

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (1990)

Heft: 11-12

Artikel: Poison or remedy? : Paul de Man as Pharmakon

Autor: Johnson, Barbara

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006649>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Barbara Johnson

POISON OR REMEDY?
PAUL DE MAN AS PHARMAKON

Merciless and Consequent

This *pharmakon*, this “medicine”, this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent. If the *pharmakon* is “ambivalent”, it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other.

[...] It is [...] the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced. [...] Writing is no more valuable, says Plato, as a remedy than as a poison. There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial.

Jacques Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy”

It is hardly surprising that the discovery of Paul de Man's collaborationist writings should have polarized critics into postures of attack and defense. Despite frequent dismissals of the affair as a “teapot tempest”, something important seems to be at stake in the “glee” of denunciation or the tortured and tortuous rhetoric of extenuation. The very asymmetry between the ease of attack and the discomfort of defense deserves comment. Deconstructors have often characterized humanist resistance to deconstruction as an intolerance for paradox, ambiguity or undecidability. Yet in our current inability either to excuse or to take leave of de Man, we are now getting a taste of our own *pharmakon*.

Polarization around de Man can hardly be said to have originated with the current scandal, however. More than any other literary theorist, I think, he has always provoked a vehemently split response. For deconstructors, he was a model of rigor, lucidity and integrity; for humanists, he was a radical nihilist; for materialist critics, a closet conservative. All three evaluations center on his privileging of language. For many, de

Man's work emitted a highly demanding imperative not to shirk the responsibilities of reading or, as it is sometimes put, not to take the impossibility of reading too lightly. For others, his focus on the unreliability and randomness of language undermined the foundations of Western values. And for still others, his characterization of wars and revolutions as byproducts of linguistic predicaments was a denial of history and a refusal of politics.

In some ways, all of the above are accurate. If one does not question the nature of Western values or the definitions of history and politics, then one would have to assign de Man to the "poison" position in each, *not* in his early writings, in which he was himself an upholder of Western values welcoming a revolutionary New Order, but in his later writings. But what if the poison in this case were precisely not the opposite of the remedy, but an attempt to get at the poison-remedy split at its root?

The journalists and polemicists are not wrong in locating the specificity of de Man's theory in his focus on language. Their mistake, however, lies in reassigning the certainties they say he takes away. If language is no longer guaranteed to be reliable or truthful, then it must "always" be unreliable, false, or biased. If not necessary, then arbitrary; if not meaningful, then indeterminate; if not true, then false. But de Man's analyses do not perform such certainty-reassignments. Rather, they question the very structure and functioning of such either/or logic. To question certainty is not the same as to affirm uncertainty:

In a genuine semiology as well as in other linguistically oriented theories, the referential function of language is not being denied – far from it; what is in question is its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition. Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge "reality", but because *it is not a priori certain* that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world¹.

It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values and linguistic values are *incompatible*. What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question².

What complicates the picture even further is the fact that, while we might be able to tell the difference between linguistic and purely phe-

1 Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory", in *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 11 (= *RT*). (Emphasis mine).

2 Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in *RT*, p. 25. (Emphasis mine).

nominal or aesthetic structures (“no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word ‘day’”), the distinction is not at all clear in the case of ideology or politics, because “what we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, or reference with phenomenalism”. From this de Man goes on to assert:

It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness [“literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available”] is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. (RT, p. 11)

In the years just prior to his death, de Man seems indeed to have been moving toward establishing a more explicit link between his own theoretical stance and a critique of the ideological foundation of Nazism. Christopher Norris has pointed to that link by entitling his study of de Man *Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*. As Walter Benjamin was one of the first to point out, fascism can be understood as an *aestheticization* of politics. In several late essays, de Man locates a crucial articulation in the construction of a protofascist “aesthetic ideology” in Schiller’s misreading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Schiller’s misreading of the aesthetic in Kant involves a denial of (its own) violence. Schiller’s vision of “the ideal of a beautiful society” as “a well executed English dance” has exerted a seductive appeal upon subsequent political visions. In his essay entitled “Aesthetic Formalization”³, de Man juxtaposes to this notion from Schiller a short text by Kleist, *Über das Marionettentheater*, in which the grace of such a dance is shown to be produced by substituting the mechanical (a puppet or a prosthesis) for the human body. Schiller’s “aesthetic state” is thus an ideal that can only be produced by mutilation and mechanization. The dance-like harmony of a state can only arise through the repression of differences within. In one of the last lectures de Man delivered before his death, he makes the political ramifications of this aesthetic state even clearer:

