

**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 future of Paul de Man

**Autor:** Culler, Jonathan

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006662>

### **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>**

Jonathan Culler

## THE FUTURE OF PAUL DE MAN

As my title implies, it seems to me appropriate both to initiate a concluding discussion that might bring out what we have learned or accomplished in our engagement with the work of Paul de Man at this conference and to attempt to direct our thinking toward the future. When Paul de Man died in 1983, he left behind a legacy of difficult texts, many of them still unpublished. It seemed apparent that an important activity of criticism and theory in America, at least in the immediate future, would be to interpret de Man's critical and theoretical writings, exploring their implications, and especially working out their possible relationships to other contemporary critical discourses, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and revisionist marxisms, which have frequently engaged those versed in deconstruction but did not interest de Man.

The discovery of de Man's wartime journalism by Ortwin de Graef and of further early journalism by Thomas Keenan has posed a different set interpretive tasks, which many of the contributors to the volume of *Responses*, edited by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, have ably taken on, reconstructing historical and theoretical contexts and bringing out dimensions of de Man's mature writings that resonate with the earlier. The discussion of these wartime writings has only illustrated more clearly a principle of which we were already aware, that meaning is context bound but context is boundless, and our surprise at the contextual materials that have become relevant demonstrates with a force that has often been dismaying that the principle of the boundlessness of context insures the impossibility of mastering the meaning even of discourses one knows well.

This project of interpretation is scarcely complete or completable, but I fear that the attempt to complete it may frequently involve a surrender to the temptations of narrativization, as we produce from the array of interpretive materials and connections offered in the *Responses* volume and elsewhere, an intelligible story, whether it be the tale of a conver-

sion, of de Man's progress from the wickedness of an European ideology to the analytical detachment of American close reading, or a turn from a disastrous political engagement to an evasion of politics, only belatedly mitigated by his "critique of aesthetic ideology" and never-fulfilled project of writing on Marx and Kierkegaard, or a tale of sinister continuities and the return of the repressed. The seductions of these fictional narrative schemes are harder to resist now – when there is a lurid "before" one ineluctably seeks some sort of "after." De Man writes "no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word 'day', but it is very difficult not to conceive of the pattern of one's past and future existences in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world"<sup>1</sup>. The problem, of course, is that while these schemes do not "belong" to the world, they structure it, and within the circumstances that they generate, the most powerful counter to one narrative scheme usually seems to be another scheme which takes in more of the facts. If in our theoretical sophistication we thought we had learned to avoid the tendentious constructions of narrative, we find the dependence of intelligibility on narrative figures forced imperiously upon us – and thus all the more important to resist in the interests of reading.

In looking toward the future one might ask many questions about the future of Paul de Man – about the future of that name, of that *oeuvre*, and the future that his writings offer those who engage them. My question is, what seems especially valuable or productive in de Man's work for the future of literary criticism and theory? In responding to such questions one's tendency is to focus on things one thinks one understands – something that can be presented as an achievement, an *acquis*. In the present critical and polemical climate it may be especially tempting to take certain ends as given and to claim that de Man's writings are means towards those ends. The danger of thinking in this way is of forgetting that reading and research are valuable insofar as they remain open to the unknown or unexpected. Discovering what one already believes one knows is a tautological sort of research and writing. One should try, therefore, to avoid the temptation of treating de Man's work as a set of solutions in order to preserve the possibility of learning something new. It is quite possible, even likely, that this work will surprise us – that previous

---

1 Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 11. Henceforth cited as *RT*.

readings will come to seem misreadings, that this work may prove to have interesting things to say about precisely those matters it is reputed to ignore, for instance. De Man writes of Rousseau that “the existence of a particularly rich aberrant tradition” of misinterpretation of a writer is “no accident but a constitutive part of all literature, the basis, in fact, of literary history”<sup>2</sup>. We can say that what makes an *oeuvre* live is its tantalizing availability for reading and misinterpretations, its resources for reversing what it is thought to have achieved.

On an earlier occasion, for a volume entitled *The Future of Literary Criticism*, I outlined five areas in which it seemed to me that de Man had made signal contributions<sup>3</sup>. I want to take up each of these (while adding a sixth topic) in terms of the somewhat different perspective I have been seeking to develop, thinking less of achievements than of future problems and prospects.

