

Brad Prager.

Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism: Writing Images.

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture.

Rochester: Camden House, 2007, Pp. 287.

In Brad Prager's new book, "image" evokes an array of associations and meanings that collectively express the many faces of German Romanticism. It stands in for an expression of subjectivity in which the visual perception of a separate outside world gives way to a process of imagination that simultaneously affirms and produces the subject's centrality. Imagination is inevitably tied to a "philosophy [that] established a mediating veil between the outside world and the perceiving subject" (6). Taking Kant and Fichte as point of departure, Prager sketches his "philosophical approach [. . .] that is concerned with the dilemmas and contradictions surrounding the self-producing subject" (3). Whereas Kant, in the *Critiques*, set out to work with the dichotomy of noumenal and phenomenal realms, he ultimately revolutionized philosophy by positing perceptions as a priori spatial and temporal categories to which objects conformed (cf. 5). This, in turn, enabled the Fichtean division of the subject (*Ich/Nicht-Ich*) that Prager correctly identifies "as an originary moment for the understanding of Romantic epistemology" (4). But throughout the book—and with renewed emphasis in the conclusion—Prager illustrates the watershed moment, "the opening of a gap," that Kantian philosophy represented (227). By applying his approach to works by a broad range of Romantics—including but not limited to the writers Wackenroder, Tieck, Brentano, Kleist, and Eichendorff, and the painters Friedrich, Koch, and Runge—Prager emphasizes another role of the image: as a figure in which verbal and visual arts intersect, even merge in symbiotic unity, and which thus becomes an epitome of Romantic aesthetics. That Prager interprets Romantic literature and painting through the lens of philosophical approaches is a strong feature of the book and makes it a model of new cultural studies. In addition, he considers the reflection about sculpture and painting in poetic texts as well as the reflection about images in the artists' aesthetic, political, and theological writings.

Following the introduction, which culminates in the cogent statement that "Romantic aesthetics was compelled to produce new inner divisions" (15), Prager begins his argumentation with a reading of "Lessing's Laokoon as a Prelude to Romanticism." In the six subsequent chapters, he offers dazzling readings of various permutations of image

and imagination. By organizing these chapters around conceptual pairs that signify the “new inner divisions” and engender opposition as well as complementarity, Prager ends up writing a Romantic text: Not only have these pairings become synonymous with the rhetoric of Early Romanticism (e.g., symbol and allegory, sublimity and beauty, light and dark), but by moving from chapter to chapter and implicitly evoking these pairings as metaphorical or metonymic replacements of each other, Prager reminds this reader of the style of Early or Jena Romantic discourse. The result is a solidly researched book that combines close readings of Romantic writing and painting with review and critique of scholarship as well as with excursions into other moments of literary and cultural history (e.g., Virgil, Winckelmann, Goethe, Jakob Böhme). But *Aesthetic Vision* also invites debate, continued research and, on occasion, objection.

To open the study with the Lessing chapter seems a bit risky. Though Prager reads the famed essay vis-à-vis Kant and proposes to treat it as a variation of the same questions that propelled Kant’s *Critiques* (17), the chapter bears the latent tendency of being considered (and remembered) as a competing model for reading the relationship between word and image, as well as between verbal and visual arts, in the subsequent chapters (cf. 34). The author seems to further this impression by describing Lessing’s *Laokoon* as a “negative example” (2) and as a prelude, even as “a foundational moment” (17) of Romanticism, although elsewhere the competition between Lessing and Kant seems intended rather than coincidental (chapter 2; 75–77).

In the subsequent chapters, the author eventually dissolves this potential problem. Chapter 2, on Wackenroder’s *Herzensergießungen* and Tieck’s *Sternbalds Wanderungen*, takes up Lessing’s theory in the thorough interpretations of the role of art works in these texts; at the same time, we witness the evolution of the inner image (phantasm) in Romanticism, which Prager views as “wholly consistent with idealism’s break from the phenomenal world” (65). The third chapter similarly employs Lessing and Kant, as it juggles the discerning nature of images in Brentano’s *Godwi* and the fleeting nature of language, the tension between “temporal and static referentiality” (86). In that, *Godwi* mimics the Romantic rhetoric of symbol and allegory—which is aptly reflected in the chapter’s title. Prager refashions this rhetoric as an expression of the representational gap opened up by Kant’s philosophy: “With respect to the emergent Kant crisis, the symbol represents the old and allegory paradoxically represents the new” (92).

From here on, Kant clearly takes precedent over Lessing. In chapter 4, the first devoted to visual artists, Prager uses the Kantian categories of the sublime and the beautiful to compare and contrast Friedrich and Koch as well as to delineate a radical, Romantic subjectivity which is constituted by preserving the irreconcilable differences between subject and object in the act of looking. The chapter is as enlightening as chapter 5, where Prager explores the use of light and darkness in Runge's works. A chapter on Kleist—which intertwines close textual reading of "Die heilige Cäcilie" and "Der Findling" with an examination of Kleist's infamous *Kant-Krise*—and the chapter on Eichendorff's *Marmorbild* complete the study. Both elucidate the underlying modernity of Romanticism by guiding us toward problems of identity, representation, and the psychological turn in formulations of subjectivity.

In short, *Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism* presents a series of readings that any further study of the subject must consider.

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Alice A. Kuzniar.

Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship.

Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. Pp. 215.

It is not that often that I come across a review of an academic book in *Bark* (Jan/Feb 2007), but this is just one of many unusual experiences I have had with Alice Kuzniar's *Melancholia's Dog*. Other examples include the exquisite pleasure of reading this wide-ranging philosophical exploration; the yearning that it evoked in me; and the exhilaration of discovering a book on the dog-human bond that transcended the potential pitfalls of sentimentality, kitsch, or the Disneyesque. Do you have to have a dog to appreciate Kuzniar's meditation on topics such as "muteness," "shame," "intimacy," and "mourning"? I do not think so. I can read Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" without ever having had a cat and understand the epistemological questions he raises. Kuzniar's book is similar. She has written an interdisciplinary treatise on the nature of language, melancholy, human bonding, shame, desire—as only a few of the topics she broaches—but the product of this inquiry, her conclusions, are not the most important feature of this book. Instead,