

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: The usual terror, the usual suspects

Autor: Hughes, Peter

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006650>

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: 07.03.2026

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

Peter Hughes

THE USUAL TERROR, THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

[...] dans l'imagination, tout perd ses formes naturelles, et tout s'altère, et l'on y crée des libertés comme les yeux créent des figures dans les nuages.

Saint Just

Those who have been engaged in writing conflicting epitaphs on Paul de Man's life and work have at least one thing in common: blindness to an ideology that underlies both his early wartime articles and much that is surprising and strange about his later work. Even before his death in 1983, de Man had been praised as an unmasker of ideology, an unveiler of rhetoric. And yet he was at the same time also attacked as a negative mystic who conferred on texts motives and powers he would not grant to their authors. After his first death there was another, the bringing to light in 1987 of the reviews and articles he had written in wartime Belgium, most of them in 1941 and 1942, most of them for the then collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*. In the months since then these articles, most of which are more dreary than dreadful, have been read as signs or manifestos of an "aesthetic ideology" that stretches back to Kant or even of what Benjamin described as "the aesthetizing of politics" and as the sinister attraction of fascism¹. There can be little doubt that the thread of Paul de Man's life and career was cut or broken by the personal and political calamities of those years: the ten years of silence that followed is evidence enough. But to suggest, as some friends and enemies have, that the rest of his life and work were devoted to undoing such an aesthetic ideology, or to furtively propagating fascist ideas, strikes me as questionable on the one hand and slanderous on the other. Both views seem blind to the possibility that the conflict in his writing and thinking may be inward and imaginative rather than linear and external. And that I

1 See especially Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*, New York & London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 1-27, 177-97; Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1988, 14, 3, pp. 590-652.

shall argue is the possibility raised by those wartime articles. If we read them as they might have been read by a contemporary, or as de Man himself would read them, they cast a different light on his literary politics and poetic theory. Far from implying or anticipating an aesthetic ideology of romantic poets and German philosophers, these early articles are pervaded by the spirit of what Jean Paulhan had just described as “La Terreur dans les lettres” – to cite the subtitle of his *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, which appeared in book form in the late summer of 1941².

The pervasive spirit of literary terrorism, whose spoor Paulhan traced all around him in the critical writing of his time, from academic discourse to *feuilleton* pieces like Paul de Man's, is marked on the one hand by a suspicion or even fear of the power of words, by an ascetic aversion to rhetoric and style. But it is a divided spirit, deeply ambivalent. Its denigration of tropes as commonplaces goes hand in hand with an exaltation of literature to the status of myth or the truth-claim of philosophy. Conviction that the idea is worth more than the word and that language is dangerous to thought converge in Paulhan's definition: “La définition la plus simple qu'on puisse donner du Terroriste, c'est qu'il est *misologue*”, (p. 64 n.). In a note to his own definition, Paulhan points out how this misologism dovetails with the deconstructive analysis of “grands mots” and high sounding terms. Such analysis of politics, or even of dreams, tends to the conclusion that the man who speaks of liberty and equality, “or even talks of flight or a ball – the dream being here only another sort of language – *is not at all* thinking what he seems to be thinking” (p. 64 n.). The earlier version that appeared in his *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1936 opens with the Blakean advice, taken from Baudelaire, that persisting in folly, pushing excess to its limit, will undo it or produce its opposite; just so here, “we have pushed a special kind of Terror to its limits, and have discovered Rhetoric” (p. 231). This was Paulhan's original plan, which called for a second part that would reassert the right and claims of rhetoric. Although that part was never written, not at least as a continuation of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, the whole of Paulhan's brilliant essay is haunted by the revelations to come: above all by the growing

2 An earlier and briefer version had appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1936, and the idea of the book goes back as far as a letter to Francis Ponge in 1925. It was meant to be followed at once by a second part that would restore the rhetoric called in question by *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. References here are to the Idées / Gallimard edition (Paris, 1973), which includes both versions: subsequent page references will be given in the text.

awareness that the denial of rhetoric is its assertion, the recognition of its power. Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition*, to take a more recent example, eliminates the letter "e", not by erasure but by its "disappearance" from the text. Perec refuses to write any word including the letter into his narrative. Hence the letter "e", because of that refusal – which involves writing the novel around the black hole of that missing letter – becomes the most important letter in the book. The refusal to speak or write a commonplace or cliché, the avoidance of a rhetorical figure, recognizes and asserts that commonplace, cliché, or figure.

This is a central paradox of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, and part of its lasting or later fascination for Paul de Man. We do not know how early he read Paulhan's essay, but he often told friends of his interest in Paulhan³, and his last interrupted seminar at Yale was concerned with *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*⁴. As I read de Man's wartime articles these questions slip away into the background, to be replaced by the sense that these articles are being read by Paulhan. Many of Paulhan's examples in the 1941 version of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, many of his terrorist suspects, come in fact from polemical and political journalism very similar to the pieces published during that same year in *Le Soir*. This eerie impression deepens with the realization that three of the strangest of the early articles suddenly make sense – a sense very different from the irony of double-talk that has been found in them – if we recognize in them the divided spirit of terrorism.