1. First, there is de Man's revaluation of allegory, which criticism in the wake of Coleridge and Goethe had treated as an undesirable and unsuccessful type of figuration, a product of the operations of fancy rather than imagination. An assumed superiority of the symbol underlay literary taste, critical analysis, and conceptions of literary history. Looking at the supposed shift from allegorical to symbolical imagery in late-eighteenth-century poetry in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man challenges the view that romantic literature produces through the symbol a reconciliation of man and nature and instead identifies the allegorical structures at work in its most intense and lucid passages. Allegorizing tendencies “appear at the most original and profound moments [...] when an authentic voice becomes audible,” in works of European literature between 1760 and 1800. He writes:

The prevalence of allegory always corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge from the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance [...] Whereas symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. (*BI*, pp. 206-7)

---

2 De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, enlarged edition, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 141. Henceforth cited as *BI*.

3 Jonathan Culler, “Paul de Man's Contribution to Literary Theory and Criticism,” in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen, New York, Routledge, 1989.

This account of the relation between symbol and allegory, and its revaluation of allegory, has been central to recent work on romantic and post-romantic literature in America, but the implications of de Man's reflection on allegory are not exhausted here. We can now see, as Minae Mizumura writes, that "the tension between symbol and allegory is already another name for the tension between a temptation of assuming the readability of a text, that is, of reconciling sign and meaning, and a renunciation of this temptation"<sup>4</sup>. But de Man also uses the term *allegory* in *Allegories of Reading* for texts' implicit commentary on modes of signification, implied second- or third-order narratives about reading and intelligibility. Foregrounding the way texts function as allegorical statements about language, literature, and reading, *Allegories of Reading* poses a question about the relation of figuration to interpretation that needs to be pursued.

But the further question that now may pose itself for us more pressingly is the relation between allegory and history. In the conclusion of the "Promises" chapter of *Allegories of Reading*, while arguing that the "redoubtable efficacy" of Rousseau's *Social Contract* is due to the rhetorical model of which it is a version, de Man writes "textual allegories on this level of complexity generate history," as if the historical effect or productivity of a text were an allegorical power, a power of allegory<sup>5</sup>. The relationship seems more intimate yet difficult to grasp in the last essays where allegory seems an incomplete narrative of a non-figurative occurrence which de Man associates with the materiality of actual history or historical modes of language-power. Kevin Newmark's difficult essay "Paul de Man's History" in *Reading de Man Reading* helps trace the elaboration of these terms<sup>6</sup>.

2. One of de Man's achievements has certainly been the revaluation of romanticism, the demonstration through studies of Rousseau, Hölderlin, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Baudelaire that it includes the boldest, most self-conscious writing of the Western tradition. The early romantics, Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Hölderlin, are "the first modern writers to have put into question, in the language of poetry, the ontological pri-

---

4 Minae Mizumura, "Renunciation," *Yale French Studies*, 69, 1985, p. 91.

5 De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 277. Henceforth cited as *AR*.

6 Wlad Godzich and Lindsay Waters, eds., *Reading de Man Reading*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

ority of the sensory object,” for which later romantic and post-romantic literature and critical discussions of it would remain nostalgic<sup>7</sup>. It is now apparent that other things are at stake in de Man's focus on romanticism, that the focus on it is crucial to an understanding of our recent past and our cultural situation. For instance, there is the problem of what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *La Fiction du politique* calls the “national aestheticism” that issues from a reading of romanticism but to which the work of a writer such as Hölderlin provides a divergence of crucial, critical force.

A critique of the reception of romanticism has been an activity of “deconstruction in America.” An aestheticizing and monumentalizing interpretation of romanticism, institutionalized in the teaching of Wordsworth in American universities, has been challenged and in some measure dismantled by the deconstructive readings produced by de Man and his students<sup>8</sup>.

De Man insists that the question of romanticism is not just one of characterizing a period or a style. Discussion of romanticism is particularly difficult, he suggests, because it requires a coming to terms with a past from which we are not yet separated, a past whose most intense questioning involves precisely this interpretive relation to experiences become memories – that is, the very structure on which our relation to it depends. Descriptions of romanticism always miss the mark, for reasons which are structural rather than due to failures of intelligence. A further complication is introduced by the fact the genetic categories on which literary history depends – the models of birth, development, death – are most decisively promoted but also exposed by the romantic works that they would be used to discuss: “one may well wonder what kind of historiography could do justice to the phenomenon of romanticism, since romanticism (itself a period concept) would then be the movement that challenges the genetic principle which necessarily underlies all historical narrative” (*AR*, p. 82). As a result, he writes, “the interpretation of romanticism remains for us the most difficult and at the same time the most necessary of task” (*RR*, p. 50).