As such, the aesthetic belongs to the masses [...] and it justifies the state, as in the following quotation, which is not by Schiller:

“Art is an expression of feelings. The artist is distinguished from the non-artist by the fact that he has the power to give expression to what he feels.

3 “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s *Über das Marionettentheater*”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984 (= RR).

In some form or another: the one in images, a second in clay, a third in words, a fourth in marble – or even in historical forms. The statesman is an artist too. The leader and the led ('Führer und Masse') presents no more problem than, say, painter and colour. Politics are the plastic art of colour. This is why politics without the people, or even against the people, is sheer nonsense. To shape a People out of the masses, and a State out of the People, this has always been the deepest intention of politics in the true sense"*.

It is not entirely irrelevant, not entirely indifferent, that the author of this passage is from a novel of Joseph Goebbels. Mary Wilkinson, who quotes the passage, is certainly right in pointing out that it is a grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state. But the principle of this misreading does not essentially differ from the misreading which Schiller inflicted on his own predecessor, namely Kant⁴.

* *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* (1929)

De Man's insistence on violence – disfiguration, death, mutilation – is not a personal predilection for horror, but rather a deep suspicion of false images of harmony and enlightenment. Hidden within the aesthetic appeals of the political images by which he himself was once seduced were forms of violence unprecedented in human history. It seems undeniable that if "the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence", the ideological aberrations he is unmasking were once his own.

It could be objected that his relation to such "aberrations" remains purely cognitive, that "accounting for" occurrences may not be the only possible response to history, and that the ideology de Man "unmasks" remains, in fact, masked. The political implications of his *cognition* remain at odds with the political implications of his *performance*. His refusal to tell his own story, which can be seen both as self-protection and as self-renunciation, was also a silencing of the question of the origins or consequences of his acts of cognition *in the world*. His unmasking of aberrant ideologies maintains a metaphorical, rather than a metonymical, relation to history. Yet those acts of cognition, however insufficient they may seem now, are not to be discarded because of this refusal to go further. In the absence of any guarantee as to Paul de Man's moral character or political vision, his writings remain indispensable in their insistence

4 Paul de Man, "Kant and Schiller", unpublished manuscript.

that the too-easy leap from linguistic to aesthetic, ethical, or political structures has been made before, with catastrophic results.

Yet that insistence is never made unironically, in such a way as to imply that the errors are ultimately avoidable. A typical concluding sentence takes the form of a double negative:

With the critical cat now so far out of the bag that one can no longer ignore its existence, those who refuse the crime of theoretical ruthlessness can no longer hope to gain a good conscience. Neither, of course, can the theorists – but, then, they never laid claim to it in the first place⁵.

The fact that the theorists never laid claim to a good conscience is by no means reassuring, especially in light of recent developments. Nor does it erase the impression of moral self-satisfaction this sentence conveys. In this typical pharmakon-like ending, de Man makes it difficult to tell which of the possible remedies is more poisonous. All the more so since in the original publication of this essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the final sentence had read “neither, of course, can the terrorists”.

The Inhuman and the Impersonal

Things happen in the world which cannot be accounted for in terms of the human conception of language. [...] Understand by nihilism a certain kind of critical awareness which will not allow you to make certain affirmative statements when those affirmative statements go against the way things are.