Two of these pieces are strange because they turn accusingly on two of the most prized of collaborationist authors in occupied and Vichy France, Henri de Montherlant and Robert Brasillach. In his perceptive discussion of de Man's wartime writing, Jacques Derrida notices the strangeness of these attacks of Montherlant's *Solstice de juin* and Brasillach's *Notre avant-guerre*, but he misreads crucial passages out of an error that masks the link between these early surprises and the strangeness of de Man's mature writings⁵. What we discover about de Man's role and coded style in the literary terrorism of collaborationist Europe points ahead to aspects of his later work: his oscillation between sceptical wit

3 As in a letter to Hans-Jost Frey, where de Man prefers him to Adorno and in several conversations with J. Hillis Miller (both private communications).

4 I am indebted to Cynthia Chase for her notes on the meetings of this seminar and on its discussion of de Man's later reading of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. This later reading forms part of my study in progress on rhetoric in Paulhan and de Man.

5 *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1988), pp. 612-614.

and sudden prophecy, an unpredictable alternation between lucidity and the cloud of unknowing. To overlook this link, to see de Man as an unmasker of ideology, is at once true and deceptive, because it at once makes it possible to read him and impossible to account for the oddity of the experience. As Jonathan Culler has put this dilemma, “One can only make sense of his writings if one already has a sense of what they must be saying and can allow for the slippage of concepts, working to get over or around the puzzling valuations, the startling assertions, the apparently incompatible claims”⁶. Part of the puzzle, as we shall see, lies in the “apparently incompatible claims” of literary terror itself; at once austere and frivolous, misological and as it were, *pathological*: words bring only more words to mind, and vice versa. The Terror presented by Paulhan, as Maurice Blanchot observed, finally becomes literature itself, condemned either to silence or the saving grace of unending illusion⁷.

* * *

Il est indispensable d'écrire très lisiblement pour faciliter le contrôle des autorités allemandes.

(Instruction on French wartime correspondence card sent by Jean Paulhan to Francis Ponge in August, 1941).

To trace the links between terrorism and deconstruction we need to turn back to de Man's two articles and then to a third, which reviews Ernst Jünger's personal account of the invasion of France and two books on the “new order” arising in Europe. I cannot hide from myself, and should not from the reader, what a disturbing experience the actual reading of these pages has been for me. Unlike the pieces from *Het Vlaamsche Land*, given to me translated and transcribed, the articles from *Le Soir* are on photocopies of the newspaper pages themselves⁸. They appear in the midst or on the edge of a mosaic of headlines, editorials, articles, decrees and photos. If we read Paul de Man's contributions as they would have been read by a contemporary, we see them surrounded and framed by

6 “The lesson of Paul de Man”, *Yale French Studies*, no. 69, p. 106.

7 “Comment la littérature est-elle possible,” in *Faux Pas*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943, p. 96.

8 I owe these copies, on which my readings are based, to William Flesch and Ortwin de Graef.

images of collaboration and betrayal, by Aesopian texts that are hard to read but impossible to forget. None of the commentary I have so far seen on these articles has called any attention to the historical and political context they imply. This context is also a key to the code de Man's articles were written in, and to neglect or overlook that context is to miss their tone and even their point. The missing contexts, the surrounding columns of propaganda that have been cut away, created an eerie double impression that has now been dispelled or hidden. For while many of the articles seem inoffensive out of context, they are made horrible by the company they keep – as in *Le Soir's* antisemitic issue of 4 March 1941.

Any one who tries to break the code of these articles will be thwarted at every turn by the way they have been published: the thin border of context on the photocopies circulated in the autumn of 1987 has been cut away, and nothing explanatory has replaced it⁹. The articles have been estranged as facsimiles (some of them barely readable) of their originals, and nothing has been done to bring them closer through notes or commentary. The editors claim that “This collection should also contribute to the study of journalism, specifically political and cultural journalism in an occupied country” (p. vii), but nothing in their brief preface tells the reader why and how that study is made hard and tantalizing by the workings of censorship, the growth of fables and deniable allegories, the absence of an explanation that is itself an explanation – by, in a word, the rhetoric of ideology that Paul de Man was then and later so quick to see and subvert. The blank refusal to read *through* his articles to the palimpsest of propaganda and historical interpretation on which they are inscribed, or even to relate them to the context of *Le Soir* or *Het Vlaamse Land* in which they appeared, robs them of interest and even of sense.

