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Review of Thomas Pfau, Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840.

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Thomas Pfau, Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xii + 572 pp. ISBN 0801881978.

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Thomas Pfau's seductive title, *Romantic Moods*,invites the reader to no intellectual dalliance. A hefty enterprise (just under six hundred pages) of British and German romantic criticism, *Romantic Moods* encompasses three categories of psychic distress that demand upfront serious engagement. Pfau addresses a major preoccupation of both current critics and romantic period writers: emotion. Rather than directing his inquiry by one dominant approach (as recent studies by Philip Fisher, Martha Nussbaum, William Reddy, and Rei Terada exemplify), Pfau integrates a three-pronged analysis of the topic, comprising "literary, historical, and psychoanalytic explanation" (191), all of which he subordinates under the term "mood." For Pfau, "mood" emblematizes not solitary individual expression, for which the lyric is a traditional vehicle, but a mode of social and historical cognition that manifests itself across patterns of "rhetorical and formal-aesthetic" practice. By focusing on a notion of mood that, following Heidegger, "takes the temperature of conscious historical existence" (13), Pfau adopts a "more rewarding" strategy for interpreting the expressive scope of romantic writing (7). His complex combination of conceptual analysis, historical narrative, and close literary reading -- each undertaken with equal thoroughness and rigor -- generates an ambitious, substantive, and provocative text.

Pfau's theory of mood locates his study within a flourishing contemporary debate on emotion. On the central question of emotion's cognitive or physiological basis, Pfau's emphasis on European romanticism and post-Kantian philosophical and literary writing jettisons the idea of the body's unreflective expression of emotion. Rather than a "spontaneous overflow" of bodily responses, feeling for Pfau "comprises an over- not underdetermined knowledge of how the subject is embedded in the world" (68). Building on Nussbaum's argument, Pfau characterizes mood as constitutive of, rather than disruptive to, knowledge, thought and action: it consists of "an intrinsically evaluative experience" (12). Whereas Terada argues that emotion is a nonsubjective phenomenon that originates in "cognitive difficulty," Pfau conceives emotion rather as an "intelligential" or cognitive "longing" that "search[es] for its own cause" (15); its corresponding embodiment in behavioral or literary form exhibits not an intelligence blockage but an intelligence quotient. Such an "epistemology of emotion" suggests Adela Pinch's work, which Pfau echoes in his own efforts to deracinate romantic emotion from its putative origin in the "sincere"

individual to expose the social saturation of its making. But whereas Pinch casts emotion as a "contagion" transmitted via reading and writing, Pfau conversely proffers reading and writing as symptomatic of underlying emotion, or mood.

Pfau significantly reorients the study of romantic emotion from "passion" to "mood." Developing his theory of mood through a philosophical lineage spanning Kant, Novalis, Hegel, Heidegger and Freud to the Frankfurt School, Pfau adopts dispositional rather than situational emotion as his critical paradigm, one in which *Dasein* adheres to "irreducibly historical" parameters (11). His volume hence delivers a tripartite history of British and German romanticism organized by a series of distinctive moods: paranoia (1789-1800), trauma (1800-1815), and melancholy (1815-1840). While questions arise concerning the extent of self-containment or permeability among the three affective epochs and about what exactly accounts for the "mood shifts" between them, Pfau's chronology is indeed suggestive. Asserting that the past "functions somewhat like the Freudian unconscious" (233), he frames each stage of romanticism as the effect of the modern subject's "embattled" (neurotic?) relation with the past -- an invented, "missed," or overdetermined past.

For the politically volatile 1790s in Europe, Pfau identifies paranoia as the abiding mood. Closely following Freud, he defines paranoia as a strategy of interpretation, which commits a subject to a narrative that imposes order on otherwise "inscrutable and inchoate" social and historical forces (80). In 1790s literature, paranoia manifests itself in the operation of "retroactive causation" by which the paranoid subject reads or writes the past in a manner that "retroactively" stabilizes and legitimates the present. While Pfau points out that the notion of a fixed past is necessary to sustain any sense of future agency (126-27), he also indicts the sense of a "fixed" -- institutionally determined -- past as the very source of paranoia. He therefore detects the thrust of suspicion behind texts by William Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft: while Blake suspects Anglicanism's systematic conspiracy against a true believer's "unique and inalienable spiritual intuitions" (100), Wollstonecraft suspects male-authored sentimentality of conspiring against "female enlightenment" (92). Pfau extensively demonstrates the affiliation of paranoia and narrative in William Godwin's novel, *Caleb Williams*, where the Jacobin protagonist's bid for political power through the narrative representation of his aristocratic employer's criminal past casts narrative itself as suspect of irrational drives. Pfau also witnesses this dialectical tension within the paranoid cognition of social forces in the 1794 treason trials in England. (Chapter Three details the alleged conspiracy involving activists Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall, and other members of the London Corresponding Society.) To historicize paranoia, Pfau shows how the 1794 trials revolve around mutually invented threats: the law is called to adjudicate a "constructive treason" evident in both the "prosecutor's narrative

