

Review In Depth

(Un)readability of Paul de Man

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The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man
by Rodolphe Gasche

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Gasche protests far too much, initially. Perhaps more than what de Man asks for.

True, de Man was a maverick critic (who died in 1983), and many think of him as the American version of Derrida, known equally for radical departures in theory, though not as prolific, as well known as the latter. Gasche writes that de Man's 'prose is dense, opaque to the point of obscurity; the sequence of the arguments is unfathomable...' (p. 1). Other caveats follow thick and fast: His principle of negation destroys all positives and positions, and it is 'torture...reading him' (p. 3). Besides, Gasche adds, there are others who find him 'morally wrong,' 'nihilistic' and even 'outlandish.' Moreover, de Man is ultra radical when he analyses language: he denies any vital or meaningful link between the linguistic and the phenomenal. If this were true, if the subtle dissymmetries working within language to which de Man insistently draws our attention through his theories yield no valid knowledge of the external world, then any intervention in the world or its language would be pointless. Gasche almost gives up on de Man in his preface. Take a look at his critical terminology, and you will conclude, Gasche writes, that his is 'a private language...a critical idiolect.' He shifts his terms through a 'strategic transcoding' (a phrase that Gasche borrows from Frederic Jameson) into incompatible domains of discourse.

Yes, de Man is impossible.

But this is only a ruse on Gasche's part. 'Let me not hasten to a conclusion,' he tells us in a seeming act of salvaging after so much savaging! There is surely something ascetic about de Man, something akin to Nietzsche. With an ascetic rigour he probes into the nature of language, especially the literary and philosophical language through what Gasche calls the 'wild card of reading' which de Man plays as his very 'singular' critical act. 'Singular' being a favourite term with Gasche,

he uses it with rapid frequency to make his points. For de Man is at odds with all critical disciplines past and present, and anyone with a sense of certainty about any theory should be worried about such a 'singular' achievement.

Stoical Pursuit

de Man's 'singular' achievement is based upon an almost stoical pursuit of a set of core problems. How do we read, specially the literary and philosophical texts? What is the nature of language in general, and in specific discourses? What is rhetoric, what is literariness? Does reading come up against the principle of negation implicit in language? How do metaphor, allegory, and irony function in it?

First, the question of language. The nature of language is what shapes up our ways of reading. Or is it the other way round: our reading frames, habits determine our perception of the nature of language? Either way one is up against a series of paradoxes. Language is autonomous, has its own internal rules, and its reference structures are immanent. You can't confuse these referrals with phenomenality. The second facet of language is mimesis. 'Mimesis is a discrete trope; language can imitate a nonverbal entity but it makes no identity claims. It is an intralinguistic event which makes possible a mimetic relation and thereby fosters an 'aesthetic mistranslation' (p. 134). de Man, in short, denies language its ability to tell us anything about the world. Language is intrinsically disruptive, and nothing worthwhile can get said in language. Every effort to pursue a reference only returns it to the inquiry about the ontology of language, its nature to be itself, materially, tropologically. But de Man concedes that all is not language, and that outside language there exists the phenomenal world. However, if this world is not amenable to language—for there are resistances to and within language—it

can still be mastered by perception. But the belief that language helps control, understand phenomena is to indulge in 'aesthetic ideology'.

de Man also invokes the classical trivium, grammar, logic and rhetoric, when he contemplates the nature of language. 'Grammar is an isotope of logic,' writes de Man. We know that grammar is closely allied to logic, and is often at odds with rhetoric. The role of rhetoric within language has always been unpredictable, problematic. Seizing hold of rhetoric, de Man makes it his paradigmatic term. The field opens up with the trivium, and language provides manifold options. Grammatically it can assert unities, affirm, totalize. It can, the way Kant propounded aesthetic judgement, unify aesthetic and rational, imaginative and empirical, anthropomorphic and the tropological. At the semantic level, however, it can undo all assertions, upset all systems of thought, coherence, totalization. It can, perhaps, through iterative negation hint or foreshadow affirmation, though this aspect of language does not interest de Man, for he would be content to stop on the near side of negation. Language in, short, is visualized as a field of perpetual tension.

