

MASSIMO VERDICCHIO

Reading de Man on Kant and Schiller

The focus of my paper is that unassuming paper by Paul de Man on “Kant and Schiller” which almost seems an afterthought.¹ It is actually a “change of pace,” de Man writes, after the heavy going of previous lectures on Kant. In fact, de Man has not even written out the lecture, which spans more than 25 pages of text, since, “I am dealing with a much easier text,” Schiller’s. De Man tells us he is going “to improvise.” It is a lot easier to do that about Schiller than about Kant, “so there is no need for such detailed textual analysis” (129). What de Man is about to present is “more in the nature of an exposition than a really tight argument, more in the nature of a class than a lecture” (129). His lecture will be easier to follow than if he were to read it.

These auspicious beginnings, with the promise of a relaxed and easy listening, as only a class by De Man can be, does not last long. What appears to be an easy day for everyone concerned turns out to be not only heavy going but also not very pleasant. Though the structure of the encounter between Kant and Schiller is “not too difficult to explain” we are told that this relation, is “in itself complex.” Furthermore, de Man’s lecture has to do with two important issues, “one of very general historical importance,” the second pertains to the Messenger lectures that de Man has been giving.

¹ All references are to Paul de Man’s essay “Kant and Schiller” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, edited with an introduction by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). All page references are in the text.

The first one has to do with Schiller's reception of Kant and, in particular, his *Critique of Judgment*, and to the way he reads or misreads Kant. But there are also de Man's contemporaries who have misread or misappropriated Kant. Jackson Bates, for instance, who uses Kant "when he has something articulate to say about the humanities" or Frank Lentricchia who goes back to Kant whenever he wants to give "certain types of contemporary criticism which will remain unnamed ... their comeuppance" (130). These are devious uses of Kant, and Schiller's is not any the less so, in fact, his use of Kant may be even more tragic, if unintentionally so. Schiller's reading, in fact, is even more insidious than it appears to be at first. As de Man reminds us, when reading Kant, or texts like Kant, we are all Schillerians, that is, we readers as well as all those attending the Messenger lectures and listening to de Man's lecture, or taking his class. The list of Schillerians also extends to eminent philosophers. De Man gives the example of the early Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work which is Schillerian in tone, a tone which we also find "in a certain way in Heidegger." In fact, the "play" between Kant and Schiller is repeated between Schopenhauer and both the early and late Nietzsche, so that one could say that Nietzsche "de-Schillerizes" and "re-Kantizes" Schopenhauer. A similar relation is established with Derrida's reading of Heidegger where "Heidegger would play the role of Schiller" and "Derrida would then appear as being closer to Kant" (131) with respect, clarifies de Man, to "a certain claim for the autonomy and the power of the aesthetic which is being asserted in the wake of Schiller, but not necessarily in the wake of Kant" (131).

What de Man writes already does not forebode well if what is being said of Schiller also implicates a wider audience of readers, an audience of Schillerians of various degrees of resistance to de Man and to that "certain type of contemporary criticism which will remain unnamed", but to which most of all of them, or of all of us, would like to give their "comeuppance." The example of Kant's reception, in fact, does not have much to do with Kant. At issue is a "pattern" (130) of reading, a resistance to reading, in which we are all implicated.

De Man describes this pattern as a "regression" from the original, a way of bridging over difficulties, where that "something threatening" (130) present in Kant, is also present in texts "like Kant" where philosophy is at stake, or, in general, in the relationship between art and philosophy. [But not in literary texts, like Kleist's]. This bridging is an attempt to account for, "to

domesticate the critical incisiveness of the original” (130). The result, adds de Man, has been “a way of emphasizing, of revalorizing the aesthetic, a way of setting up the aesthetic as exemplary, as an exemplary category, as a unifying category, as a model for education, as a model even for the state” (130). Thus the matter of Schiller’s reading of Kant is of far reaching consequence and implication. A heavy burden for a paper given to a class, just to provide a change of pace.

