

FORUM

A Note on The New Section, "Forum"

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Editor's Note:

The following article by Christopher Norris initiates a new section of the journal called "Forum," which invites succinct responses from readers that would be considered for publication in the next issue.

FORUM

"The Night in which All Cows are Black:" de Man, "mere reading," and indifference to philosophy

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I

Since the appearance of his first book on Derrida in 1986, Rodolphe Gasché has acquired a well-deserved reputation as one of the most astute and philosophically informed commentators on deconstruction.¹ During that time he has published a number of essays about Paul de Man – among them, most notably, "Setzung" and "Uebersetzung" and "In-Difference to Philosophy" – which have a strong claim to be the best things yet written on this strange, discomfiting, utterly distinctive and (at times) perversely idiosyncratic thinker. The present volume collects these previously published texts together with a good deal of new or extensively reworked material.² Of course this involves a degree of repetition between chapters, or some passages where Gasché returns to aspects of de Man's work that have received fairly extensive commentary at earlier points in his book. However, these passages are far from redundant, since he is always re-engaging with unresolved issues, or attempting to find some different (more adequate) approach to arguments that have so far eluded, baffled, or defied his best efforts of critical exegesis. Indeed the chief merit of Gasché's book – and one that sets it decidedly apart from the general run of commentaries – is its determination to take full measure of de Man's claims as a thinker whose work cannot be categorised according to any conventional understanding of "philosophy" or "literary theory." At times he is over-prone to endorse the view that de Man's thought is so original – so utterly unbeholden to conventional standards of truth, textual warrant, logical consistency, argumentative coherence,

1 Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the philosophy of reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986).

2 Gasché, *The Wild Card of Reading: on Paul de Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988). All further references given by page-number only in the text.

etc. – that those standards can simply have no place in any reckoning with its implications. Still Gasché very rightly resists the idea promoted by some literary theorists that deconstruction represents the final undoing of “philosophy” at the hands of rhetoric, or that a reading in the deconstructive mode is one that *de facto* subverts or discredits all the concepts and truth-claims of Western “logocentric” reason.

Indeed, a good portion of his book is devoted to showing just how far de Man’s writings depart from any normative idea of what counts as a valid philosophic argument or a duly accountable reading of texts in line with received scholarly-interpretive protocols. Nevertheless he very firmly rejects the claim that de Man was just a crafty rhetorician and perverter of truth whose work can be dismissed – now that we know about the notorious wartime journalism – as the product of a deeply corrupt intelligence anxious to invent sophisticated plays for covering its own intellectual and moral tracks.³ In this latter connection Gasché has a long closing chapter which steers an admirably clear-headed path among all the swirling claims and counter-claims provoked by the discovery of de Man’s articles in *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamse Land*. That is to say, it comes closest to achieving the right balance between frank admission of their often morally repugnant (at best opportunist and unprincipled) character and refusal to adopt the kind of high-handed approach that takes no account of their cultural-historical context, their resistance to cooption for the purposes of straightforward Nazi propaganda, and – most of all – the complete lack of warrant for counting his later “deconstructionist” work in any way continuous or subtly collusive with those none the less deeply compromised early productions.⁴ One may feel that Gasché is somewhat over-stating his case for the defence when he asserts that “[t]hey are not even sympathetic to the Nazi cause [but] are, primarily, interested in protecting Flanders’ independence” (258), or

3 See Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism: 1939-1943*, eds. Werner Hamacher et al. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) and *Responses: on Paul de Man's wartime journalism*, eds. Hamacher et al. (U. Nebraska P., 1989); also – among the more hostile or downright dismissive commentators – David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: deconstruction and the fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Jon Wiener, “Deconstructing de Man” and “Debating de Man,” in *Professors, Politics and Pop* (London: Verso, 1991), 3-11 and 12-22.

4 See entries under Note 3, above; also Jacques Derrida, “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s war,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14 (Spring 1988), pp. 590-652 and Christopher Norris, “Postscript: on de Man’s early writings for *Le Soir*,” in *Paul de Man: deconstruction and the critique of aesthetic ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 177-98.

again, that “de Man’s concern with national peculiarity represented for him at that time the major critical tool for resisting the occupation forces and Nazi ideology” (265). Also there is a problem – a logical tension – about claiming on the one hand that the early texts are more subtle, resistant, many-levelled (and so forth) than hostile critics have supposed while asserting on the other that those critics merely demonstrate their own obtuseness and malice by seeking out evidence of a continuity between the wartime journalism and de Man’s later work. Still, as I say, this chapter makes a strong case on textual, historical, political, and even ethical grounds for rejecting much of the ill-informed commentary and ill-disguised academic rancour that has masqueraded as moral outrage on the part of de Man’s detractors.