---

7 De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 16. Henceforth cited as *RR*.

8 The key role of this critique in de Man's own changes – the turn towards a linguistic terminology above all – emerges clearly in the dual versions of his “Time and History in Wordsworth,” published for the first time by Andrzej Warminski and Cynthia Chase in *Diacritics*, Winter 1987.

3. Third, there is de Man's identification of the relationship between blindness and insight. In *Blindness and Insight* he argues that critics "owe their best insights to assumptions these insights disprove," a fact which "shows blindness to be a necessary correlative of the rhetorical nature of literary language" (*BI*, p. 141). A famous passage describes the way the New Critics' concentration on language (rather than authors, for example) was made possible by their conception of the work as organic form but led to insights into the role of irony that undermine the conception of literary works as harmonious, organic wholes. For them, as for other critics, an

insight could only be gained because the critics were in the grip of this peculiar blindness: their language could grope towards a certain degree of insight only because their method remained oblivious to the perception of this insight. The insight exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right – the question of his own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask – and so being able to distinguish between statement and meaning. He has to undo the explicit results of a vision that is able to move toward the light only because, being already blind, it does not have to fear the power of this light. But the vision is unable to report correctly what it has perceived in the course of its journey. To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides. (*BI*, pp. 105-6)

I should add, parenthetically, that this is not de Man's attempt, as some have claimed, to make his own youthful blindness an ineluctable necessity – at least not unless one can show some brilliant insight of his wartime journalism that was made possible by its blindness to the significance of anti-semitism, for example. De Man's is a theory about the dependency of truth upon error, not simply about the pervasiveness of error.

This relation is structural, not psychological, for de Man. The blindness is not a product of the distinctive individual histories of critics. And although "blindness" seems to belong to a phenomenological vocabulary of consciousness, perhaps we should rather construe it in a more mechanical way, as a predictable disruption of a perceptual mechanism. As Barbara Johnson's and Hans Jost Frey's papers have indicated, de Man speaks of what others would call the unconscious in terms of mechanisms of language: what happens independently of any intent or volition of subjects. He would, as Neil Hertz stressed, interpret psychological ac-

counts as defensive ways of creating intelligibility, of countering the threat of the random and of mechanical unintelligibility. An important question here, which Barbara Johnson's discussion of the "inhuman and impersonal" has broached, is the possible impact of this way of thinking on a post-structuralist psychoanalytic criticism which explores how texts are structured by psychic conflicts or operations they theorize. As Neil Hertz suggested, de Man's thought may link up with the explorations of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. At a time when psychoanalytic readings may become the refuge of a certain humanism, as in American Ego psychology, which sees us as most human in our "unconscious selves," insistence on impersonal mechanisms may prove salutary.

4. This leads to my fourth and I think most important topic, what Barbara Johnson calls de Man's development of a materialist theory of language and Hans-Jost Frey investigates as the "madness of words." One might say that what de Man first described as the division at the heart of Being, and then as the complex relation between blindness and insight that prevents self-possession or self-presence, is in his later work analyzed as a linguistic predicament, the figural structure of language that insures a division variously described as a gap between sign and meaning, between meaning and intent, between the performative and constative or "cognitive" function of language, and between rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as trope.

Although literary theory has to a considerable extent assimilated the demonstration that reading should focus on the discrepancies between the performative and constative dimensions of texts, between their explicit statement and the implications of their modes of utterance, criticism has not yet explicated and worked with the more difficult and unsettling aspects of de Man's writing on language and occurrence. In emphasizing certain non-semantic aspects of language, from the indeterminate significative status of the letter, as in Saussure's work on anagrams, to the referential moment of deixis, as in Hegel's "this piece of paper," de Man stresses that language is not coextensive with meaning, and rhetorical reading becomes in part an exposure of the ideological imposition of meaning as a defense we build against language – specifically against the inhuman, mechanical aspects of language, the structures or grammatical possibilities that are independent of any intent or desire we might have, yet which are neither natural nor, in fact, phenomenal.