of a defendant's highly coordinated . . . acts" and the "defense's critical interpretation of that narrative as an expression of the state's delusional fears" (156).

A period marked by such historical insecurity thus inaugurates romantic feeling in the mood of paranoia. Some of Pfau's preliminary observations here tend to rehearse familiar arguments regarding ideology as a conspiratorial matrix of unconscious forces coordinating and "perpetrated" by a cultural *habitus* (94). He thereby broaches the question of mood's relation to ideology. While both terms refer to a form of cultural substratum, Pfau suggests that while ideology is prescriptive and never fully knowable, mood is evaluative and *knowing*. In the latter cognitive vein, Pfau traces paranoia's Enlightenment heritage: paranoia responds to the Enlightenment's potentially untenable ideals of rational coherence. Emerging as a principle of historical control that entertains the possibility of "retroactive causation" through narrative production, paranoia's very striving for a hyperlucid accounting of contingent events betrays its contrary irrational impetus.

As modes of social and historical cognition, romantic moods hinge on an engagement with the past that ultimately reveals the romantic subject's anxious encounter with modernity. In Pfau's chronology, trauma succeeds paranoia in characterizing the central romantic epoch, where instead of retroactively constructing the past to master inchoate modern conditions, the subject traumatically confronts these conditions only belatedly as a previously unacknowledged history. Pfau applies Cathy Caruth's influential theory of trauma as a history that "can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" to a reading of the ballad genre (Caruth 18, qtd. in Pfau 194). In German as well as British romanticism, the ballad stages "a comprehensive recovery and advocacy of 'ancient' folk culture" (229), exhibiting a fixation on nostalgic, pastoral ideals, which for Pfau reflects a traumatic symptomatology. Regarding the culminating poem of William Wordsworth's 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, "Michael," Pfau proposes that a symbolic insistence on the local values of landownership and filial bonds indexes a misrecognition of England's transformation from an agrarian to a market economy, a historical shift that presses the eponymous shepherd toward a catastrophic awakening. The poem's formal departure from the preceding ballads (Wordsworth identifies "Michael" as "A Pastoral Poem") reproduces this kind of awakening in Wordsworth's analogous recognition of the ballad genre's rhetorical and epistemological limitations (192-3). Pfau likewise posits an enigmatic juxtaposition in early nineteenth-century German lyric between romantic conservatism (*Altkonservatismus*) and postmodernism. Reading poems by Joseph von Eichendorff, he argues that the lyric recalls the past "not as an empirical reference point" but (embodied in mood) as "a simulacrum enabling the subject to mediate (albeit strictly *ex post facto*) its own traumatic exodus into the present" (263-64).

Pfau's configuration of trauma in this manner revises the trope of romantic nostalgia. Romantic lyric's characteristic longing for the past, from Pfau's viewpoint, in fact dissimulates an incipient awakening to modernity. In this light, Wordsworth's model for lyric poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility" implicates less an objective memory than a defensive illusion, under which trauma threatens to displace "tranquility." What might appear in British and German romanticism as a conservative reprise of folk tradition alternately suggests a postmodern overture: lyric engages the past in order to retrieve and to "encrypt" a "missed" encounter with historical cataclysm -- with, as Pfau specifies, the "sudden and all-consuming arrival of economic, sociocultural, and political modernity between 1789 and 1815" (269).