Any study of writing in an occupied country, for example, must take into account the relations between authorized and clandestine publication or broadcast, between the authorized *Le Soir* and the fugitive and manifold versions of *La Libre Belgique* or even more fleeting and forbidden tracts, mimeographed sheets found in mail-boxes, slogans and orders painted overnight on walls. Because, as Ernst Gombrich has observed of

9 Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, Lincoln, Nebraska and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1988. The anti-semitic supplement, copied and published in full, is the exception to this rule of deletion.

the relations of BBC and Nazi radio propaganda during the second world war, the authorized (Nazi) source, the German Home Service, often had to answer or deny reports broadcast by the BBC without admitting the source or even the existence of such reports¹⁰. To make such an admission would be to admit that many Germans, despite the risks involved, listened to the forbidden broadcasts from London, believed them, and passed on what they had heard. In a similar way, *Le Soir*, which was throughout the period of Paul de Man's employment the most important authorized (that is, collaborationist) *francophone* newspaper in Belgium, both masks and reveals its intertextual relations with clandestine reports and inadmissible events. And these relations, passed over by the editors in a silence that oddly repeats *Le Soir's* own attempt at concealment, pervade his articles from the first.

To take just one example among many that show the need to read Paul de Man the way he read others, as an allegorist, we might look more closely at the way he reads accounts of Belgian and French defeats and German victories in the *Blitzkrieg* of 1940. There are several such accounts reviewed in *Le Soir*, and the subject from the start troubles him, evoking accusations of false interpretations and defences of the valor and humanity of the Germans. Confronted by (or having chosen to review) two opposed accounts of the campaign, de Man warmly approves one, made up of articles that had already appeared in the Fascist paper *Le Pays réel*¹¹, that praises the courage and skill of the Belgian army, concluding that not they, but rather their French and British allies, had been defeated, thus forcing the Belgians to capitulate. Against this de Man sets and pillories the personal record (*Ma deuxième guerre*) of a *commandant* Rousseaux, who fought from the start of the brief campaign until he was captured on the 25th of May. De Man writes: "Selon lui, l'armée belge a manqué à ses devoirs les plus élémentaires; elle ne s'est même pas sérieusement battue et a toujours reçu l'ordre de fuir avant d'avoir vu l'ennemi de près. De telles affirmations doivent être combattues avec énergie, si on ne veut pas laisser se divulguer de fausses inter-

10 *Myth and Reality in German War-Time Broadcasts*, London, The Athlone Press, 1970, pp. 10-13.

11 As the official organ of Léon Degrelle's Rexist party, *Le Pays réel* had been financed by both Mussolini (as early as 1936) and Hitler (since 1939), see J. Gérard-Libois and José Gotovitch, *L'An 40: La Belgique occupée*, Brussels, CRISP, N.D., pp. 33-36, hereafter cited as *L'an 40*. The article discussed here appeared in *Le Soir* for 25 February 1941.

prétations des événements”. Setting aside for the moment the impertinence of this, in which the young armchair strategist refutes the old soldier's bitter experience, we should notice the imperatives and prohibitions of de Man's conclusion. Behind them lies, among other motives, an attempt to refute the charge that was widely made against the army, the King, and the King's closest advisers, chief among them Henri de Man, that they caved in and capitulated much too easily, against the conviction of the government and the greater part of the population, that they might still have stopped the German advance as they had in 1914. The earlier war was by the winter 1940/41 both a reproach and a call to resistance for many Belgians. Even *commandant* Rousseaux's title, *Ma deuxième guerre*, called attention to this, as did the widespread charge that defeatists and Fascists had urged or ordered flight rather than the firm defence of 1914. De Man explicitly rejects Rousseaux's critical comparison with “la bravoure de 1914-18”, and there may be an even more unmentionable reason for his rejection and uneasiness than those already given. Evoking events and documents of the time may enable us to reconstruct that untellable allegory.

Shortly before the 11th of November 1940, despite strict German prohibitions against public assembly and any unauthorized spreading of news or attempts to influence popular opinion, fliers and graffiti began to appear all over Brussels, urging celebration of this memorial date, which fell on a Monday, of the earlier war against Germany¹². Employers were urged to give their workers the day off, shopkeepers to close, children and students to stay away from classes, believers to go to church, and every one who could to pay respects to the monument to the Unknown Soldier and the *Monument aux Anglais*. All of this was accompanied by slogans (“*Vive l'Angleterre! Vive la R.A.F.!*”) that called attention to the fact that the war was by no means over and was in fact then going badly for the Axis powers. Thousands took part in what marked the beginning of middle-class and urban opposition to the German occupation and to their Belgian collaborators. Parallel demonstrations took place in Antwerp, Liège, and Verviers, but not in Flanders or in general among farmers or workers. Taken by surprise, the German military and police struck back through arrests and threats made secretly to their Belgian underlings. But once again the propagandist code translated this alarm into soothing and belittling reports to Germany, in which von Falken-