Now, how do we read? To read, in rudimentary terms, is to become at once aware of the materiality of the signifier. Since signifiers/words have their own internal rules, the linguistic and the phenomenal do not converge, words and deeds or objects are not continuous. de Man evolves a reading method which he calls 'mere reading,' or 'rhetorical reading.' That is his 'wild card.' This 'mere reading' brings up to the surface the latent tension mentioned above in the classical trivium, especially between grammar and rhetoric. Reading is like negative theology, it reactivates rhetoric, and proceeds to destroy 'via negativa all the sediments of meaning by which grammar covers language.' This kind of reading uncovers language to show how both epistemology and aesthetics intervene to commodify a piece of writing. Reading, for de Man, is a negative process in which the text is restored, as it were, to the bare facticity of language. It is in a sense the unreading of grammar by rhetoric—and what is manifest in this unreading are the raw workings of language.

When it comes to rhetoric, the story gets more complicated. For as one reads, one becomes conscious of two kinds of rhetoric at play in a piece of writing: one is the rhetoric of

grammar wherein rhetoric unread grammar, the other the rhetoric of tropes, and both scarcely coalesce. To get them to coalesce, to totalize is the act of aesthetic ideology. The 'mere reading' that de Man advocates is disruptive of both concepts and aesthetic totalization.

Aesthetic Ideology

What is aesthetic ideology for de Man? Aesthetics has always been the domain of philosophers who theorized on nature and the self rather than language. It is the principle of aesthetics to seek unity amidst disparate elements. And in seeking to unify, metaphor helps and is the clear villain. Metaphor is indeed the 'totalizing instance par excellence.' It treacherously levels all differences, subjugates them, and totalizes power. Metaphor has a strong political implication for de Man. Hence 'it can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent,' writes de Man (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 63). Yes, metaphor erases all difference, presupposes a 'necessary link,' an 'organic link between the poles of exchange' (p. 22). All metaphysical systems are totalities precisely because the positing of resemblance between the terms erases their difference. They further acquire the status of a natural process, hence the alleged superiority of metaphor/symbol over metonymy, of the grammatical over the rhetorical, of the philosophical over the literary (p. 22). de Man is almost obsessively wary of all forms of totalization. For him, therefore, rhetorical criticism raises political awareness, and resistance to all forms of entrenched ideology. de Man retranslates all metaphors/symbols into linguistic facts, totalizations of all kinds into rhetorical potential of the signifier. What he undertakes is a detotalizing operation, 'the detranslation of totalizing translations' (p. 34). Ideology is what confuses reference with phenomenality. And at the heart of aesthetic ideology there is a totalizing drive.

The next question is: what is it about the speech act theory that fascinates literary critics? It is, obviously, the performative aspect of the total speech act which includes as part of itself an act of reference. Here the emphasis is on the performative, not on the referential, the latter being possibly inscribed in the former. This sheer pragmatics of the linguistic act was a real breakthrough in philosophic thinking, thought J. L. Austin. For it

shifts the focus from language as truth to language as action. Though de Man is indebted to the speech act theory, especially to the notion of the performative, he was not very happy with it. The notion squarely rested on the idea of self-positing, an idea trapped in the metaphysics of subjectivity which disturbed de Man. de Man, after a brief spell under the influence of Hegel's emphasis on the notions of subjectivity, selfhood and consciousness, a legacy of German idealist philosophy, wanted to break free of this school of thought—which included other thinkers such as Fichte, Schlegel. When you posit an object, the positing presupposes the self-positing of a self. The self becomes an absolute presupposition in this context, and acquires the status of a transcendental self. For de Man it is not the subject that uses language as a tool, it is language that produces the self. de Man's critique, while interrogating these assumptions behind the performative, tries to reformulate the notion by allegorizing it as a figure. He rejects the concept of positing, of the performative which would constitute the totalizing 'explicating power ... associated with values such as presence and subjectivity.' Therefore the notion of the performative is rewritten in the context of truth as envisaged by Nietzsche and Heidegger as something intrinsically ambiguous. Even as it performs the language act, it undoes its own performance—for it both conceals and unconceals. One can see here how the notion of the performative has moved farther away from Austin! The performative is a figure, is structured like an allegory. And allegory as a figure is what de Man prefers to metaphor, and what motivates his theory of rhetoric.