At any rate Gasché is quite justified in arguing that the de Man “affair” has very often served as a pretext for avoiding any genuine engagement with those questions that are raised with such singular insistence and force in his later texts. Chief among them is the claim for reading – “mere reading,” as de Man provocatively puts it – as a powerful resource for the unmasking of “aesthetic ideology,” that is to say, for revealing the kinds of naive, phenomenalist, or naturalised “commonsense” assumptions that have so far exerted such a strong hold upon our thinking about issues in politics, ethics, philosophy, and literary theory.⁵ There is no room here for an adequate account of de Man’s radically heterodox approach to these issues, nor yet for a summary of Gasché’s often just as difficult and at times even more tortuous exposition. Sufficient to say that de Man propounds a “materialist” (as opposed to a phenomenalist) theory of the text that insists on the sheer *literality* of reading – quite aside from thematic concerns – and which moreover rejects any kind of expressive, intentionalist, anthropomorphic, referential, metaphorical, symbolic, or other such interpretive strategy for ensuring that texts turn out to have a meaning in accordance with received values of truth, coherence and intelligibility. This “materialism” (which is also a radical formalism) involves the idea of a textual substrate made up of the mute, aseptic elements – the very letters of the text – upon which meaning is momentarily imposed through a series of arbitrary “positings” (*Setzungen*) that cannot be reduced to any order of intentional coherence or thematic continuity except by a kind of unwitting self-delusion on the reader’s part, a resort to some form of naive “aesthetic ideology.”

5 See especially de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984); *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986); *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. A. Warminsky (U. Minnesota P., 1996).

Hence de Man's contention (in his programmatic essay "The Return to Philology") that the phenomenalist error – that of presupposing some "natural" link between language, perception, and the realm of extralinguistic reality – is one which has characterised almost every school of philosophic and literary-critical thought, especially in the wake of Romanticism.⁶ Hence also his claim that a "resistant" reading must steadfastly abjure the various consoling illusions which have served to dissimulate the gap that opens up between language and world, thought and cognition, or the "material" elements of textual inscription and the "phenomenalist" appeal to modalities of sensory-perceptual experience. To go along with such illusions – so de Man argues – is not only to reveal a critically-disabling blindness to the workings of figural language but also, more crucially, to risk falling into a form of aesthetic ideology with potentially far-reaching ethical and political consequences. For we shall then be more easily persuaded by those forms of seductive organicist thinking which equate the naturalness – the preordained growth and development – of some particular language or culture with the power of expression vested in privileged tropes such as metaphor and symbol, figures which claim to transcend or to reconcile the various (merely prosaic) antinomies of subject and object, mind and world, or language and phenomenal experience. Undoubtedly this is where de Man's later writings can be seen to constitute – in Geoffrey Hartman's phrase – a "powerful though belated act of atonement" for the grievous errors of his wartime journalism.⁷ For whatever one's view with respect to their moral, political, or strategic ambiguities those writings very often endorse just the kind of national-aestheticist thinking that de Man was later to repudiate by every means at his disposal.

All the same, as many readers have felt, de Man's way of setting about this task was highly equivocal – not to say evasive – in so far as it seemed to undermine the very basis of ethical judgement, or the grounds for holding persons presently accountable for their own past actions and utterances. Such would appear to be the upshot of his theory (derived in equal measure from Fichte, Nietzsche, and a highly tendentious reading of Rousseau) where the self becomes a kind of radical fiction brought into being by momentary acts of "posting" which leave no room for any viable conception of substantive or

enduring personhood.⁸ "However one interprets positing in Fichte," Gasché writes,

its *Setzen* is not simply human. Nor is it to be mistaken for human law, for *Gesetz*. It is important to be aware of this, particularly because both Fichte's philosophy of positing and Austin's Speech Act Theory (which because of its notion of act is not to be mistaken simply for the act of speaking human beings) have been "humanized" in order to become applicable to a certain analysis of literature. (41)

No doubt this is faithful to de Man and also to de Man's reading of Fichte, refracted as it is through a radically formalist (and in his sense "materialist") theory of language that would treat the idea of continuing selfhood – or of present answerability for past speech-acts – as the merest of consoling "humanist" illusions, shown up as such through a reading attentive to the "autonomous," self-positing power of linguistic figuration. All the same it is (to say the least) a highly questionable thesis and one that Gasché is over-ready to accept without sufficiently considering either its dire ethical implications or the range of objections that could well be put from alternative philosophic standpoints. On his account "[t]he analogy between Fichte's principle of the unconditional identity of the self and the Act of Speech Act Theory cannot be overlooked," since "[i]n both cases it is by means of the purity of an 'act upon an act itself, which specific act is preceded by no other whatever,' that a subject becomes objective or that a speech act turns into an intentional act."⁹ But this is simply to ignore the whole range of contextual, institutional, social, cultural, interpersonal and suchlike factors which (according to Austin) must always be involved in any genuine speech-act transaction. Of course it may be said – with Derridean warrant – that there remain all sorts of unresolved problem with Austin's appeal to "context" as a means of distinguishing "normal" from "deviant" instances of speech-act utterance.¹⁰ Nevertheless even Derrida stops well short of suggesting – like de Man – that such appeals should be dismissed out of hand, or that performatives must somehow be conceived as issued by a

8 See de Man, *Allegories of Reading: figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

9 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (New York: Meredith, 1970), p. 153; cited by Gasché, p. 40.

10 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1963); Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph*, Vol. 1 (1977), pp. 172-97.

6 de Man, "The Return to Philology," in *The Resistance to Theory*, 21-6.

7 See especially de Man, "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Ueber das Marionettentheater*," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 263-90.

self-positing Fichtean Ego that leaves them suspended in a state of radical disjunction "preceded by no other whatever."