12 I am indebted here to the documented account in *L'An 40*, pp. 368-76.

hausen, the Wehrmacht commander, insisted that the demonstrations were limited to the liberal bourgeoisie and had not involved the masses. It was translated again by their Belgian subordinates into the terrorist austerity of a proclamation that echoes the tone of de Man's article: "La population comprendra que des incidents aussi regrettables que ceux qui ont été provoqués le 11 novembre par quelques éléments irresponsables de la population sont de nature à desservir les intérêts les plus sacrés du pays"¹³. Notice that this sacred severity of tone imparts a message that remains vague; first because to say what happened would be to contradict the proclamation itself, and second because official silence was counterbalanced by widespread public witness and clandestine reports. The allegorical text, both here and in de Man's articles, refuses to name its subject.

To grasp what lies (in more than one sense) behind this refusal of reference we have to bear in mind that propaganda, in this like irony or satire, can only be read and understood in relation to a world of events and discourse from which the text or proclamation deliberately diverges or distances itself. Such different ways of "saying the thing that is not" are also ways of not saying the thing that is, or is feared. Hence a third translation of the events and clandestine accounts of the 11th November, so abusive that both events and their openly secret interpretation are buried under insults. The author of this attack, which appeared in the collaborationist pages of *Le Nouveau journal* on the 15th November, 1940, was its publisher Paul Colin: "Quelques bandes de braillards et de snobinettes, applaudis par deux quarterons d'écervelés, ont organisé dans les rues de Bruxelles des bousculades d'autant plus indécentes qu'elles prétendaient s'inscrire sous le signe du patriotisme"¹⁴. In trying to read this and similar propaganda we have to remind ourselves that even here a code is at work. The dismissive "snobinettes", for example, may be read as a shocked reaction to the role played in the demonstrations by lycée and university students, the well-brought up daughters (and sons) of the Brussels bourgeoisie¹⁵.

13 *L'An 40*, p. 375.

14 *L'An 40*, p. 375.

15 The tone and choice of insults is reminiscent of the more recent attack by Louis de Pauwels of *Le Figaro* on the lycée and university students who demonstrated in Paris and throughout France against the policies of the Chirac government in late 1986, in which he notoriously suggested that they were "atteints d'un SIDA mental". That insult in turn alludes to a right-wing code about disease, morality, and politics,

We will see how central this attack on the bourgeoisie is to the terrorist rhetoric of de Man's articles, but we might note that Colin seems disturbed by appeals to patriotism. I detect this disturbance in the shift of tone toward the end of his attack, for example, when abuse gives way to more decent language (“sous le signe du patriotisme”). Some of the historical reasons for this disturbance should now be clear to us, but there were others that were more cultural and personal. Paul de Man was writing in *Le Soir* for a Walloon (i.e. French-speaking Belgian) audience, among whom his articles try to evoke sympathy and interest for both Flemish and German literature and culture. And yet that same Walloon audience had already had several brutal reminders that it was thought to be “ungermanic”, pro-French, bourgeois, and even, apart from the Rexist, anti-Fascist. Flemish- and French-speaking soldiers, for example, were not segregated within the Belgian army, but they were separated the moment they surrendered to the Germans. As soon as the capitulation took place, Flemish soldiers were released and allowed to return to their homes. The Walloons were kept in German prisoner-of-war camps for years, many thousands of them until they were liberated by the Allies in 1944 or 1945. This partly racial discrimination was one of the two chief causes for the early chilling of Belgian attitudes toward the Germans – the other being the starvation of the civilian population – and Hitler made no bones about this policy. Although the Führer had not by mid-July 1940 made up his mind about the future of the Belgian state, he ordered every possible advancement for the Flemings, but no favors whatever for the Walloons: “Den Wallonen sind keinerlei Vergünstigungen zu gewähren”¹⁶. And yet Paul de Man, Flemish by origin and granted further special privileges and rations by the Germans, writes in French to assure his Walloon audience that they are clearly better and better-off than the decadent French, and are indeed living in the best of all possible worlds. Even his attempts to mediate between cultures ran counter to German policy. As soon as the *Militärverwaltung* took over in the summer of 1940, the distribution facilities of the Agence Dechenne (for which de Man later worked) were used to divide the two cultural groups by stopping all circulation of French-language publications in Flemish

but it backfired because the bourgeoisie of Paris, unlike that of wartime Brussels, did not have to swallow such an insult, which was all the more offensive to the many who, not knowing the code, took (or refused) it quite literally.

16 Hitler's wishes were expressed in a letter to the Army High Command from General Keitel of 14 July 1940: it is reproduced in *L'An 40*, facing p. 201.

areas and to seal off Walloon areas by keeping out newspapers and magazines from France. All of this oppression and exclusion of his audience had to be glossed or passed over in silence.