Paul de Man, “Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*”

The pleasure with which de Man manipulates terms like “ruthlessness” is unsettling, however much one wishes to believe he is only “warning against unwarranted hopeful solutions”. Something of what is at stake may be gleaned from an exchange published in *The Resistance to Theory* between de Man and Meyer Abrams. The exchange occurred during the discussion of de Man's lecture on Walter Benjamin's “The Task of the Translator”. Elaborating on the statement that “Benjamin says, from the beginning, that it is not at all certain that language is in any sense human”, de Man explains:

5 “The Return to Philology”, in *RT*, p. 26.

The “inhuman,” however, is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language – independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have.

Abrams: I want to go back to the question [...] about language being somehow opposed to the human. I want [...] to provide a different perspective, just so we can settle the matter in a different way. And that perspective won't surprise you because you've heard it before and expect it from me.

de Man: That's very human.

Abrams: Suppose I should say, as many people have said before me, that instead of being the nonhuman, language is the most human of all the things we find in the world, in that language is entirely the product of human beings. [...] Now, suppose that, alternatively to looking at the play of grammar, syntax, trope, somehow opposed to meaning, I should say – and I'm not alone in saying this – that language, through all these aspects, doesn't get between itself and the meaning, but instead that language, when used by people, makes its meaning. [...] What can be more human than the language which distinguishes human beings from all other living things? [...] All I want to do is present the humanistic perspective, as an alternative, an optional alternative, which appeals to me. Instinctively, it appeals to me.

de Man: Well, it appeals to me, also, greatly; and there is no question of its appeal, and its desirability. The humanistic perspective is obviously there [...] [But] a certain kind of critical examination [...] *has to* take place, it has to take place not out of some perversity, not out of some hubris of critical thought or anything of the sort, it has to take place because it addresses the question of what actually happens. Things happen in the world which cannot be accounted for in terms of the human conception of language. And they always happen in linguistic terms. [...] And good or bad things, not only catastrophes, but felicities also. [...] One could say, with all kinds of precautions, and in the right company, and with all kinds of reservations – and I think it's a very small company – that Benjamin's concept of history is nihilistic. Which would have to be understood as a very positive statement about it. [...] Understand by nihilism a certain kind of critical awareness which will not allow you to make certain affirmative statements when those affirmative statements go against the way things are⁶.

Earlier in the discussion, de Man situated the crux of the difference between himself and Abrams as follows: “If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such”. The problem is not

6 “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in *RT*, pp. 96-104.

one of deciding whether language is or is not human, but rather of knowing exactly what the word “human” means. Language becomes the pharmakon within which it is both impossible and “desirable” – indeed, urgent – to separate the human from the inhuman. But from what standpoint is such a statement being said?

The question of the humanness or inhumanness of language is very much tied to the question of a *lieu d'énonciation*. In an early and fundamental essay on Mallarmé, entitled “Poetic Nothingness”, de Man quotes a famous letter written by Mallarmé at a turning point in his poetic career:

This last year has been a terrifying one. My thought has worked through to a Divine Conception. [...] I write to inform you that I am impersonal now, and no longer the Stéphane you once knew – but an aptitude the spiritual universe has for seeing itself and for developing, through what once was me⁷.

As de Man demonstrates in his discussion of Benjamin, from the Divine to the inhuman *il n'y a qu'un pas*. De Man follows very much in this tradition of impersonality, which was to lead Mallarmé to the theory of the “elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who leaves the initiative to words”. As Hillis Miller points out, “the first person pronoun is used rarely and sparingly by de Man. [...] This goes along with an austere rigor that makes his essays sometimes sound as if they were written by some impersonal intelligence, or by language itself”⁸. This eclipse of the self by language is both the content and the rhetorical mode of de Man's writing. I have analyzed elsewhere both the grammatical errors and the personifications that mark this apparent eclipse⁹. Here I would like to return to de Man's gloss on Benjamin's suggestion that language might not be in any sense human. The example discussed is strange. Inhumanity seems to inhere in the lack of correspondence between the German word “Brot” and the French word “pain”.

7 Quoted in Paul de Man, “Poetic Nothingness”, *Critical Writings 1953-1978*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 25.

8 J. Hillis Miller, “‘Reading’ Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*”, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 165.