Thus it is hard to avoid the suspicion that one main purpose of de Man's late writings was to "disarticulate" every notion of ethical responsibility and thereby disown any lingering guilt for his *vita ante acta* as represented by that yet-to-be-discovered cache of articles in the archives of *Le Soir*. Moreover, those writings are subject to the charge that they merely replace one kind of "totalitarian" approach with another, more subtle but no less coercive in its claims to dictate what should properly count as a rigorous (undeluded) reading of texts. Gasché is well aware of this likely objection and indeed cites various passages from de Man – especially "The Resistance to Theory" – where he preempts the charge by frankly owning up to it in his typical "late" style of absolute, apodictic authority mixed with a deceptive tone of self-deprecating irony. Thus, for instance:

technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable. They are also totalising (and potentially totalitarian) for since the structures and functions they expose do not lead to the knowledge of an entity (such as language) but are an unreliable process of knowledge production that prevents all entities, including linguistic entities, from coming into discourse as such, they are indeed universals, consistently defective models of language's impossibility to be [sic] a model language.¹¹

As I have said, Gasché is not one to underestimate the sheer affront that such a passage must offer to all the normative standards – of logic, coherence, conceptual precision, definitional clarity, etc. – that are commonly taken to decide what shall count as a valid (or meaningful) statement. Nor is he prone, like so many of de Man's literary-critical followers, to treat any objection along these lines as a sure sign that the objector has failed to fathom the incomparable depth and rigour of his thought. Indeed Gasché is at pains to emphasise the extreme singularity of de Man's project, that is to say, its utter and complete "indifference" to the concepts, categories, and protocols of disciplined philosophic thought. Thus he is able to demonstrate, like others before him, that de Man more than once bases a whole elaborate structure of argument on a plain *misreading* of certain passages – for instance, in Kant or Hegel – which he annexes to his own heterodox purpose either through inaccurate translation of

crucial phrases or by supplying a gloss wildly at odds with their manifest purport.¹² (I forget who first made the joke about "DeMannuel Kant" but it does come persistently to mind when reading these essays.) Yet Gasché is still convinced – despite all this evidence of wilful misprision – that de Man's late work has a cogency and rigour that justify (indeed compel) the kind of closely attentive reading which his book sets out to provide.

II

Just why this should be is the chief question for any reviewer (myself included) who shares Gasché's fascination with that work but has come to suspect – after much hard reading – that the emperor's clothes, if not entirely absent, are distinctly threadbare in places. After all, what kind of "rhetorical reading" is it that, in Gasché's words, "focuses on the nonphenomenal and autonomous potential of language, rather than producing noumena, [and which] exhibits a fragmentary chaos of meaningless linguistic matter, repetitive mechanical rules, and absolutely opaque linguistic events?" (76). Not, to be sure, the kind that could have any place in that traditional conception of rhetoric (or of language, literature, philosophy, or the human and social sciences) which stands in the service of humanist values, and which de Man therefore takes as the chief target of a properly "rhetorical" reading. Gasché makes the point with particular force in a chapter ("Apathetic Formalism") where he contrasts de Man's peculiarly bleak or inhuman theory of language with the assumptions embodied in a canonical work such as Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.¹³ What "rhetoric" stands for here is the continuity of tradition and the power of language to communicate meaning across distances of time and culture through a shared sense of communal belonging to a concept of humanity that somehow transcends all the obstacles placed in its way. To de Man's way of thinking, on the contrary, this is the merest of naive humanist illusions, a consoling belief which must be rejected if we are ever to break the hold of that

12 See the essays collected in de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*; also Stanley Corngold, "Error in Paul de Man," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8 (1982), pp. 489-507; Raymond Geuss, "A Response to Paul de Man," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10 (1983), pp. 375-82; Christopher Norris, "Kant Disfigured: genealogy, critique and postmodern scepticism," in *The Truth About Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

13 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

pervasive "aesthetic ideology" which denies the stark truth of our linguistic predicament as revealed through a properly demystified reading in the prescribed (deconstructive) rhetorical mode.

In the end – and despite all his express misgivings – Gasché comes out in defence of de Man as a thinker whose absolute "singularity" places him beyond reach of criticism on any of the terms laid down by received forms of philosophical, ethical, political, or literary-critical judgement. Not that he advances this claim lightly or without a due sense of its outrageous character as measured against any reasonable standards of intellectual probity and truth. After all, "[i]f the material linguistic event has as such no relation whatsoever to a meaning intention, how then can it be said to make such intention possible or to subvert it?" (84). And again: what are we to make of a practice of reading which raises "indifference" to a high point of principle, or which refuses point-blank to meet the most basic requirements of interpretive fidelity, textual warrant, good-faith communicative purpose, etc.? Gasché puts the case with typical directness though also – just as typically – with a strong suggestion that de Man is so utterly unique a thinker as to place his work in a realm quite beyond those otherwise imperative requirements. "His is a world," Gasché writes, "of unrelated singulars, each so idiosyncratic that in it everything universal becomes extinguished; it is a world of heterogeneous fragments forming a whole only insofar as, by their mutual indifference and lack of generative power, they are all the same, endlessly repeating the punctuality of their lone is on the face of it adequate grounds for viewing de Man's entire project as a massive aberration of critical intelligence, a project driven by his maybe understandable need to find ever more complicated ways of "dissociating the cognition from the act" (de Man's phrase), or denying present responsibility for past deeds and utterances.