There is even the embarrassment of language itself. De Man's written command of his native language, as Ortwyn de Graef observed in translating his articles from *Het Vlaamsche Land*, was rather shaky; often clumsy and ungrammatical. To praise the language in which the praise is written is meant to be self-confirming. But if the praise is badly written the result is self-subverting. So much of his zeal to promote and translate the *völkisch* qualities of Flemish/culture is undermined by both the manner and matter of the attempt. As in the voice that asserts in *The Waste Land*, "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch", both rhetoric and reference cast doubt on the assertion. Though not on the voice itself, on its strange predicament.

This self-denying voice resonates through de Man's later work, at once warning against alienation and *aporia* and yet arguing that it is inescapable. His plight was from the start a poignant if at times uncertain echo of Michelet's lament in *Le Peuple*: he felt himself at one with the people, but every attempt to express that unity confirmed his estrangement from a people whose language he could not speak. The way out of that predicament was the transforming power of the imagination as it was conceived by the romantics. The *Lyrical Ballads*, read as both evidence and disproof of that power, remind the reader through Wordsworth's preface of this quandary of language, to which Coleridge later returned in his *Biographia Literaria*. The quandary remains, and one of the reasons for Paul de Man's continuing significance is that he translates it out of the primitive code of "La Terreur dans les lettres" into the subtlety of philosophical concerns with language that reflects the undermining achievement of Nietzsche and Heidegger. His translation (or transformation) of the terrorist code into a decoding process that undermines the referential force of literary texts – in the name of a deeper grasp of their rhetorical power – transforms the imagination into a sibyl that promises to liberate us from the bafflement created by its riddles ... by telling us even more riddles.

It is striking that from the very beginning de Man warns against what Paulhan describes as "le pouvoir des mots", never against their impotence: against a madness of words provoked rather than resolved by the imagination. This seems even more striking when we reflect on his silence concerning this other role of the imagination, this very different

view of language. That other view emerges in Geoffrey Hill's sense of the imagination as redemption or atonement for the guilt created by language, "an anxiety about *faux pas*, the perpetuation of 'howlers', grammatical solecisms, misstatements of fact, misquotations, improper attributions"¹⁷. The literary imagination accordingly atones for specific and recognized barbarisms and mistakes, which may range from a slip of the tongue to the Big Lie of propaganda. Hill even draws a parallel with a severe judgment of Simone Weil that was itself based on her condemnation of wartime propaganda: "It seems to me one of the indubitable signs of Simone Weil's greatness as an ethical writer that she associates the act of writing not with a generalized awareness of sin but with specific crime, and proposes a system whereby 'anybody, no matter who, discovering an avoidable error in printed text or radio broadcast, would be entitled to bring an action before (special) courts' empowered to condemn a convicted offender to prison or hard labour". Such punishments, and worse, were inflicted on wartime collaborators and propagandists for the crime of "avoidable error" in the use and abuse of language. But what redemption is possible, what sentence must be served, if the error of language is unavoidable?

* * *

Our chains rattle, even while we are complaining of them.
Coleridge

The wartime articles in French, where the error of language can only be countered by the asceticism of terror, attack literary style as a class weapon and obstacle to a revolutionary *Ordre Nouveau*. In discussing an article by Drieu la Rochelle in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* he had usurped from Jean Paulhan, de Man quotes approvingly Drieu's conclusion that France had aged into abstraction and decadence because "La civilisation française a cessé d'être fondée sur le sens du corps"¹⁸. In this the French are a contrast to the Germans of the new Nazi *Kultur* praised by Bertrand de Jouvenel in his book *Après la défaite*, which "fournit une

17 "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'", in *The Lords of Limit*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 7.

18 *Le Soir*, 18 March 1941.

analyse très pertinente de l'évolution morale qui mena les jeunes allemands à devenir les plus acharnés adversaires de la bourgeoisie démocratique triomphatrice de 1914-1918. Jusqu'à présent, on avait trop peu pris au sérieux cette révolution intérieure. Le fascisme était considéré comme une espèce de folie passagère, tandis qu'il est au contraire une réaction extrêmement normale et durable devant des circonstances créées par la politique mondiale [...]". It was these revolutionary pretensions of Nazism that de Man shared and that accounted in his mind for the military triumph of Germany. And not only in his mind, because although the "revolutionary" Nazism of Röhm and the SA, which Heidegger had also supported, had been crushed within the Reich, it was still being touted at home and exported for possible belief abroad. German radio propaganda, as Gombrich has pointed out, observed a discreet silence about the more loony intricacies of Nazi ideology and concentrated instead on this simple opposition between youth and senility, revolution and reaction: "There was no comparison possible, as Goebbels wrote, between the first world war and the second, for now the German army carried the spell of invincibility, being preceded by the magic of a glorious revolution [...] the slogan of the young nations was sufficiently vague to be flexible and sufficiently emotional to be rousing, and so the German armies were made to march into France to the strains of the *Frankreich Lied* 'We come and smash their old and corrupt world to bits'"¹⁹.

