstructionists, pointing to the impossibility of coincidence of allegorical sign and meaning. Thus the symbol, the idea of a stable meaning, and, ultimately, a stable subject to guarantee this meaning, give way to a fragmentary allegory; the self falls apart.

In the next two chapters, Prager turns to Romantic painters: in the fourth chapter, the well-known Friedrich and the less well-known Koch (mentor to the Nazarene art movement) and, in the following chapter, Runge. Prager contrasts Koch's and Friedrich's works as illustrations of the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime (with explicit reference to Jean-François Lyotard's reading). The chapter is less a study of the works of the two artists than of Romantic-era writing about the artists, focusing specifically on the subject-related anxieties of the art critic F.W. Basil von Ramdohr, read against the Kantian text. Ramdohr found the lack of a well-defined perspective in Friedrich troubling, particularly in the painting *Das Kreuz im Gebirge* (1808); indeed, Prager demonstrates how Friedrich undermined many of the eighteenth-century canons for landscape painting (as would guarantee, for example, the ability of the viewer to enter into the work) so as precisely to problematize the relationship between internal representation and material image, thus foregrounding the internal conflict at the basis of the Kantian sublime. Koch, who depicts what we might call conventional romantic beauty, serves here mainly as a foil to Friedrich, but his depictions of the Schmadribach waterfall do make splendid cover illustrations.

In the fifth chapter, Prager turns to Friedrich's contemporary, the painter Runge. Runge's painting is explicitly allegorical and mystical, and refers to his messianic theory of art: that color and light reveal (or function as symbols of) the divine, and that art suitably reconfigured has the mission to further the general understanding of the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Although Prager raises the appropriate issues, here the distinction of symbol and allegory, I found this chapter to be the least integrated with the subjective thesis of a book as a whole; for example, I did not find a convincing argument that the antithesis of light and dark in the drama of creation is one that is primarily played out intra-subjectively. Most impressive in this chapter is the briefly developed contrast

between Runge and Friedrich. Although it might have disturbed the structure of the argument, Runge might well have served as a better foil to Friedrich than the relative lightweight Koch in this context.

Prager's Kleist interpretation begins with Kleist's famous "Kant-Krise," his doubt after reading Kant about the possibility or verifiability of objective knowledge. Prager reads Kleist's stories as dramatic enactments of these doubts. The first of the two stories interpreted here, "Die heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik (eine Legende)" (1811), contains veiled references to one of Kleist's favorite themes in this regard: the Eucharist. Kleist sees in Catholic communion theology a (to be sure, problematic) resolution via faith to his existential and epistemological doubts. The story describes a single, now-legendary event described from a variety of temporal and ideological viewpoints: the plot fails because of the effect on the chief plotters of a musical performance of a mass which "converts" them, but leaves them mad. Through the irony inherent in the differences between the several recountings of the story, Prager sees in the story a parody of a Catholic conversion, which, unlike a Kantian sublime experience, does not result in the empowerment of the subject, but rather its unconditional destruction, in the form of submission to a claimed "pure presence." Similarly in the second story, "Der Findling" (1811), a complicated tale of the disastrous consequences of an act of adoption, the most important scene for Prager's book is the appearance of a live double of a portrait of a dead man; the picture has emerged from the frame, as it were, with tragic effects on all of the characters, in the all-too literal materialization of what had been an image in the imagination.

In the final interpretative chapter, Prager reads Eichendorff's "Marmorbild" (1819) again as a story about looking, that is, about self-construction through projected perception. The late Romantic author is often taken to espouse a conservative philosophy of politics and religion, a nostalgic yearning for a pre-revolutionary aristocratic past. Prager joins with Theodor Adorno's attempt to save Eichendorff from this interpretation by reading the story against the grain. In the "Marmorbild," a young man named Florio seems to find his poetic calling by renouncing the sensuality of pagan art (the statue of Venus who comes to life in the story; note Prager's reading of the story as an anti-Pygmalion tale) for the stability of a Christian worldview. Florio must reject his heathen desires, which appear to him as visually projected upon the statue, in favor of a stabilized Christian identity—in turn visible in the figure of Bianca, whose constant averting of her own gaze symbolizes his regained and unthreatened subjectivity. In this way, Eichendorff thought himself to

have answered the dangers of subjectivism raised by the earlier Romantics, but Prager illustrates convincingly how the text unwittingly demonstrates the seductiveness of the very model it claims to reject.

Unlike in many other books, the theoretical arguments here genuinely illuminate rather than obscure the texts to which they are applied, while casting a clear light on the authors who have inspired them. The general problematic sets up interesting ways of reading and comparing the works treated, and brings out useful interrelationships among them, as well as providing a vocabulary with which to discuss the shared philosophical commitments of literature and visual art. Although a rich map of Romanticism is painted here, it is hard not to miss one or two texts that might have fit well with the general argument (such as Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799), whose main characters are visual artists, or one of several works by E.T.A. Hoffmann). In addition, music is merely touched upon in this work (especially in relationship to Kleist), but it is certainly in contention for the centrality of the visual arts in Romanticism that is maintained here.

A few additional points: The abundance of background information—ranging from the history of the Laocoon sculpture group to useful summaries of the precursors of Romanticism, such as Marsilio Ficino and Jakob Böhme, and the relevant biographical details—makes this book valuable beyond its interesting and well-conceived thesis. Helpful translations into English are included of all German passages, for non-German speakers, though with a few inaccuracies in several places (especially in the Brentano and Runge chapters). All in all, Prager's book is a thought-provoking re-reading of Romantic narratives which demonstrates the continuing necessity of philosophically informed close readings in the study of culture.

#### Note

[1]. The idea of the "absolute subject" as "the subject posited by German idealist thought" (p. 161) is a standard interpretation of German idealism that goes back at least to Jean Paul, and is echoed by Martin Heidegger's history of western philosophy and by French post-structuralists who have followed Heidegger's interpretation. Recently, several historians of philosophy—(most prominently, Frederick Beiser, who entitles his book *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism* (2002), and also Andrew Bowie in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (2003), a volume whose emphasis on music contrasts in interesting ways with the book under review)—have challenged its accuracy in a historical sense. These latter writers agree with Prager about the fundamental distinction between Fichte and the early Romantics, but for

them it rests precisely in a critique of Fichte's latent subjectivism; for the Romantics, the absolute, as the condition of possibility of subjectivity/objectivity, cannot itself be said to be subjective. Beiser, in particular, stresses a non-subjective form of Platonism in the Romantics.

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