No wonder, then, that what started out to be an amicable lecture in friendly surroundings should grow more difficult, if not more threatening. What started out as a benevolent atmosphere at these Messenger lectures has gradually grown sour. The audience is beginning to resent being put into difficulty: “Since I have now had questions from you and since I’ve felt some resistances ...” (131). By the time of de Man’s lecture on “Kant and Schiller” the atmosphere has deteriorated as some people in the audience has begun to grow weary: “You are so kind at the beginning and so hospitable and so benevolent that I have the feeling that...” De Man stops here, he meant to say that he has the feeling that his audience is no longer so benevolent and well-wishing as it was at the beginning, but he stops short, leaving it implied, and, in appearance, discounting it: “But I know that is not the case and there’s always an interesting episode in a series of lectures like that, I know that from experience” (131). De Man calls the hostility that is emerging “interesting” and a common occurrence since it happens, to him, all the time.

From what he says, it would seem that, usually, the resistance to de Man’s reading is initially hostile whereas this time he started out in an idyllic mood: “One doesn’t necessarily begin in as idyllic a mood as things were here.” And it did not take long before the friendly atmosphere changed. “But it does not take you too long before you feel that you’re getting under people’s skin, and that there is a certain reaction which is bound to occur, certain questions that are bound to be asked, which is the *interesting moment*, where certain issues are bound to come up”(131-32, my italics). De Man is not surprised by this turn around, he expects the “certain reaction,” as he expects the resistance which underlies it, as he expects the questions that “come up.” This is the “interesting moment” that we noted earlier, the moment de Man “de-Schillerizes” his audience’s aesthetic ideology and encounters its resistance. The threat inherent in de Man’s exposition, as in Kant’s, requires a Schillerization on the part of his audience, which is equally threatening, but in ways different from the threat posed by de Man, as he

later points out. De Man has a name for this “interesting moment”; he calls it “reversibility”:

Well, the topic that has emerged and which I didn't deliberately want to — or *which I didn't even know about, in a sense* — has been this problem of the question of reversibility, of the reversibility in the type of models which I have been developing on the basis of texts. (132, my italics)

The reversibility de Man has in mind has to do with his reading of Kant which Schiller erases, or abridges. Much has been written on this topic, but in this paper I am only interested in the reversibility going on in de Man's lecture with respect to his own Messenger audience. This is the reversibility that allows a text such as de Man's "Kant and Schiller" to be applicable to de Man and to his listening, or reading audience, where the latter's resistance amounts to a Schillerization of de Man, an attempt to bring back a balance which would reinstate the possibility of a meaning which de Man's notion of materiality in Kant threatens. The Schillerization, in other words, that overlooks the materiality of a text and reconstructs it into a system of meaning that produces aesthetic ideology. This reinscription is for de Man a *relapse* and not a reversal.

It will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition again. That relapse, however, is not the same as a reversal... the recuperation, the relapse, has to be distinguished from a reversal. (133)

On the contrary, the passage from trope, which is a cognitive model, to something which is not, a performative, for example, is, instead, “to some extent an *occurrence* which has the materiality of something that actually happens,” it has “truth value, it is true” (132), and it is, therefore, history. This process is irreversible. The relapse, instead, is a regression, a process like Schiller's reading of Kant that takes place in a temporal mode and, “it is as such not history” (134).

The notion of reversibility is not a deliberate theme de Man had set himself but “it has been brought out by a question” and therefore it is “more interesting than any other to me” (132). It is to this form of reversibility that I would like to turn to now, which emerges at the moment of an apparent confrontation between de Man and his audience, and occurs when de Man, after having stated that the total concern with the practical results

in a total loss with reality, in a total idealism (142), now accuses his audience of being like Schiller, of being equally at a total loss with reality. He accuses them, indirectly, of total idealism: “before you decide that, don’t decide too soon that you are beyond Schiller *in any sense*” (142, my italics). I would like to emphasize the phrase “in any sense.” I am sure de Man meant it in the positive sense that we all fall prey to this type of misreading when reading Kant, or those like Kant, who seem to threaten our deep seated beliefs in thinking, in philosophy, just as he stated in his reading of Hegel that we are all Hegelians. Now we are all Schillerians. But given what de Man states here of Schiller, which he did not do in Hegel’s case, not being beyond Schiller is equivalent to being a dupe, a self-deluded critic completely severed from reality.