The strangeness of de Man's task in celebrating Germany's victory over France deepens when we realize that he is writing in French. It is in French that he condescendingly notes that "les Français ne se sont pas encore habitués à l'idée que la création de l'organisation mondiale nouvelle ne dépend plus d'eux"²⁰. And there is at least one moment when the collision between French prose style and German conquest strikes him forcibly enough to produce comment. Writing admiringly about Ernst Jünger's war diary account of the invasion of France, he closes with some bemused remarks about the translation, which he finds "too perfect". The explanation of this paradoxical criticism is that the translation ends by giving the impression that the book had actually been written in French, "ce qui, surtout lorsqu'il raconte l'histoire d'un Allemand

19 Gombrich, *Myth and Reality*, p. 7.

20 *Le Soir*, 18 March 1941.

envahissant la France, a quelque chose d'étonnamment choquant"²¹. His response to Jünger yields a further and final surprise. In its mythic vision, in its formal perfection, he finds what the literary terrorist seeks beyond all the fiddle of style and subjectivity – which he here invidiously finds in Gide – and that is the text exalted to the status of universal truth. As in other texts of this sort that come to mind, the truth on offer may only manifest itself to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

In one of the articles mentioned already, on Brasillach's *Notre avant-guerre*, de Man mentions Brasillach's fearful inability to grasp, at a Nazi Nuremberg rally, "cette importance soudaine du politique dans la vie d'un peuple" (12 August 1941). Just below this review is a brief and cryptic announcement: "Radio-Bruxelles consacre une émission au départ de la Légion 'Wallonie'", which could be taken by contrast to show that many Belgians grasped something Brasillach had missed. For the "Légion Wallonie" was a volunteer corps of French-speaking Belgians, later in 1943 incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*, who were being honored as they set off on a road to the East that ended for so many in shame and death. Their commander was to be the Rexist leader Léon Degrelle, Hitler's favorite among the Belgian Fascists, and their last stand was to be in Pomerania during the Spring of 1945. Of eight thousand men, only seven hundred survived, many to face Belgian courts²². Their enthusiasm, a contrast to Brasillach's, is also a contrast between the Nazi "nouvelle ère", the "new era" named and welcomed by de Man, and the nostalgia for the old order (*Notre avant-guerre*) implied by Brasillach's book and by his inability to enter into the spirit of Nazi spectacle. Jacques Derrida reads this remark as possibly "overdeterminable" but concludes that it criticizes the Nazis and distances de Man from Brasillach's Nazi sympathies. And yet the force of the judgment, clarified by the texts that appear around it, is surely that de Man distances himself precisely from Brasillach's aestheticism, his Alexandrian incomprehension of the "the life of a people"; in a word, Brasillach does not understand the cause for which he was shot after the Liberation of France: he was not Nazi enough. De Man's judgment seems to Derrida to hint at irony, but it might better be read as a quite unironic declaration of the

21 *Le Soir*, 23 June 1942. The book reviewed was *Jardins et routes*, a translation by Maurice Betz of *Gärten und Strassen*.

22 See Hans Werner Neulen, *Eurofaschismus und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Munich, Universitas Verlag, 1980, pp. 69-78, 154.

terrorist principle that stylish phrases and Byzantine refinement mask the *völkisch* truth of things.

Irony after all is a lie that subverts its own power to deceive. The paper Paul de Man wrote for was devoted to the opposite endeavor: the attempt to subvert the evidence of its readers' senses. It had at all costs to present an image or mosaic of a calm contented society united behind humane German authority. The problem, however, was that virtually every photo or paragraph that sought to convey that message collided with a contradiction, often in the picture or prose itself. The children of veterans are shown above the Brasillach article being sent off by train to pass “de délicieuses vacances” at Limbourg. And why? Because more than a year after the defeat of Belgium's army many thousands of their fathers are still in German prisoner-of-war camps, leaving their families destitute. Although Belgium, like Holland and Norway, had been defeated, her government went into exile in England and continued in a state of war with the Third Reich. King Léopold III, advised by Henri de Man, had ordered the surrender of the Belgian Army, but there was no Vichy government, no arguably legitimate collaborationist regime. There was instead a military occupation by the German army, a *Militärverwaltung* backed by police forces and economic despotism that deported forced labor to Germany, ransacked the country for money, machines and food, starved the civilian population, and – through its large and powerful *Propaganda-Abteilung* – took over newspapers such as *Le Soir* that then put the best possible face or mask on an ugly situation. It should be remembered, as Belgian sources have pointed out, that the entire editorial board of *Le Soir*, without exception, had refused to work for Nazi propaganda after the capitulation in 1940. All of them were fired, to be replaced by a more amenable group that included Paul de Man. From the start, including his own opinion that henceforth collaboration was the task of every reasonable person, *Le Soir* had somehow to balance fantasies against surreal actuality. It had to balance reports of Pétain's speeches to boy scouts against police raids (*razzias*) to seize grain and secretly slaughtered pigs; jokes about BBC broadcasts against the news that French Jews were forbidden to have or listen to radios – all of these hallucinatory contrasts can be found juxtaposed on the cropped and random photocopies of *Le Soir*.

