

Brad Prager, *Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism: Writing Images*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007. viii + 287pp.

Kant marks a boundary line, an "abyss," in the words of Philip Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, with regard to the construction of the modern subject that divides it with the past. (René Wellek and Jane K. Brown might also have been evoked.) Kant's conception of the mind forecloses the possibility of a direct experience of the thing-in-itself or absolute certainty about God or the real order of the world. Writers and artists responding to Kant are compelled to account for the limits of vision and the active role of the imagination in the construction and representation of the world. Brad Prager, author of a book on filmmaker Werner Herzog (Wallflower, 2007) and the co-editor of a volume on visual studies and the Holocaust (Camden House, 2008), applies Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy to visual aesthetics in German romanticism. Specifically, Prager looks at a selection of romantic painters and novelists writing or referring to the visual arts, and how each implies a model of perceptual aesthetics that conceives the outside world as an imaginative construction of our own making. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Prager integrates philosophy, literature, and the visual arts to lay out a model of romanticism as "a system against systems" (227), an open ended discourse that speaks to the modern and post-modern.

Prager begins with a discussion of Lessing's *Laocoön*, both as it stands in relation to the classicism of Winckelmann, and as it expresses a conception of art that contrasts with the romantics. For Lessing there is a distinction between the plastic and verbal arts related to the former's inability to capture the dynamic character of experience. Lessing nevertheless sees fixity in the object that makes it independent of the mind. The romantics, by contrast, do not grant such a generic distinction. For them the ideas that represent the verbal and those that represent the visual both occur in the same field of the imagination, and so are indistinguishable from each other.

Prager next turns to Wackenroder's fictional *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* and Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*. While the former sympathizes with classicism, the aesthetic value of the friar derives from the divine inspiration of the artist, not the formal qualities of the art. The "real" work is a "phantasm" created by revelation, the material object disappearing under the gaze of the religious beholder. Looking at this from the secular side, Tieck's *Franz Sternbald* develops these themes; the phantasm becomes a sign for the unattainable ideal. In this way, Prager argues, *Franz Sternbald* can also be read as an anti-*Bildungsroman* in which the growth of the artist remains unfulfilled. He extends this theme in the next chapter, in his discussion of the Clemens Brentano's *Godwi*. Drawing on Paul de Man's notion of allegory, the *Künstlerroman* is perceived as an anti-*Bildungsroman*, predicated on a system that keeps deferring meaning.

The next two chapters focus on the visual arts, in particular the aesthetics of the sublime in the paintings of Casper David Friedrich and Joseph Anton Koch, and the symbolism of color and light in those of Philipp Otto Runge. Underlying all of these is a shift away from historical painting to the landscape, coupled with complex shift in the relationship between the subject and nature. Friedrich's play with the rules of perspective creates images that evoke the sublime by creating a disconcerting realm that cannot be perceived in nature or encompassed in time and space. The work of art becomes a gesture toward what cannot be depicted or

reconciled into a total vision. By contrast, while Koch's "heroic" landscapes of vast mountain-scapes appeal to Kant's mathematical sublime, his fidelity to perspective reaffirms a totalizing vision that can be controlled by the subject. Developing a system of colors informed by the mysticism of Jacob Böhme, Runge develops an aesthetics in which the divine is represented through the medium of light. God is the source of all light, but it is the subjectivity of the individual in relation to the light that creates color.

The last two chapters explore the dangerous implications of the subject's construction of the object. A chapter on Kleist looks at the short stories *Die heilige Cäcilie* and *Der Findling*, focusing on the way that art can derange the subject. Prager's treatment of Kleist is his weakest chapter. In his discussion of the Eucharist in Catholicism as the material presence of Christ, Prager's assertion that the substance of transubstantiation is "something akin to matter" (168), is contrary to the doctrine of substance found in Aristotle and Aquinas that informs transubstantiation. More compelling is his treatment of Eichendorff's novella *Das Marmorbild*. Following a hint from Adorno, Prager focuses on a thematization of narcissism that undercuts the categories of "self" and "other."

Clearly written and deeply informed with both the primary and secondary materials, Prager's book is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the visual aesthetics of perception among the romantics. His final goal is twofold: to read visual experience as found in both the writings and paintings of the German romantics, but also to underline and foreground the role of the subjectivity in constructing the visual experience, the problem of the self, and the text. This pertains not only to the gaze of the writers and artists under scrutiny, but more fundamentally to the gaze of the readers of the book.

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Thomas Pfau, **Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy 1790–1840**. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. 572 pp.

To praise Thomas Pfau's book as an impressive scholarly work is not a stretch considering it shares Pfau's shrewd reading skills of German and English Romantic literature through the lens of such diverse theoretical figures as Freud, Lacan, Heidegger, Benjamin, and Adorno. The manuscript's tripartite structure of paranoia, trauma, and melancholia attempts to provide a "psychohistorical narrative" of romanticism along the chronological axis of the French Revolution (1789–99), the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), and post-Napoleonic repression (1815–40) without succumbing to a traditional, linear narrative. Instead, Pfau continues to practice eloquent dialectical twists and turns when and wherever a linear argument might settle in for an all too comfortable resting point. Last but not least, the book deserves commendation if for no other reason than Pfau's writing style that is as articulate as it is methodologically transparent. Only against new historicism does Pfau employ a polemical tone in order to ensure that his own interpretation skills shine all the more vis-à-vis "the garden-variety methods of associative or contextual rumination" (24), i.e., the alleged historicist's inferior epistemological framework (193).

Pfau's point of departure is that emotion, and its more manifest configuration of mood, cannot and should not be reduced to an irrational expression or passion that lacks cognitive verification. Rather, he sees mood as "the deep-structural situatedness of individuals within history" (7). While Pfau concedes that mood