Gasché draws the line at such psychobiographical speculations, regarding them as merely a pretext for evading any real and sustained critical engagement with de Man's texts. No doubt this was the strategy adopted by many hostile commentators – David Lehmann and Jon Wiener among them – who seized on a few such passages taken out of context and used them as "evidence" in support of their case that de Man's work (and "deconstruction" in general) amounted to an all-purpose ploy for excusing any amount of collaborationist guilt.¹⁴ Still the absurdity of arguments like this should not be allowed to rule out other, more

considered attempts to understand de Man's later texts as at least in part designed to avoid any direct acknowledgment of the guilt-feelings engendered by the memory of his wartime journalism. It seems to me very hard to resist this conclusion when one reads (say) de Man on Nietzsche and the virtues of an active power of forgetting, a transformative or strong-revisionist outlook that would lift the dead hand of a merely "antiquarian" (truth-fixed) historical approach and leave us free to explore the full range of possibilities for self-redescription.¹⁵ And again, how else should we interpret those passages from his essay on Rousseau's *Confessions* where de Man treats of the confessional text as a "machine" for generating guilt, a narrative mode wherein past (maybe fictive or imaginary) misdemeanours can be multiplied at will, and thereby offer a pretext for claiming all the more credit for frank and fearless self-exposure? Thus "what Rousseau really wants" – in recounting the episode of the servant-girl Marion whom he falsely accused of having stolen a ribbon – "is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets ... This desire is truly shameful, for it suggests that Marion was destroyed, not for the sake of [Rousseau's] saving face ... but merely in order to provide him with a stage on which to parade his disgrace, or, what amounts to the same thing, to furnish him with a good ending for Book II of his *Confessions*."¹⁶ In which case, de Man concludes, such "honest" self-reckoning will always be subtended by a covert (self-justificatory) motive, one which "will indeed exculpate the confessor, making the confession (and the confessional text) redundant as it originates."¹⁷ No doubt – as Gasché would argue – this reading must be taken on its textual merits and not referred back to de Man's life-history in any vulgar-reductionist fashion. All the same, as so often in his later work, there is a need to explain why he should make such a capital point of collapsing the difference between fact and fiction, and moreover present it as somehow preferable – more honest, less self-indulgent – to refrain from "confessing" to past faults lest the speech-act in question turn out to be a form of roundabout self-exoneration.

It seems to me that Gasché goes too far in making allowance for the utter "singularity" of de Man's thought and the consequent need – as he sees it – to

15 See de Man, *Allegories of Reading*; also "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 142-65.

16 de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 285.

17 Ibid., p. 301.

suspend the normative criteria that apply in the reading of *all* texts other than those of Paul de Man. This claim is pushed hardest in a chapter on Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy" where Gasché points out – among other things – the persistence of certain quite traditional assumptions and values in Derrida's reading, among them the commitment to intelligibility and the principle that an adequate interpretation must in some sense do justice to the subtleties and complexities of the text in hand.¹⁸ The passage is worth quoting at length since it shows just how much he is willing to grant by way of special licence to de Man's very different "deconstructionist" approach.

The Derridean reading . . . does not presume that the rhetoricity of Plato's text fatally flaws any attempt to interpret and come to understand it. On the contrary, the way Derrida understands text, that is, as a structure of referral, invites productive readings, readings that not only weave new interpretative threads into it but compose so many rewritings of it as well. Like Derrida, de Man also assumes the referentiality of language, but this referentiality is strictly intralinguistic, and . . . always saturated by an exact opposite such that only negative knowledge is possible From the perspective of de Manean mere reading, Derrida's philosophical claim – that is, that an essential, however subtle, difference obtains between *logos* and *mythos*, concept and metaphor, philosophy and sophistics, even though this difference rests on a constituting commerce between the oppositions – is an aberration. In mere reading, relation to an opposite amounts to undermining all claims to distinctness [This] assumption . . . is, for de Man, a last hideout of the philosophical illusion of a reconciliation of language and the phenomenal world. (176-7)

Still there is the question – one that Gasché never quite brings himself to answer – as to whether de Man would be justified in laying this charge against Derrida's reading of Plato. For it is far from clear that a de Manean "reading" could come anywhere close to the level of intelligence, analytic acuity, conceptual rigour, and long-range textual-interpretive grasp that distinguishes Derrida's Plato commentary.