9 See my essay entitled “Rigorous Unreliability”, in *A World of Difference*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

The translation will reveal a fundamental discrepancy between the intent to name *Brot* and the word *Brot* itself in its materiality, as a device of meaning. If you hear *Brot* in this context of Hölderlin, who is so often mentioned in this text, I hear *Brot und Wein* necessarily, which is the great Hölderlin text that is very much present in this – which in French becomes *Pain et vin*. “Pain et vin” is what you get for free in a restaurant, in a cheap restaurant where it is still included, so *pain et vin* has very different connotations from *Brot und Wein*. It brings to mind the *pain français*, *baguette*, *ficelle*, *bâtard*, all those things – I now hear in *Brot* “bastard”. This upsets the stability of the quotidian. I was very happy with the word *Brot*, which I hear as a native because my native language is Flemish and you say *brood*, just like in German, but if I have to think that *Brod* [*brood*] and *pain* are the same thing, I get very upset. It is all right in English because “bread” is close enough to *Brot* [*brood*], despite the idiom “bread” for money, which has its problems. But the stability of the quotidian, of my daily bread, the reassuring quotidian aspects of the word “bread”, daily bread, is upset by the French word *pain*. What I mean is upset by the way in which I mean – the way in which it is *pain*, the phoneme, the term *pain*, which has its set of connotations which take you in a completely different direction¹⁰.

Later, in his response to Abrams, de Man equates the inhuman with loss of control. That “there is a nonhuman aspect of language is a perennial awareness from which we cannot escape, because language does things which are so radically out of our control that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly” (*RT*, p. 101). At another point, however, when questioned by Neil Hertz about how a word like “inhuman” can be derived from the connotations of *Brot*, de Man responds by treating the example *itself* as a loss of control:

Well, you're quite right. I was indulging myself, you know, it was long and I was very aware of potential boredom, felt the need for an anecdote, for some relief, and Benjamin gives the example of *pain* and *Brot*, and perhaps shouldn't ... whenever you give an example you, as you know, lose what you want to say; and Benjamin, by giving the example of *pain* and *Brot* – which comes from him – and which I've banalized, for the sake of a cheap laugh (*RT*, p. 95-96) (ellipses in original)

In its ellipses, its anacoluthons, its denials, this passage comes very close to total incoherence. De Man dismisses the example as a cheap laugh, but his nervousness suggests that he sees it as a slip. What has the slip let show, and what does it have to do with the inhuman? It seems to me that what the slip reveals is not the inhuman but rather the *human* as a loss of control – the de Man that suddenly says “I get very upset”, “my native

10 “The Task of the Translator”, in *RT*, p. 87.

language is Flemish", later feels this small outbreak of exhibitionism as the intrusion of something over which he has lost control. What de Man's categories of human and inhuman seem to lack is a concept of the unconscious. Though he may have reasons to feel it with particular acuity, he is not alone in experiencing the approach to the mother tongue – or perhaps to the mother as such – as the threat of a loss of control. Indeed, even without assigning an unconscious meaning to the example (seeing in it de Man's relation to his mother, or to Belgium), one would have to say that de Man's riff on *pain* and *Brot* sounds suspiciously like a process of free association, a rather exuberant glide along what Lacan would call the signifying chain.

De Man's desire to replace the unconscious with the randomness of language is made explicit in his analysis of Rousseau's slip – Rousseau's blurting out of the name "Marion" as the stealer of a ribbon. De Man writes:

Because Rousseau desires Marion, she haunts his mind and her name is pronounced almost unconsciously, as if it were a slip, a segment of the discourse of the other. But the use of a vocabulary of contingency ("le premier objet qui s'offrit") within an argument of causality is arresting and disruptive, for the sentence is phrased in such a way as to allow for a complete disjunction between Rousseau's desires and interests and the selection of this particular name. Marion just happened to be the first thing that came to mind; any other name, any other word, any other sound or noise could have done just as well and Marion's entry into the discourse is a mere effect of chance¹¹.