There are, in de Man's accounts, two levels of imposition. First there is the positing by language, which does not reflect but constitutes, which simply occurs. De Man speaks of "the absolute randomness of language prior to any figuration or meaning" (*AR*, p. 299). This does not mean, as some commentators affect to believe, that somehow agents are not responsible for their words or actions; on the contrary, the possibility of their being responsible depends on the randomness of language itself, the blind occurrence of its positing. De Man writes, "The positing power of language is entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it" (*RR*, p. 116). Then there is the conferring of sense or meaning on this positing, through figuration – as in allegorical narratives of law and desire, lurid figures of castrating and beheading, and less lurid figures as well. Positing does not belong to any sequence or have any status; these are imposed retrospectively. De Man asks, "How can a positional act, which relates to nothing that comes before or after, become inscribed in a sequential narrative? [...] it can only be because we impose, in our turn, on the senseless power of positional language the authority of sense and meaning" (*RR*, p. 117). We transform language into historical and aesthetic objects, or embed discursive occurrences in narratives that provide continuities, in a process of troping that de Man calls "the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their own demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn" (*RR*, p. 122). "We cannot ask why it is that we, as subjects, choose to impose meaning, since we are ourselves defined by this very question" (*RR*, p. 118).

Neil Hertz's "More About Lurid Figures," discussing passages in which de Man describes the law in Rousseau, observes that for de Man the divergence between grammar and meaning becomes explicit when the linguistic structures are stated in political terms (*AR*, p. 269). De Man writes of "an unavoidable estrangement between political rights and laws on the one hand, and political action and history on the other. The grounds for this alienation are best understood in terms of the rhetorical structure that separates one domain from the other" (*AR*, p. 266). That rhetorical structure is the discrepancy between language conceived as grammar and language as reference or intentional action, and the ineluctability and indeterminacy of this structural relationship is what de Man calls "text." "The structure of the entity with which we are concerned," writes de Man in his exposition of *The Social Contract*, "(be it

as property, as national State, or as any other political institution) is most clearly revealed when it is considered as the general form that subsumes all these particular versions, namely as legal *text*" (AR, p. 267). The problematical relationship between the generality of law, system, grammar, and its particularity of application, event, or reference is the textual structure Rousseau expounds in the relationship between the general will and the particular individual, or between the state as system and the sovereign as active principle. The tension between grammar and reference

is duplicated in the differentiation between the state as a defined entity and the state as principle of action or, in linguistic terms, between the constative and performative function of language. A text is defined by the necessity of considering a statement, at the same time, as performative and constative, and the logical tension between figure and grammar is repeated in the impossibility of distinguishing between two linguistic functions which are not necessarily compatible. (AR, p. 270)

What is the significance of that aporia between performative and constative? It emerges clearly in Rousseau's question of whether "the body politic possesses an organ with which it can *énoncer* [articulate] the will of the people." The constative function of stating a preexisting will and the performative positing or shaping of a will are at odds, and while the system requires that the organ only announce what the general will determines, the action of the state or "lawgiver" will in particular instances declare or posit a general will. This is especially so in the founding of the state, for though, as Rousseau writes, "the people subject to the Law must be the authors of the Law", in fact, he asks, "how could a blind mob, which often does not know what it wants [promulgate] a system of Law." The structural tension between performative and constative here in what de Man calls the text is determinative of history, with the violence of its positings, its tropological substitutions, and their "eventual denunciation, in the future undoing of any State or any political institution" (AR, pp. 274-5).

5. One might, then, insert an additional rubric to bring my five to six: de Man's writings, contrary to what has frequently been suggested, offer a particularly demanding reflection on the nature and structure of history<sup>9</sup>.

---

9 See, for example, Cynthia Chase's discussion of de Man's Kleist essay in her "Trappings of an Education," in *Responses*, ed. W. Hamacher, N. Hertz and T. Keenan, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

Andrzej Warminski, in his contribution to the volume on de Man's wartime journalism, when puzzling over what might have caused the frenzied viciousness of newspaper responses to the de Man affair, shrewdly offers the hypothesis that precisely when de Man seemed dead and buried, he comes back – bad enough – but “comes back in a way that makes it forever impossible for 'supporters' and 'enemies' alike to mouth the old stupidities about his work” as 'anti-historical' or 'apolitical' – revealing that in truth it is “nothing but a sustained, relentless mediation on history and the political”<sup>10</sup>.

Indeed, I think this is so, and it will be valuable to demonstrate it in critical readings – not just of de Man's late works, but also of the earlier writings, given the inclination of both opponents, such as Frank Lentricchia, and friendly commentators, such as Christopher Norris, to read de Man's essays of the 1950s as evasions of history and retreats to inwardness<sup>11</sup>.