If de Man at the beginning of his “Kant and Schiller” paper felt that he had outworn his welcome as a result of the Messenger lectures he had already given, with this paper, which amounts to a belittling of Schiller, with his insistence that none of his audience can consider himself or herself beyond Schiller, he has every reason to feel that his audience is now hostile to him. The fact that he also includes himself in the group does not, in any way, mitigate the accusation. As the one who has read the materiality in Kant’s text and Schiller’s erasure of that reading, de Man is, after all, the one-eyed man in the land of the blind. De Man’s albeit indirect condemnation of Schiller, amounts to a categorical condemnation of everyone present not only as a scholar but also as a teacher.

Whatever writing we do, whatever way we have of talking about art, whatever way we have of teaching, whatever justification we give ourselves for teaching, whatever the standards are and the values by means of which we teach, they are more than ever and profoundly Schillerian (142).

De Man leaves nothing to chance. Whatever we do as teachers and scholars we are like Schiller, and we live a total idealism, absolutely severed from reality. Not only as scholars, our insights are regressive with respect to the texts we read, but also as teachers our teaching is affected and is, similarly, regressive. De Man leaves us no way out. *Whatever* we do and say as scholars and educators we are “more than ever and profoundly Schillerian.” If anyone was well-disposed toward de Man at the beginning of his paper, he or she is now decidedly against him.

If at one level de Man is reacting against Schiller's aesthetic state, his hostility is also against the academic state, another enterprise that flourishes in the aesthetic state, or which is built on the principles of Schiller's conception of aesthetics and aesthetic education. What is at issue here are the bases of our "liberal system of humanistic education" (150) which is founded, precisely, on Schiller's system of aesthetic education, or, on our basic notion of "culture" as a whole, which is the same. It is based on the basic misconception that it is possible to move from an individual work of art to a "collective, massive notion of art," an art for the masses which, then, would assume "national characteristics," such as "the culture of a nation," and "a social dimension called 'cultural'" (150), out of which would emerge as "logical conclusion" a political institution which is the aesthetic state, as Schiller conceived it.

Some of the dire consequences of Schiller's philosophy is the popularization of philosophy. Philosophy, then, becomes the domain of men while art the domain of women. In either case we are confronted with a kind of knowledge which is "less rigorous, less scientific, and which is more popular" (154). Similarly, "considerations on education lead to a concept of art as the metaphor, as the popularization of philosophy". In this state "Kant is not taught. Schiller would be taught." As such, "the aesthetic belongs to the masses ... it belongs to culture, and as such it belongs to the state, to the aesthetic state, and it justifies the state" (154). De Man's implication is that our so-called liberal education, and all of us so-called liberal educators, are, unknowingly and indirectly contributing to forming a political order similar to Schiller's conception of an aesthetic state, from there to Fascism or Nazism the way is short.

De Man's surprising final quotation which is "not from Schiller" but turns out to be from Joseph Goebbels drives the point home, indirectly, that Schiller's mystification of Kant and his notion of aesthetic education, which is at the basis of our liberal educational system, is, paradoxically, a repressive conception that leads to the popularization and the massification of knowledge, and to a political state such as the one that characterized the Nazi state. De Man's surprising quotation from Joseph Goebbels' novel *Michael*, which could have very well been written by Schiller, makes this point even clearer. To say with Wilkinson and Willoughby, the editors of Goebbels's novel, that the comparison with Schiller's aesthetic state is "a grievous misreading" (155), may be correct, but this is not the point. As de Man points out, Schiller's reading of Kant is a misreading, but it is always a

question of misreading. The entire liberal state rests on a misreading and it is through a misreading that we eventually arrive at the aesthetic state and at the Fascist State.