As I have said, there are some (albeit muted) indications that Gasché is uneasily aware of all this and that he knows full well the strength of those counter-arguments that would see nothing more to de Man's late work than a single-minded will to "disarticulate" every last notion of truth, meaning, and

ethical responsibility. What allows him to keep these doubts at bay is the fact that so much of his book is couched in a style of oblique or free-indirect paraphrase which remains indeterminate as between neutrally reporting what de Man has to say and signalling endorsement or at least qualified approval on his own part. Thus, for instance, "[e]verything besides language is of the order of phantasm, and it [language], therefore, must enjoy the unconditional interest of the reader. Its injunction is to be repeated, to be infinitely reenacted in the randomness, uniqueness, and incomprehensibility of its occurrence" (233). Well yes, one wants to say: so it goes in any number of passages from late de Man, and this can scarcely be faulted as an accurate account of what "occurs" – or what is supposed to occur – when we follow the letter of de Man's prescription for a properly "materialist" reading. However, Gasché never fully acknowledges the chief objection to this whole strange project: namely, that it cannot be carried through without ceasing to "read" in any genuine sense and adopting an attitude of stupefied indifference to everything except the mute, aseptic, sheerly "material" letters on the page. "In short," Gasché writes,

the literary and philosophical discourse are, for de Man, meaningful enterprises involved in forgetting or recuperating the non-phenomenal properties of the material and formal act of figuration, properties that come into view, as he insists, through figuration itself, precisely to the extent in which figuration is itself a repetition of the originary violence of positing. (85)

But then one has to ask how those figural "properties" could possibly "come into view," given de Man's absolute insistence on the "nonphenomenal" character of language (i.e., its irreducibility to the order of sensuous or perceptual-cognitive experience), along with his idea that figuration somehow *precedes and disrupts* any "meaningful" construal that we – or the deluded philosophers and critics – might wish to place upon it. Quite frankly I can make no sense of this claim and think that Gasché would himself be hard put to make sense of it if he exited briefly from the paraphrastic mode and took up a somewhat more critical stance toward de Man's mesmerising rhetoric.

III

There is (or used to be) a joke going the rounds of literary academe that the world was full of unwritten books and untutored critical theorists due to the massively inhibiting effect of de Man's teaching and writing. Gasché is untouched by this particular malaise but does show the symptoms of a variant condition, one that comes out in his curious unwillingness to press the kinds of

18 Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone P, 1981), 61-171.

question that would seriously challenge de Man's project with regard not only to its flagrant misreading of source-texts and its dubious philosophical credentials but also its motivating interests and purposes. Toward the end of his book Gasché proposes an unlikely comparison between that project and the logical positivists' attack on what they considered mere "pseudo-problems" in philosophy. Such were the problems that typically arose when thinkers relinquished the firm ground of empirical observation and logical reasoning and yielded to various forms of delusive "metaphysical" abstraction.¹⁹ As Gasché sees it, "de Man's critical debunking of all attempts to unify, or gather, though considerably more intransigent, is not unrelated to the Vienna School's critique of metaphysics, in that it proposes a categorical abandonment of all traditional philosophical issues" (232). Well, to be sure, everything is related to everything else if one frames the terms of comparison broadly or vaguely enough. Still there is a vast difference – except (of course) from de Man's undifferentiating viewpoint – between the logical positivists' idea of philosophy as a science-led quest for rigour and precision in the assessment of various theories, methods, truth-claims, observation-statements, etc., and an approach like de Man's that would utterly repudiate all such pointless philosophical strivings.

Gasché pretty much acknowledges this when he proceeds to develop the comparison. Thus:

Whereas the logical positivists relinquished many traditional philosophical problems as meaningless because no empirical (or rather material) truth criteria could be provided to verify them, de Man abandons them in their entirety because the criteria for there to be truth have been expanded to such a degree as to definitely foil all possibility of judgment. The criterion being the total transparency and absolute coinciding of the way meaning is conferred and meaning itself, all one is left with is hopeless juxtaposition, disjunction, contradiction, and so forth. (232-3)

Now it may be said that logical positivism itself ran afoul of various contradictions or internal anomalies, among them – most famously – the fact that the verification-principle could not be stated in terms which satisfied its own stringent condition, i.e., that in order to count as "meaningful" a statement must be *either* empirically verifiable *or* self-evidently valid in virtue of its logical

form.²⁰ However, these objections clearly arose from a mode of critical analysis that continued to respect all the basic criteria – of logic, consistency, definitional rigour, self-reflexive application, etc. – which have long been taken to define what counts as an adequate philosophical argument. In other words they are as remote as can be from the kind of relentlessly "debunking" approach – or the attitude of downright cavalier indifference to all such operative concepts and distinctions – which Gasché takes as the hallmark of de Man's late writing.

I must confess to having no idea what he means by his claim that, with de Man, "the criteria for there to be truth" have somehow "been expanded to such a degree" that there remains no "possibility of judgment" (as between meaningful and meaningless statements) in the old, presumptively deluded logical-positivist manner. Some clue is perhaps offered by the next sentence where Gasché holds out the impossible ideal of a "total transparency and absolute coinciding of the way meaning is conferred and meaning itself," failing which – so the passage implies – we are compelled to follow de Man into the morass of "hopeless juxtaposition, disjunction, contradiction, and so forth." But there is no reason to grasp either horn of this false and absurdly overstated de Manean dilemma. That it has seemed persuasive to some literary theorists – even a few with well-developed philosophical interests – may to some extent be explained by the problems with logical positivism and also (as Quine pointed out in a well-known essay) with its logical-empiricist successor movement.²¹ However those problems are as nothing compared to the confusions that result – or that would result if the project could be carried through – from de Man's attitude of resolute "indifference" toward all such strictly indispensable concepts, categories, and distinctions. To call them "indispensable" is of course to deny what Gasché finds so compelling about de Man's arguments despite and against his own admission of their weakness on just about every count when assessed by normative (philosophical) standards of probity and truth. Still there is something odd – even perverse – about his constant willingness to give those arguments the benefit of the sceptical doubt when that doubt is pressed so far beyond the limits of rational intelligibility.