In a way, the entire debate between Lacan and Derrida concerning the purloined letter is summarized here in this discussion of a purloined ribbon. That such was de Man's own understanding of it can be seen not only in the Lacanian phrase "the discourse of the other" but also in the fact that the original title of "Excuses" was "The Purloined Ribbon".

De Man's refusal of psychoanalysis, his desire for chance rather than desire to have the last word, is of a piece with his adoption of a stance of impersonality. But just as his desire to erase the self leaves residues in the grammar of his essays, so too does his self-effacement leave psychoanalytically readable traces in the domain of pedagogy. For the remainder of this paper, I would like to analyze de Man as a pedagogical, rather than merely as an intellectual, figure. I think that it is impossible

11 Paul de Man, "Excuses", *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 288.

to understand the intensity of the current debates about de Man without taking the pedagogical arena into consideration. De Man himself characterized his work as “more pedagogical than philosophical; it has always started from the pedagogical or the didactic assignment of reading specific texts rather than, as is the case in Derrida, from the pressure of general philosophical issues”¹². And the editors of the special issue of *Yale French Studies* entitled “The Lesson of Paul de Man” go so far as to say “He was never not teaching”¹³.

What Is a Teacher?

A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call *sending*.

Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*
(quoted by Alan Bass in his introduction to
Derrida's *The Post Card*; Bass's italics)

What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.

Nicolas Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom”

The title of this section is an allusion to Michel Foucault's influential essay, “What is an author?” In that essay, Foucault is at pains to distinguish between a biographical “author” and a textual “author function”. In the same way, Paul de Man seemed to want to distinguish between the person of the teacher and the intellectual process in which he or she is engaged:

Overfacile opinion notwithstanding, teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of show business or guidance counseling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task¹⁴.

In her memorial tribute to de Man, Ellen Burt describes eloquently the extent to which de Man succeeded in existentializing this view of the

12 “An Interview,” in *RT*, p. 117.

13 *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, *Yale French Studies* #69, ed. Peter Brooks, Shoshana Felman, and J. Hillis Miller, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985, “Foreword”.

14 “The Resistance to Theory”, in *RT*, p. 4.

teacher, by conveying “as complete a detachment from the claims of subjectivity or individual personality as was possible”¹⁵. A different kind of example of his pedagogical self-effacement occurs in his introduction to a special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* which presents the work of six of his students. While eventually speaking about “my generation” and “their generation”, he nevertheless totally avoids the first person pronoun in the long opening paragraph in which he refers to their participation in “a [rather than “my”] year-long seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities” or “various graduate seminars”. “It would be an injustice to see in them only the product of a single ‘school’ or orthodoxy, thus reducing their challenge to mere anecdote”. Rather, he asserts, “the essays collected in this volume come as close as one can come, in this country, to the format of what is referred to, in Germany, as an *Arbeitsgruppe*, an ongoing seminar oriented towards open research rather than directed by a single, authoritative voice”¹⁶. Yet no one is fooled by these denials of authority. They serve only to increase the impression of authority he conveyed. Again and again both admirers and critics testify to his authority as paradoxical. The memorial tributes are eloquent on the subject:

I want to speak not about de Man's power as a teacher and as a writer, but about the extraordinary intellectual authority he exerted on his friends and colleagues, at least on me. Paul de Man much disliked words like “power”, “force”, or “authority”, especially when applied to the academic world. He would have smiled ironically again and more than a little scornfully at the idea that he had what those words name, though obviously he did.

(J. Hillis Miller)

His jokes would always be in some sophisticated manner joking at his own expense, pedagogically disclaiming, in a Nietzschean manner, his own authority. [...] Paul disclaimed his own authority, yet none had more authority than him.

(Shoshana Felman)

The last thing he probably would have wanted to be was a moral and pedagogical – rather than merely intellectual – example for generations of students and colleagues, yet it was precisely his way of not seeking those roles that made him so irreplaceably an exception, and such an inspiration.

(Barbara Johnson)

15 “In Memoriam,” in *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, p. 11.

16 *Studies in Romanticism*, 18, Winter 1979, p. 495.