Disfigured Metaphor

Now, what is allegory, and why does de Man prefer it to metaphor? Even though allegory happens to be 'the most general version' of metaphor, its stress on details, its use of literal signs entail no resemblance to the meaning intended by allegory. Often the allegorical meaning becomes secondary, to put it somewhat crudely, because the details could always assert their own meanings. The allegorical meaning and the literal meaning enjoy 'a relation of non-coincidence.' de Man envisages here a repetitive struggle between the two segments of meaning which turns the allegory into an open figure, 'into a figure of nonclosure' (p. 31). Since it nullifies any process of identification between the two segments, it 'is a

disfigured metaphor whose totalizing potential is metonymically laid out...in an endless process of narrative. The allegory is what permanently disrupts the totality specific of the figure of metaphor' (p. 31). de Man calls it 'ironic allegory' which is essentially deconstructive, and which eventually leads him to propound his theory of unreadability. Derrida endorses this view of allegory in his *Memoirs: For Paul de Man* when he says that the figure 'represents one of language's essential possibilities; the possibility that permits language to say the other and to speak of itself while speaking of something else...' Allegory and metonymy both are de Man's deconstructive tools which hold out in texts (literary and philosophical) against the powers of aestheticization.

With these new formulations, de Man looks upon text, textuality, as an agonistic field wherein a referent generated by the text subverts its grammar to which it owes its construction. But why subvert? one may ask. This is not so much a subversion as an activation of the principle of negation which de Man increasingly uses in his later writings, the principle emphasizing the irreducible asceticism characterizing his thought. Isn't de Man trapped in his own binaries? Can't contradictory forces, and their directionalities of meaning, coexist in the same text? It is surely the condition of an aporia, an unresolvable dilemma, but this condition need not necessarily promote the unreadability thesis of de Man. As he allegorized the performative, he also allegorizes the text: for a text enacts 'the narrative of its impossible closure ... its impossibility to become a whole' (p. 44).

Rhetoric and Difference

How about philosophical texts? Tradition establishes difference among disciplines such as philosophy, literature and rhetoric. Gasche states quite unambiguously that philosophy is a discourse of difference. However, in de Man's 'rhetorical reading', the principle of difference becomes the first casualty. If metaphor erases all difference, then isn't de Man negating the very principle of difference here? Gasche is obviously not very happy with what he calls de Man's 'highly disturbing practice of reading,' (p. 74). de Man reads Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche in a manner which foregrounds the literary, and the

sheer materiality of language. For him the literary is not something specific to literature. It is at work in all verbal events. Literature, rather flamboyantly, displays its figural character and thereby its instabilities of meaning, while philosophy hides its 'figural praxis' behind a facade of 'laboured constructs of meaning.' For instance, Nietzsche's critique of philosophy in de Manian terms is 'literary.' The philosophical claim to truth is literary. Literature even becomes 'the model for the kind of truth to which philosophy aspires' (p. 88). And de Man finally, as a kind of *coup de grace*, pronounces that 'philosophy turns out to be an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature' (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 115).

Now comes a sudden rupture by way of an appendix to the book wherein Gasche tries to come to terms with de Man's early wartime writings. It is a disruption brought about by time and history, which impedes Gasche's text from closing upon itself. Was de Man pro-Nazi, a 'collaborationist'? Yes and no. His anti-semitism at any rate is 'undeniably unpardonable.' But Gasche goes through a series of torsions in order to defend, condemn, yet extenuate, reprieve his protagonist. Finally, he admonishes that the early wartime journalism needs to be situated in the proper context—the spirit of which would put into question Derrida's theory of 'citational drift'. However—Gasche even moots the point—wasn't de Man also talking about the German 'national singularity,' not, as many would imagine, the German hegemonic culture? It is indeed a discursive tight-rope walk for Gasche.

In the final analysis, however,

there are perhaps excesses of theorizing in de Man's notion of resistance to theory. If, for instance, his unreadability principle is the result of such a resistance, a resistance immanent in language or in phenomenality, then doesn't this principle affect his own writing? That Gasche is able to come up with a fairly coherent account of de Man seems to prove the contrary! However, even his extreme positions are based upon an unassailable logic, a logic which no notion of the literary can disfigure. To sum up, de Man surely provides us with a counterforce against which one needs to test one's own theories.

Gasche's work is remarkable in many ways. His through-going interventions into philosophy, into all the intricacies of logic involved in de Man's structure of argumentation, and the conclusion that he comes up with, with strong reservations which occasionally get sidelined in his attempt to represent de Man—these would certainly remind the reader of the critic's dilemma, his being 'willing to wound but afraid to strike!' Gasche can hardly resist a paradox, nor can he those contingent moments of obfuscation whose allure characterizes one aspect of postmodernism. He instead belabours them all into submission in his rather laboured prose and cumbrous philosophical itinerary. It is to the credit of Gasche, however, that he enables the reader to learn to use his 'blindness' to get 'insight' into de Man's very 'singular', even, to use Gasche's other term, 'idiosyncratic' achievement.

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