20 For a lively and informative recent account, see C. J. Misak, *Verificationism: its history and prospects* (London: Routledge, 1995).

21 W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1961), pp. 20-46.

19 See especially Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (New York: Free P, 1959), pp. 60-81.

It is perhaps worth recalling, in this context, that one main target of the logical positivists' critique was that strain of Heideggerian depth-ontological thinking which likewise claimed to penetrate beyond the entirety of "Western metaphysics" to a realm of authentic truth-as-unconcealment (*aletheia*) which had been covered over throughout the history of Western post-Platonic thought.²² Gasché takes Heidegger as his prime authority for asserting that "singular" thinkers – such as de Man – cannot be held accountable to received (conventionally sanctioned) standards of interpretive warrant or fidelity to the text in hand. Here again the relevant passage needs quoting at length in order to bring out the contortions imposed upon Gasché's attempt to think the unthinkable in response to de Man's summons. In so far as such a thought informs de Man's writing, he suggests,

it is one that is so singular as to destroy its oneness and, with it, the unifying power that thought must be able to exercise to be the one thought in the first place. It is therefore a thought so singular that it risks incomprehensibility. Yet in that very risk it appeals to thinking, which must face the challenge of the uniqueness of such an idea. Uniqueness on the level of thought, however, is not only exceptional, as is often believed in total disregard of the essence of thinking. Uniqueness, ultimately, is what thought *itself* makes impossible. Although absence of uniqueness does in no way preclude the independence or autonomy of a thinking enterprise, thinking begins with the fallout of all uniqueness. Yet to have tried to think the impossible singularity, uniqueness of thinking in its universality, is what, forever, will make de Man's "impossible" thinking so *incontournable* for anyone who claims to be in the business of thinking. (113)

Confronted with a passage like this one is tempted to cite some of Carnap's withering comments on the kinds of obscurantist bewitchment by language to be found in Heidegger's work, that is to say, his idea of certain long-forgotten primordial truths that can be brought to light only by a thinking-back into the prehistory of (so-called) "Western metaphysics."²³ Ironically enough, one of de Man's early essays ("Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin") was mainly devoted to pointing out the errors and confusions that could result from this uncritical acceptance of etymology as a source of uniquely "authentic" interpretive

22 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

23 See Note 19, above.

insight.²⁴ Gasché is too intelligent and perceptive a reader to fall for any wholesale version of that fallacy. Besides, his own argument is for the most part conducted in a manner of careful and consequential reasoning which (thankfully) declines any such resort to *Völkisch* ideas of the wisdom enshrined in such primordial words. However, it is clear from the above passage that Gasché's claims for the utter "singularity" of de Man's thought – and hence for treating it as un beholden to commonplace standards of logic, rationality, and truth – have a great deal to do with Heidegger's notion of an authentic thinking which begins at the point where those standards no longer apply.

IV

Having myself published a book about de Man some twelve years ago, I should perhaps say something about my own, now very different view of his work.²⁵ Like Gasché I found it an enthralling, perplexing, in many way deeply disturbing experience which left me convinced that de Man must be wrong in some crucial and obscurely motivated way, yet also that his readings had an uncanny power to override many of the obvious objections that rose up against them on almost every page. In part that uncanniness came from his knack of preempting such criticism by applying it to others and then somehow contriving to present it as a chief virtue in their thought. Thus for instance, in the essay on Heidegger mentioned above, de Man makes a cardinal point of distinguishing between "errors" and "mistakes" in textual commentary, the latter due to mere carelessness, oversight, failure to notice salient details, etc., while the former result from the kind of strong-revisionist reading (like Heidegger's exegesis of Hölderlin) which fall into error by sheer necessity or force of interpretive will. So when Heidegger ignores some crucial exegetical point – as by silently eliding a negative or transforming a subjunctive-conditional construction into a straightforward assertoric statement – it is always (so de Man would have us believe) an "error" whose significance far transcends commonplace standards of scholarly-critical accountability. And of course there is a strong implication here that his own thought is of a stature and uniqueness that justifies similar exceptionalist treatment.

24 de Man, "Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin," in *Blindness and Insight*, 246-66.

25 See Note 4, above.

How this might square with de Man's later insistence on the stubborn *literality* of reading – on the need to respect the letter of the text even (or especially) where such a reading turns out to disrupt every notion of interpretive consistency and truth – is a question that finds no answer in his work. As I have said, Gasché is not always inclined to adopt this all-licensing approach on de Man's behalf. However there are many passages in his book – some of which I have cited above – where he does seem committed to the special-case view that de Man, like Heidegger, is a thinker of such originality as to defy comprehension and disqualify criticism on any but his own, intransigently “singular” terms. Thus: “they [de Man's readings] are ‘different,’ idiosyncratic to a point where, by making no point, they will have made their point – so singular as to make no difference but, perhaps, in that total apathy, a formidable challenge to philosophical difference” (90). It seems to me now – coming back to de Man after a period mainly devoted to reading in the “other” (analytic) tradition – that a thinker whose influence can work such contagious effects on a commentator of Gasché's undoubted intelligence is best regarded as a brilliant, subtle, but perverse exponent of what Carnap called “pseudo-problems in philosophy.”²⁶ After all that tradition has come a long way since the heyday of logical positivism, not least in the matter of providing alternatives to the kind of sharply disjunctive thinking that characterized both the positivist programme and de Man's more extreme (and more rhetorically adroit) variations on the sceptical theme.