It has recently been remarked that the unearthing of de Man's early writings has induced deconstructors to abandon their anti-biographical stance and to search for intentions, mitigating circumstances, and contextual elements that might help to understand the man. What this reveals, however, is not that the person of the author has suddenly been brought back from exile, but that that person was always already there, idealized as impersonal. In other words, it was not *despite* but rather *because* of his self-effacement that students and colleagues were led to substantialize and idealize him, as if the teacher as person could simply be deduced from the teacher-function. They took him as a metaphor, not a metonymy, of his persona. Just as in a psychoanalytic situation the analyst's silence allows the analysand to construe him or her as a subject-presumed-to-know, de Man's silence about himself (including – but not restricted to – his past) created a blank on which admirers could project their idealizations. This fascination clearly had its dangers – but where did we get the idea that powerful teaching could ever be purely beneficent? Western philosophy indeed originated with a text that saw the teacher as *pharmakon*, perched between enlightenment and corruption.

De Man's blank was in fact itself already constructed out of transference idealization. As de Man told Stefano Rosso, “I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority. [...] I assume, as a working hypothesis, (as a working hypothesis because I know better than that), that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it's doing”¹⁷. In a passage in which de Man describes his discovery through Reuben Brower of pedagogy as a subversive activity, he explains teaching as an induction into this type of heuristic transference onto a text as a site of (perhaps inhuman) knowledge:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge. [...] Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse

17 “An Interview”, p. 118.

in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. Close reading accomplishes this often in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden¹⁸.

If this type of teaching is subversive – and it is certainly subversive in the ways de Man describes – it is because it is *materialist* – it takes language not only on the level of meaning but on the level of meaning-production and -disruption. But in another way, this teaching is also deeply conservative, not in its content but in the frame it draws around that content. The instructions to the students are phrased in the grammar of an absolute but hidden authority: “students were not to ... they were to ...”. Listen to the description Richard Ohmann gives of a not-so-different set of instructions to the student taking the Advanced Placement English course:

Another thing a student is supposed to be is objective. The Acorn Book says that his Advanced Placement English course will teach him how to read *and respond* to works of literature, but if the descriptive material and the examinations are any indication, the Advanced Placement Program actually teaches the student not to respond to literature, not with his feelings. His concern must be with “organization of the elements of the poem”, with “particular uses of language” that express a contrast, with the function of minor characters, with the way structure, imagery, and sound contribute to the whole meaning of a poem – “your feeling about the poem is important”, he is implicitly told, “only as the outcome of careful reading”. His role is that of the neutral instrument, recording and correlating the facts and drawing conclusions. If any need or interest other than the formalistic drove him to read the work, or indeed, if something within turns him *against* the work, he will quickly learn to suppress these unwelcome responses. They are not among the competencies that will move him a step up the ladder. To his reading of a poem he is supposed to bring the techniques he has mastered, and only those. He is, in other words, alienated in very nearly the Marxian sense. and, of course, the ideal student is of the middle class. Docility, care, tidiness, professional ambition, the wish for objectivity, these are all qualities valued particularly by the middle class and encouraged in its young¹⁹.

By thus drawing a frame around the text as a *sujet supposé savoir*, the teacher can teach the student not to ask certain questions about the literary canon or about the teacher. It is no accident that few students ever

18 “The Return to Philology”, *RT*, pp. 23, 24.

19 Richard Ohmann, *English in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 57.

asked de Man what he had done during the war. De Man's subversive teaching certainly unsettled many of the assumptions that have accompanied the humanist understanding of the canon, but he did nothing to unseat the traditional white male author from his hiding place behind the impersonality of the universal subject, the subject supposed to be without gender, race, or history. He created a slightly idiosyncratic canon of his own (in part through throw-away lines like "in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text"), but he did not suggest that there were multiple literary histories, or readers with completely different senses of what was urgent. Perhaps it was not his place to do so. His pedagogy was a pedagogy of self-difference and self-resistance within a traditional understanding of canonical texts and questions. It is up to us to open the subversiveness of teaching further – *without* losing the materialist conception of language that remains de Man's truly radical contribution.