Norris is altogether mistaken, for instance, when he insists that “what de Man always sets up in opposition to history is a certain idea of the poetic, of poetry as a deeper, more authentic knowledge, undeluded by the claims of merely secular understanding. Perhaps,” Norris continues, “the most striking example is “Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” where de Man raises questions of historical belatedness, of poetry's relation to politics, and specifically that kind of revolutionary politics that preoccupies Wordsworth in *The Prelude*”<sup>12</sup>.

This is indeed a striking example, for the argument of this essay is precisely the opposite of what Norris takes it to be. Far from opposing, as Norris claims, an inwardness of poetic imagination to an exteriority of historical action, de Man specifically links revolutionary historical action to the poetic imagination; such action in this case fails through “excess of interiority” – a commitment to the imperious autonomy of the imaginations and a disregard for material resistances. In Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the revolutionaries who attack the cloister of the Grande Chartreuse, like the travellers setting out to cross the Alps, “are driven by the same, almost divine wish, and stand under the influence of the poetic faculty. This gives them the power to direct themselves decisively

---

10 Andrzej Warminski, “Terrible Reading,” in *Responses*, cit., p. 389.

11 Shoshana Felman's “Paul de Man's Silence,” *Critical Inquiry*, 15, 1989, particularly pp. 722-44, provides a compelling demonstration of this sort.

12 Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 5.

towards the future. But it is just as certain that in this same instant, this faculty is conscious neither of its powers nor its limits, and that it errs through excess" (*RR*, p. 58). Elsewhere de Man speaks of Marxism as "ultimately a poetic thought" in its attempt to imagine a future that corresponds to its own convictions (*BI*, p. 240).

History and poetry are thus in a very complicated relation in Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and de Man. First, "History is, to the extent that it is an act, [only part of the notion of history] a dangerous and destructive act, a kind of hubris of the will that rebels against the grasp of time. But on the other hand it is also temporally productive since it allows for the language of reflection to constitute itself" (*RR*, p. 57). The language of reflection and interpretation, which manifests itself when the travellers in the *Prelude* recognize they have missed the crossing of the Alps, is that of poetry, but it is also the language of history, since as de Man notes at the end of the essay, "the poet and historian converge in this essential point to the extent that they both speak of an action that precedes them but that exists for consciousness only because of their intervention" (*RR*, p. 65). Act and interpretation are linked but divided (for the historian as well as poet and critic), as in the crossing of the Alps, "in which the coming-to-consciousness is in arrears of the actual act." Moreover, if the act of the revolutionaries or the travellers fails from its excess of interiority, "poetry partakes of the interiority as well as the reflection: it is an act of the mind which allows it to turn from one to the other" (*RR*, p. 59). Note that interiority and reflection are the opposites distinguished here, not synonyms. Poetry is not opposed to history but includes both the imaginative projection and the self-conscious reflection on the relation between an occurrence and the signification it acquires.

In Wordsworth's complex interrogation of the relation between poetry and history, "the imagination appears as the faculty which allows us to think of our striving for action as a need for a future, as a *maladie d'idéalité* (as Mallarmé put it) that projects us out of the everyday present into the future" (*RR*, p. 57). It is the vital, dangerous, productive energy of historical action as well as the source of poetry. Although Norris writes that for de Man "the history of poetic consciousness from Wordsworth to Hölderlin is a passage marked by a growing disenchantment with the idea that poetry, or imaginative thought of any kind, might actively engage with issues of real-world history and politics", de Man's reading of Hölderlin argues rather that "the direct opposition between Titanism and poetry that has been maintained, explicitly or implicitly, by

so many interpreters", is a mistake, and that in Hölderlin "a dimension similar to Titanism can reside within the poetic act, although it represents at the same time a turning back [from the excess of interiority] through which consciousness transforms the excess into language" (*RR*, p. 63).

I suspect that a reading of those passages or essays which are supposed to demonstrate de Man's aversion to history will in fact show a powerful reflection on the gap between action and knowledge, which it may be awkward for those who live by claiming to study literature politically to acknowledge. Despite the overwhelming evidence history affords that one cannot control the historical outcome of one's actions, and despite reflection on this problem in the Marxist tradition, critics such as Lentricchia persist in treating de Man's discussions of this problem as a rejection of history or of "the political," as it is called, even as a rejection of action. They might do well to look at de Man's critique of Malraux in "The Temptation of Permanence" for "a nationalistic conservatism" that emerges from the attitude of one for whom history has become painful and who sees it "only as a shapeless fatality" or his attack in "The Inward Generation" on "a preconceived and reactionary view of history as indifferent and meaningless repetition"<sup>13</sup>.