Indeed Gasché might not have been driven to such desperately wire-drawn paradoxical conclusions had he taken some account of those developments in recent philosophy of language that are likewise critical of empiricist (or phenomenalist) theories of meaning and reference, but which do not jump straight to the opposite fallacy of counting reference a purely textual or “intralinguistic” function.²⁷ To be sure, as de Man says, “it is not *a priori* certain

that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world.”²⁸ But there can be few philosophers nowadays who would wish to defend such a cratylist thesis, despite de Man's artfully rigged suggestion that *any* argument in support of the claim that language refers to a world “outside” itself must be in thrall to some version of cratylism or – what amounts to the same thing – some form of delusive “aesthetic ideology.” So it is that Gasché feels able to assert, following de Man, that “reference is a function of language itself and remains entirely within its bounds,” moreover that, “since language interconnects only elements within itself, it is shielded from being linked to extralinguistic referents, disconnected from the cognitive process and the value considerations characteristic of the phenomenal world” (132). But this structuralist-derived theory of reference can be made to look plausible only through another of de Man's forced or artificial dilemmas, that is to say, by presenting it as the only alternative to a naive “phenomenalist” theory that equates reference with some kind of direct, intuitive, unmediated access to objects and events in the real-world domain. Hence his curious idea that anyone who thinks of reference in “extralinguistic” terms, i.e., as not (or not exclusively) a function of language's “autonomous” signifying power, must have fallen prey to the cratylist delusion which upholds the existence of a *natural* link between signifier and signified, or sign and referent.²⁹

Thus, according to de Man, ‘the convergence of sound and meaning . . . [is] a mere effect which language can perfectly well achieve, but which bears no relationship, by analogy or by ontologically grounded imitation, to anything beyond that particular effect.’³⁰ If this were all that his argument amounted to then one could simply agree and moreover remark that it is a view which has been shared by the vast majority of philosophers and linguists from Plato down. That is, they have accepted the “arbitrary” (non-natural and non-mimetic) relationship between word and object, except in those markedly deviant cases – such as onomatopoeia – which are taken to prove the general rule. (Those few who have disagreed – in the line of descent from Cratylus himself to Horne

26 Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudo-Problems in Philosophy*, trans. R. George (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969).

27 See for instance – from a range of philosophical standpoints – Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982); Gareth Evans and John McDowell (eds.), *Truth and Meaning: essays in semantics* (Clarendon P., 1976); Gilbert Harman and Donald Davidson (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972); Mark Platts (ed.), *Reference, Truth and Reality: essays on the philosophy of language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Ernst Tugendhat, *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: lectures on the philosophy of language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

28 de Man, “The Resistance to Theory” (op. cit.), p. 11.

29 For further discussion, see Ora Avni, *The Resistance of Reference: linguistics, philosophy, and the literary text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) and Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch (eds.), *Critical Encounters: reference and responsibility in deconstructive writing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP).

30 Ibid, p. 10.

Tooke – have mostly had a poor press or been regarded as holding some highly idiosyncratic views.) But this is not to say that the relationship is “arbitrary” in the sense of that term espoused by many post-structuralists and pushed beyond the limit of intelligibility in de Man’s late writing. For once a word has acquired meaning (and reference) as a matter of shared linguistic convention then clearly it is the case – as Saussure, among others, was quick to acknowledge – that its usage cannot be simply a matter of “arbitrary” imposition.³¹ More than that: there are certain additional constraints having to do with grammar, logic, and propositional content which narrow down the range of possible interpretations in any given case and which thus enable communicative grasp across otherwise large distances of linguistic and cultural context. Here again, Gasché might have been less impressed by the ineluctable “rigour” of de Man’s arguments had he taken some account of the treatment of these issues by Donald Davidson and other philosophers in the post-Quinean tradition.³² For one major theme in their work is this question of just where the line is to be drawn – and on just what principled grounds – between the “arbitrary,” the conventional, and the strictly non-conventional (since trans-culturally valid) aspects of linguistic-communicative grasp.³³

De Man’s main purpose in his later writing is to scramble these distinctions to the point where communication breaks down altogether and language becomes an impenetrable chaos of “arbitrary” sounds or inscriptions. I have cited several passages from Gasché’s book to just this effect but will offer one further example of the kind lest the reader doubt – as well she might – whether anyone could possibly endorse such a view.

Considering the sheer arbitrariness and intrinsic senselessness of the material and signifying agencies of language, the randomness of their individual occurrences, the relative independence of their play, and the opacity of their literal materiality, all experienceable meaning appears superimposed on them . . . As these literal instances become thematized in the text’s inscribed reference to its own figuration,

31 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. and ed. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983); also Harris, *Reading Saussure* (London: Duckworth, 1987).