De Man is situating the origins of Fascism in our own liberal education, in the misreadings that are at the heart of the thinking of our greatest thinkers and educators. It is almost “as if” de Man wished to defend himself against his detractors who, years later, will accuse him of being a Nazi sympathizer, once they discover the antisemitic writings that he, as a young man, published in a Nazi run Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*. It is “as if,” in his own defense, de Man were accusing his Messenger audience of being likewise, albeit unwillingly and indirectly, through the profession of their aesthetic ideology, the potential perpetrators of an aesthetic and Fascist state.

De Man is very aware of the risks he is taking in denouncing his audience. He anticipates what would happen to him for speaking out if he did not have tenure or if he did not have a well-established reputation.

And if you ever try to do something in the other direction and you touch on it you'll see what happens to you. Better be very sure, wherever you are, that your tenure is well-established, and that the institution for which you work has a very well-established reputation. Then you can take some risks without really taking many risks. (142)

De Man has always taken risks with everyone of his writings that chartered out new and untraveled ways of reading. Yet, he had never been, up to this essay, either so radical and accusatory or so conscious and verbal of the risks that his reading would generate.

The hostility to de Man and to his lecture on Kant and Schiller is confirmed by the question and answer period that followed his talk. Ironically, those present and who ask questions are some of the same people who will later criticize de Man: M. H. Abrams, Dominick La Capra, Christopher Fynsk and David Martyn. All of them are hostile to de Man's exposition and all prove themselves to be Schillerians. Although, Abrams claims that he is “not at all in opposition” to de Man's “illuminating analysis of Schiller” he would like to put it in a “different perspective” (155), that is, into an historical perspective. In this perspective, Schiller, especially the Schiller of *Aesthetic Letters* can be said that “he moves over Kant” and establishes more than any other predecessor the dialectical process for Hegel. After weighing the pros and cons of this historical approach and the

“risk of deconstructing those people,” Abrams suggests that his ultimate criterion for theory is profitability. “No matter how these people, no matter how Kant may have gotten into the bind in which he found himself by the history of his thinking, ultimately the aesthetic judgment is enormously useful for us in dealing with the aesthetic experience” (156-57). As for Schiller, “I think, Schiller, in his own way, too, is enormously useful for us in dealing with aesthetic experience” (157). In the exchange that follows, de Man and Abrams, go out of their way to appear to be in agreement when in fact they could not be disagreeing more and their viewpoints be further apart. Abrams’s notion of Schiller’s passing over Kant leads him to speculate on Schiller’s concept of the dialectic, which for him anticipates Hegel’s, and how this passing over implies a death, “something dies,” and a resurrection. The conclusion of the exchange between Abrams and de Man focuses around the notion of death. For Abrams, “death matters”, while for de Man death is only “a movement,” “a self-reflection”(158). Their dialogue concludes with the following exchange:

De Man: Well, I think that’s a wide area of agreement. The other thing that stands between us is death.

Abrams: I think death is important.

De Man: Okay. (158)

Considering that de Man at the time of this lecture in March 1983 was dying — he would die in December of that year — his answer to Abrams, “The other thing that stands between us is death,” becomes a poignant and revealing statement. What separates them is not only their views on Schiller but also death, which will soon take de Man. It is uncanny that Abrams would choose to bring up the notion of death to describe Schiller’s dialectic when he must have known that de Man was seriously ill. From what he says, however, it may be that he did not know the extent of his illness. De Man, however, must have certainly known that he was dying.

For Paul de Man, however, death is not a concept as for Abrams but something only too real. He views death as an occasion for reflection, and, perhaps, for taking risks. Having tenure and being secure in one’s job is perhaps not enough if you are going to denounce your colleagues as Schillerians, or as fascists. You can take such risks only if you are on the verge of death, and, if you can anticipate that some day soon, after your death, someone will discover your past and denounce you for it. One can

understand now, perhaps, why de Man went out of his way to give his audience a false sense of security, why he chose a style of delivery more proper to a class than to reading a lecture. It was meant to be Paul de Man's last lesson and testament, and his last radical, critical act. What separates us, today, from him, and even from Derrida, who just recently passed away, is not just their death, but the fact that while we are all Schillerians, they at least knew it.

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