Romanticism's third and final affective epoch in Pfau's schema negotiates not a fictionalized or unregistered past but an overdetermined one. Pfau again stresses the modernity of late romanticism by locating its characteristic mood -- melancholy -- on the order of the signifier. Moving from Freud toward Heidegger, Pfau defines melancholy as the effect not of an unconscious loss within the subject but of a "lucid despair" over the subject's depleted expressive resources (338). Melancholy arises within a "thoroughly overdetermined world in which all objects, identities, and possible forms of action appear owned and exhausted a priori" (326). Pfau recognizes this lament over the fundamental loss of a vital signifier as the "very essence of post-Waterloo literature and culture," which he finds evident in Jane Austen's narratives of "calcified" social life and in Keats's "studiously patterned" early poetry (328, 324). He argues that Keats contests the high romantic paradigm of authentic lyrical expression by constructing in lyric a mere simulation of feeling through a "verbal finery" of banal literary signs. Through the nineteenth-century figures of the "Cockney" and the "German Jewish" poet, Pfau traces the sense of social and linguistic alienation that motivates them to magnify, subversively, the "commodity status" of literary language. In Heinrich Heine's poetry, he thus elaborates his understanding of melancholy as an excess (not a deficiency) of knowledge, including insight into the "determinants and constraints that delimit the subject" (392), implicating melancholy inextricably with *ressentiment*. From Austen and Keats to Heine, Pfau exposes satirical energies fueled simultaneously by nostalgia *and*aggression in the wake of derivative cultural conditions.

In his analysis of melancholy as the final romantic mood, Pfau diverts attention from the familiar romantic ideal of creativity to a postmodern model of simulacra. After 1815, in Pfau's view, romantic writing reflects not an autonomous subjectivity but only the stylized reproduction of outlived signifiers pointing to an "atrophied interiority." According to Pfau, melancholy "expressly identifies as a self-conscious, fatigued, indeed symptomatic form that disables the (romantic) paradigm of spontaneity and expressivity before our very eyes" (326). Hence he daringly attributes the "intensity" of Keats's verse from *Endymion* to "To Autumn" to the "abject

status of the word," to a mere "hypostatized value retroactively inferred," thus to the melancholic effect of simulacra (352, 341, 345). Romantic melancholy signals a "new cultural epistemology" that in recognizing the thoroughly "simulated and textual" conditions of modern culture mourns the absence of originality, of authentic agency, and ultimately of self (359) -- a movement that for Pfau links late romantic poets like Keats and Heine to existential psychology and avant-garde aesthetics.

Across the trajectory of paranoia, trauma, and melancholy, Pfau's project of historicizing romantic emotion through the paradigm of mood appears curiously to dissolve "romanticism" itself. In addition to his historicist objectives, Pfau organizes his study by a sophisticated psychoanalytic framework. By claiming that the past functions like the unconscious, he interprets romantic literature not as evading (or repressing) the past, but as "maintaining a dialectical relation to history" (227). The subject's underlying historical entrenchment becomes legible through an encryption in literary language as mood. Much as the psychoanalytic ego shuttles between the conscious mind and the subterranean shaping force of the unconscious, a subject experiences the romantic period as a battleground on which it braces for consciousness of an impinging modernity by negotiating the past. Issuing symptomatically as paranoia, trauma, and melancholy, this dynamic historical processing functions by way of simulacra -- whether as retroactive causation, a simulated retrieval of an unacknowledged history, or the fetishized reproduction of derivative signifiers. By emphasizing *simulacra*, a historical haunting of the literary text, Pfau's theory of mood destabilizes high romantic ideals, such as originality, authenticity, autonomy, and sublimity, which wish to transcend historical contingency. Pfau seems to draw a direct line from the Enlightenment to the postmodern, from a paranoid standard of "overdetermined knowledge" to the melancholic condition of "atrophied interiority." His history of romantic emotion thus allows little moment for the genesis of a robust, creative romantic subjectivity, which it consequently surrenders to critical reevaluation.

If the sublime subject comes under scrutiny in Pfau's study, the study itself assumes sublime proportions. Its hybrid critical schema fills out a capacious volume that can overwhelm the reader with a sense of excess erudition. While the different trajectories of theoretical, historical, and literary reading might occasionally seem digressive or disorienting, its formalist component of astute close reading of wide-ranging textual material adeptly crystallizes Pfau's complex arguments. Pfau's thoroughness in concept and demonstration of his theory of mood will reward the reader's tenacity. In addition to incisive commentary on individual authors and works, particularly on Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and on Keats and Heine, Pfau's enterprising project makes important contributions to the intellectual history

of emotion, to British and German cultural history, and to an ongoing rethinking of romantic studies.

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