32 See entries under Note 27, above; also Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974).

33 See especially David Lewis, *Convention: a philosophical study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1969); Barry Stroud, “Conventionalism and the Indeterminacy of Translation,” *Synthese*, Vol. 19 (1968), pp. 82-96.

they tend to exhibit a sphere of irreducible heterogeneity characterized by the absolute impenetrability and material singularity of the linguistic sounds or letters that, therefore, do not lend themselves to any meaningful interaction. These instances form a chaotic sphere of radically fragmented material agencies between which no text can ever be woven. (71)

In which case – it seems fair to ask – how is it that de Man’s texts ever got written or, once written, subject to commentary in Gasché’s (sometimes) lucid exegetical mode? Then again, how is it that we are *given* to read Gasché’s book in the expectation – not always disappointed – that it will make sense of certain passages of de Man in a way that those passages (sometimes, not always) fail to make sense in and of themselves? “Giving to Read” is Gasché’s title for his chapter contrasting Derrida with de Man, and I recall it here in order to emphasise how utterly different is Derrida’s sense of what constitutes an adequately complex, subtle, and responsive textual reading. For de Man it is a matter of taking away – showing up as naive or deluded – every last source of readerly assurance that we might have some chance of getting things right or at least of reading in a way that doesn’t “arbitrarily” impose its own meanings on an otherwise recalcitrant (“opaque,” “material,” or “heterogeneous”) textual substrate. Yet neither he nor Gasché could advance this case with any hope of being read or understood were it not for the falsity of de Man’s arguments and the self-exempting clause that implicitly attends their every attempt at consistent formulation.

In short, there is a massive performative contradiction involved in the sorts of claim put forward in the paragraph cited above. Gasché is misled – or so it seems to me – by his over-willingness to grant de Man’s writings a genuine *philosophical* import despite all the evidence (which Gasché lays out in some detail) that they belong to some different, wholly “singular” mode of oblique confessional discourse or perhaps to some hybrid quasi-philosophical displaced narrative *genre* that has more in common with the texts of writers like Beckett, Blanchot, or E.M. Cioran. Once in a while Gasché admits to certain misgivings in this regard, or the suspicion that maybe de Man is just a bad philosopher by any (not just conventional) criteria of reason, consistency, and truth. Thus:

[i]f one not, in light of the results produced by this truly systematic levelling of difference and positive analogization – a levelling that is clearly deliberate, and not attributable to mere oversight or philosophical naïveté in general – immediately reminded of Hegel’s famous dictum concerning those philosophers for whom thought is a night in which all cows are black? (64-5)

This strikes me as a fair assessment of de Man's "philosophical" claims, despite Gasché's strenuous efforts to lessen the gravity of the charge by treating his work as a special case whose "singularity" places it far beyond reach of any such conventional judgement. By asking us to think of that levelling as "deliberate" – and not just the upshot of "oversight" or "naiveté" – Gasché is clearly banking on de Man's own distinction (propounded in the essay on Heidegger) between mere "mistake" and significant or motivated "error." But then we have to ask what could possible *justify* so perverse and single-minded an effort to plunge philosophy back into the realm of chaos and old night. Gasché has written the best, most intelligent book we are likely to get on de Man from a critical standpoint closely aligned with its subject's ruling preoccupations. What is now needed is a more detached, resistant, or sceptical reading which holds out against the seductive power of de Man's nihilist rhetoric.

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NOTES, DOCUMENTS and REVIEW ARTICLES

Fantasia on a Theme of Tallis¹

ROBERT WILCOCKS

Les désastres, à vrai dire, commencèrent très tôt. Bertrand Russell raconte avoir perdu toute estime pour Hegel quand il lut le passage de "La science de la logique" consacré au calcul infiniésimal. Tout en prétendant, naturellement, dégager mieux que les mathématiciens le sens véridique de cette branche des mathématiques, l'illustre philosophe allemand démontrait surtout qu'il n'y avait rien compris, accouchant, nous dit Russell (dans "Human Knowledge, its Scope and Limits"), d'un "non-sens brouillon."²

I am willing to think as radically as is necessary to pursue the truth. I draw the line only at stupidity, error and dishonesty – in short, at bullshit. The utterly opaque muddle of theory lies beyond that line. Theory, incidentally, is about as dangerous in terms of impact in the real world as Noddy in Toyland.³

1 Raymond Tallis, *Enemies of Hope: A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism. Irrationalism, Anti-humanism and Counter-Enlightenment*. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. Pp. 499. Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1988; 2nd edition, 1995. Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism*. London: Edward Arnold, 1988.

2 Jean-François Revel, "Les pièges de la philosophie," *Le Point*, 21 March, 1998, 76-77. This quotation is from page 76.

3 Raymond Tallis, "Saussure, so far," letter in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 21 November 1997, 15. The reference to *Noddy in Toyland* is no doubt a remembrance of a passage from *In Defence of Realism* (1988):

The suggestion that the writing of 'space fiction' is always a response to doubts about the validity of any attempt to describe contemporary reality is as plausible as the claim that *Noddy in Toyland* (a classic novella in the genre of anti-realistic 'explicit' fiction written in the late 1940s) was Enid Blyton's admission of her inability to come to terms with the enormities of the Cold War. (Tallis 1988, 131)