The ugly face of military occupation required a language of euphemism and blandness. “La littérature française devant les événements” was how de Man avoided mentioning by name the shocks of defeat, be-

trayal, and resistance covered by “the events” in this heading for one of his articles. His language was definitely Aesopian, as a number of readers of the *Le Soir* essays have noticed. But the fable is less comforting than it may seem. Through several articles and reviews on and about books concerning the war, especially about the invasion of Belgium and the fall of France, de Man downplays their interest and even regrets their way of dwelling on the past. This softpedalling of battles and defeats was part of German propaganda's concern that they might give rise to a desire for revenge – as indeed they did – but it was also I think a more personal concern of Paul de Man. He did not want to dwell on the “avant-guerre” or the war itself because he was already looking ahead to the “après-guerre” that was meant to follow an early German victory. Any event or any book that called attention to the fact that Belgium was still formally, and to some extent actually, at war with the Third Reich, and that the hope of early victory, after which the social revolution could begin, had faded into an everwidening war that by the end of 1941 stretched around the world and grouped Russia, Britain, and the United States against Germany and Italy, any such reminder increasingly dismayed him. Like his uncle Henri, whose protégé he was, Paul de Man had come to fascism from the left, and the puritanical tone he adopted toward Brasillach and Montherlant was part of his rejection of the social and cultural hierarchy they were part of and, in his eyes, tainted by. A little mourning, as *Hamlet* reminds us, goes a long way, and a little too much nostalgia is a dangerous thing. Hence his genuine and otherwise surprising refusal of both the shining lacquer of style and the commonplaces of traditional politics, especially when they seem to be embedded in an old order or a dangerous kind of recollection²³.

23 Both of these refusals are part of his cultural terrorism, but they may also directly echo some of the political slogans that were part of his daily life. Several articles extol “European” values and „The defence of the Occident”, phrases that were in themselves part of the liturgy of right-wing politics. During the weeks and months of late 1941 and early 1942, during the very period of their recurrence in his articles, these phrases had a further and pointed significance: they were meant to counter the declaration by Churchill and Roosevelt, in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941, of Allied war aims and principles. This inspired Hitler to circulate the slogan of “European solidarity” and summon a meeting of his own allies to proclaim a “European New Order”. It was during these weeks that we find as well-placed a source as Ciano, Mussolini's Foreign Minister and son-in-law, writing from Hitler's headquarters, “Now the fashionable slogan is that of 'European solidarity'. Europe

This brings us to the second of de Man's surprising attacks, a review of Montherlant's *Solstice de juin* – like Brasillach's *Notre avant-guerre* a book that touched all the nerves we have just laid bare. It is exactly the kind of text that Derrida once identified in *Positions* as “embarrassing”, and therefore one most likely to open itself to an interesting reading. Derrida here notices that there is something incidentally odd about de Man's definition of language, quite apart from his even stranger rejection of Montherlant's style. Language is defined along with manners and customs, as “material and direct”, a token of the terrorist reduction of language to instrumentality. The heart of his attack on Montherlant is really an attack on literary language itself and on writers in general as empty stylists: “parce que les littérateurs sont capables d'exprimer des lieux communs avec élégance, on en fait des oracles et on écoute leur parole comme un message providentiel [...] On est étonné de la naïveté et de la nullité de certaines de leurs sentences lorsqu'on les dépouille du vernis brillant qu'une forme soignée leur confère” (11 Nov. 1941). It would be hard to find a more unvarnished example of Paulhan's terrorism, which he characterizes by precisely this “rupture avec le lieu commun”.

It is also a crude prevision of the subtle insistence in de Man's later work on the separability of figurative language and cognitive value. This insistence, as a later title and argument like “the epistemology of metaphor” serves to show, is anchored in the notion that *meaning* is the standard of language. And meaning, even here, is unveiled and shown to be empty. The political roots of this terrorism, its technological shoving of style aside as a kind of decadence, are visible in his contempt for writers who have not either gone to the people or gotten down to the hard work of finding solutions and remedies for their “véritables carences”: “C'est là l'oeuvre des spécialistes qualifiés et non pas de dilettantes touche-à-tout qui n'ont pour eux que leurs facilités oratoires ou la qualité de leur style”. The philistinism of this could hardly be closer to the terrorist revulsion from style, hardly further removed from any sharing in an aesthetic ideology. De Man prefaces all of this by turning against Montherlant a poignant image that the author of *Solstice de juin* applied to all those who had written about the war and its consequences: “Aux écrivains qui ont trop donné, depuis quelques mois, à l'actualité, je