A challenge for serious interpreters of the problem of history is to relate such remarks to de Man's later discussions of history as power and occurrence, as in "Kant and Schiller", where he writes, in a passage discussed by Marc Redfield, "History is therefore not temporal, it has nothing to do with temporality but [with] the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition." History is productive occurrence, and therefore not meaningless, but it emerges from a breakdown of cognition and of the tropological system on which cognition depends. Historical occurrence is unnameable, but gives rise to naming, through such figures as prosopopoeia, which figuratively reinscribe it into a system of meaning<sup>14</sup>. This persistent approach to the relation of act and interpretation is a rich vein of thought that we have scarcely begun to mine.

6. Finally, de Man's late essays, collected in *Aesthetic Ideology*, undertake a critique of an aesthetic ideology which imposes, even violently,

---

13 In de Man, *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsay Waters, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 33-4 and 17.

14 See Sam Weber, "The Monument Disfigured," in *Responses*, cit., p. 422.

continuity between perception and cognition, form and idea, and which reading, pursued to its limits (as it occurs in texts), is always undoing. Retrospectively, we can now see this project in earlier writings as well, in de Man's discussions of Heidegger, and in his critique of the "salvational poetics" which sees poetic imagination as a way of overcoming contradictions, and of the "naive poetics" which "rests on the belief that poetry is capable of effecting reconciliation because it provides an immediate contact with substance through its own sensible form" (*BI*, p. 244). The critique of aesthetic ideology does not somehow undo or compensate for collaboration, and it is important not simplistically to conflate aesthetic ideology and fascism, but to distinguish, as Ortwin de Graef does in his careful discussion, between aesthetic ideology and specific political positions. But we can say that much of de Man's mature work is staked on the premise that close reading attentive to the working of poetic language will expose the totalizations undertaken in the name of meaning and unity.

The late essays in *Aesthetic Ideology*, as Marc Redfield has explained, find in Kant's work on "aesthetic" a critique of the ideology of the aesthetic developed, for instance, by Schiller and applied, or misapplied, both in humanistic conceptions of aesthetic education and in fascist conceptions of politics as an aesthetic project. Traditionally, the aesthetic is the name of the attempt to find a bridge between the phenomenal and the intelligible, the sensuous and the conceptual. Aesthetic objects, with their union of sensuous form and spiritual content, serve as guarantors of the general possibility of articulating the material and the spiritual, a world of forces and magnitudes with a world of value. Literature, conceived here as not as literary works but as the rhetorical character of language revealed by close reading, "involves the voiding rather than the affirmation of aesthetic categories" (*RT*, p. 10). So, for example, the convergence of sound and meaning in literature is an effect which language can achieve "but which bears no relationship, by analogy or by ontologically grounded imitation, to anything beyond that particular effect. It is a rhetorical rather than an aesthetic function of language, an identifiable trope that operates on the level of the signifier and contains no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world – despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion" (*RT*, p. 10). Literary theory, in its attention to the functioning of language, thus "raises the question whether aesthetic values can be compatible with the linguistic structures from which these values are derived" (*RT*, p. 25). Literature it-

self raises this question in various ways, offering evidence of the autonomous potential of language, of the uncontrollable figural basis of forms, which cannot therefore serve as the basis of reliable cognition, or as de Man argues in the essay on Kleist in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, allegorically exposing the violence that lies hidden behind the aesthetic and makes aesthetic education possible.

De Man's essay "Kant and Schiller" concludes with a quotation from a novel by Joseph Goebbels, already cited by Barbara Johnson and Marc Redfield, which casts the leader as an artist working creatively on his material: "The statesman is an artist too. The leader and the led ('Führer und Masse') presents no more of a problem than, say, painter and color. Politics are the plastic art of the state, just as painting is the plastic art of color. 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." De Man's argument is that this aestheticization of politics, which seeks the fusion of form and idea, is "a grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state," but that Schiller's conception is itself a similar misreading, which must be undone by an analysis that takes us back to Kant. Kant had "disarticulated the project of the aesthetic which he had undertaken and which he found, by the rigor of his own discourse, to break down under the power of his own critical epistemological discourse"<sup>15</sup>. We discover here another instance of the structure Neil Hertz has discussed, of later readings revealing that the original was already disarticulated. De Man seeks to demonstrate how the most insightful literary and philosophical texts of the tradition expose the unwarranted violence required to fuse form and idea, cognition and performance.

This aspect of de Man's work has already begun to receive attention, for instance in Christopher Norris's book *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*, and in Marc Redfield's work of which we have an excerpt here. Norris, for all the strategic importance of his early exploration of this aspect of de Man, seeks to assimilate de Man to Adorno, and, as Marc Redfield argues in a review of Norris and J. Hillis Miller entitled, "Humanizing de Man," Norris displays scant understanding of the "materiality" of the letter or of inscription which in such essays as "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" is what resists

---

15 De Man, "Kant and Schiller," *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming.

transformation “into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment”<sup>16</sup>. A good deal of work remains to be done on this difficult topic of the prosaic materiality of the letter or inscription and its relation to history and the aesthetic, as when de Man writes, for instance, that “the critique of the aesthetic ends up, in Kant, in a *formal materialism* that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime”<sup>17</sup>. That formal materialism of the letter or inscription when considered non-teleologically – that is not as sign but as blank, indeterminately significative mark – is a puzzling concept, what de Man calls on the one hand “all we get” yet on the other hand impossible to experience as such, except as what gets transformed when we confer sense and meaning. Despite successful moves in a few recent essays in explicating the critique of aesthetic ideology, there is much more work to be done.

De Man's writing grants great authority to texts – a power of illumination which is a power of disruption – but little authority of meaning. This highly original combination of respect for texts and suspicion of meaning will give his writing a continuing power, though its effects are not easily calculable. His essays commit themselves to major literary and philosophical works for their relentless undoing of the meanings that usually pass for their value. His cumbersome yet memorable writing, with its tone of authority and elusive yet resonant key terms, effectively teaches suspicion of meaning and “the danger of unwarranted hopeful solutions,” while demanding (in a paradox Barbara Johnson discussed), as the price of possible insight, a commitment to the authority of the text.

Especially important is de Man's insistence that we not give into the desire for meaning, that reading follow the suspensions of meaning, the resistances to meaning, and his encouragement of a questioning of any stopping place, any moment that might convince us that we have attained a demystified knowledge. This frequently puts us in an uncomfortably precarious situation, precisely at what might seem a programmatic moment. “More than any other mode of inquiry, including economics,” de Man writes, in a sentence quoted by Barbara Johnson, “the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as determining factor in accounting for their

---

16 Marc Redfield, “Humanizing de Man,” *Diacritics*, 19 (Summer 1989), p. 35.

17 De Man, “Kant and Schiller,” *Aesthetic Ideology*, cit..

occurrence.” That formulation – “determining factor” – seems to me to carry a warning: while exploring possible links between de Man's thinking and the resources of other contemporary theoretical discourses, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and marxism, we ought to remain alert to the possibility that the tools for unmasking may also be *determining* factors, factors that determine and thus help account for ideological aberrations. As so often with de Man, one cannot be sure whether this formulation is a subtle warning or a grammatical ambiguity. The linguistics of literariness is an important factor in accounting for ideological aberrations but to call it a *determining* factor – may this not suggest that it determines them and accounts for them because it *produces* them, as well as helping to analyse and explain them? As so often, when confronted with the indeterminately significative dimensions of language on which we cannot but confer sense and meaning, we are left with that more than grammatical problem.

#### Résumé

Quelles sont les contributions les plus importantes de l'oeuvre de Paul de Man pour l'avenir de la théorie et de la critique littéraires? Six domaines où cette oeuvre apporte non seulement un acquis mais aussi un programme ou une problématique pour la recherche et pour la réflexion théorique peuvent être identifiés: (1) la théorie de l'allégorie et son rapport avec l'histoire; (2) la révalorisation du Romantisme, dont l'interprétation est une tâche des plus nécessaires et des plus difficiles; (3) l'explication du rapport entre “blindness” et “insight”; (4) le développement d'une théorie matérialiste du langage; (5) une réflexion sur la nature de l'histoire dans ses relations avec l'imagination poétique et le problème du rapport entre la connaissance et l'événement; (6) la critique de l'idéologie esthétique, entamée dans ses derniers écrits.