– the Führer said – besides being a geographical expression is a cultural and moral concept”. See *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* (London, 1948), p. 459.

prédis, pour cette partie de leur oeuvre, l'oubli le plus total. Les journaux, les revues d'aujourd'hui, quand je les ouvre, j'entends rouler sur eux l'indifférence de l'avenir, comme on entend le bruit de la mer quand on porte à l'oreille certains coquillages". De Man hails this as a "just and severe sentence", a phrase that echoes the austerity of as Saint-Just, and then inflicts it on *Solstice de juin* itself. Such a consignment to oblivion evokes Nietzsche, just as the figure of the seashell's rumor of the sea evokes Wordsworth's story of the shell and the stone, and difference between the two, the sentence and the simile, shows us some of the difference between the writer and his reviewer.

This contrast seems all the sharper if we notice in closing how it all seemed to yet another contemporary, one who reviewed both Montherlant's book and *Les Fleurs des Tarbes*. This was Maurice Blanchot, who relished in *Solstice de juin* all of the romantic irony that de Man detested. And in his extended essay on Paulhan he writes the missing second part, the missing rhetoric that even when written is still missing, because if taken to its conclusion, Paulhan's vision of terror becomes indistinguishable from literature itself. Even in his lighthearted essay on Montherlant, whose title "De l'insolence considérée comme un des Beaux-Arts" plays on De Quincey's "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts", Blanchot catches what remains an ominous paradox of style – "On prend une attitude, mais on prend l'attitude de ce qu'on est réellement"²⁴. When he turns to Paulhan, he traces over the book that is offered as an anatomy of terror another book that anatomizes and dissects literature, calling even its existence in doubt. After reading them all – Paulhan, de Man, Blanchot – and allowing for all the differences, we are left in closing with the recognition that all three are caught, late or soon, by the laws of literary terror. And Paul de Man, who in his early writings tried to dispossess language, went on to be haunted by it. Flight and pursuit become undecidable, escape hardly possible. All writers share in acts of terror, there are only unusual suspects.

24 Both essays, the second of which is entitled "Comment la littérature est-elle possible", are found in *Faux Pas*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943.

Zusammenfassung

Paul de Mans Kriegsjournalismus hat zu einer großen Debatte geführt, die aber nur selten im Zusammenhang mit seiner ambivalenten Haltung gegenüber der Rhetorik untersucht wurde. Diese Ambivalenz geht zurück auf seine stetige Bewunderung für Jean Paulhan, dem Herausgeber der *Nouvelle revue française*, und auf dessen Ablehnung der Rhetorik, wie sie klar und deutlich in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la terreur dans les lettres* (1936, 2. erweiterte Auflage 1941) formuliert wurden. Nach Jean Paulhan drückt sich der literarische Terror – ein Ausdruck, der auf die soziale Bedeutung der *Terreur* zur Zeit der Französischen Revolution verweist – durch zwei offenbar entgegengesetzte Haltungen gegenüber der literarischen Sprache und ihrer Rhetorik aus. Rhetorik wird einerseits als eine billige Sammlung von *lieux communs* verachtet und soll vom Autor vermieden werden; dieser soll über das Sublime, das er in der Literatur entdeckt, berichten. Beide Haltungen lassen sich bis auf de Mans frühe Schriften zurückverfolgen. Daraus ergibt sich die oft schwer zu verstehende Doppelhaltung: seine Angriffe auf das, was de Man den Stil des Mandarin nennt (wie ihn Henri de Montherlant und Robert Brasillach anwenden), aber auch seine ernstgemeinte Aufforderung zum Opfer im Sinne der Revolution und sein gleichzeitiges Lob für den überschwenglichen Stil von Ernst Jünger. All das geistert in de Mans späterem paradoxen Ansatz zur Definition der Rhetorik mit, wird von seiner aesopischen und verneinenden Sprache in bezug auf Kollaborationsschriften sogar noch unterstrichen. Beim näheren Hinschauen auf das, was man "Umtext/Umfeld" der Zeitung *Le Soir* nennen möchte, aber auch seine eigenen Artikel in diesem Blatt, machen deutlich, wie aktiv er in die Rolle eines "Terroristen" geschlüpft ist. Trotzdem zeigt sich, daß, was Maurice Blanchot als Paradoxon von Paulhan bezeichnet hat, auch auf Paul de Man anwendbar ist: vor der Rhetorik zu fliehen, heißt von ihr verfolgt zu werden, und die Aufhebung der Sprache bedeutet die Aufhebung der Literatur schlechthin.