

Paul de Man and the Cornell Demaniacs

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by

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To deManiacs near and far.

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I'd like to thank Dr. Faridah Manaf for arranging this talk. I studied with Paul de Man in the early 1960s at Cornell University. The de Man of that time was different from the de Man you are aware of. He had not yet published a book, though he definitely had an underground reputation. He hadn't yet met Jacques Derrida (Jack the Reader!), an event which occurred in 1966 — three years after I had left Cornell. His first book, *Blindness and Insight*, was published in 1971, when he was 51. In an article printed in *The London Review of Books* Frank Kermode called Paul de Man “a remarkable teacher, the kind that makes and keeps disciples” — which is certainly true (“Paul de Man’s Abyss,” <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n06/frank-kermode/paul-de-mans-abyss>). That he impacted my life deeply is without question. I keep running into things I've said when I re-read *his* works — things I have intentionally/unintentionally stolen: the “anxiety of influence”! I am, however, by no means a scholar of Paul de Man. I am far from having read everything published under his name. Furthermore, between the time I knew de Man in the early 1960s and his death in 1983, his work underwent a considerable change of direction — a change of direction which I will not attempt to trace here. I will concentrate on the early de Man rather than the later because it was *that* de Man who had the greatest impact on my thinking. Imagine the effect of words like these — from the “Foreword” to *Blindness and Insight* — on a young man who had seen the limitations of the professors he was studying with all too clearly:

If we no longer take for granted that a literary text can be reduced to a finite meaning or set of meanings, but see the act of reading as an endless process in which

truth and falsehood are inextricably intertwined, then the prevailing schemes used in literary history . . . are no longer applicable.

The opening essay of *Blindness and Insight* is called “Criticism and Crisis.” I know now but would not have known then the etymological connection between the words “criticism” and “crisis.” Both have to do with the need for “judgment” (*krisis*). Stéphane Mallarmé — one of Paul de Man’s favorite authors — declared that poetry was the language of a state of crisis (“Crise de Vers”).

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This is how Paul de Man, dying — and aware that he was dying — summed up his life’s work. The passage is from his introduction to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, which appeared in the year of his death, 1983:

I would never have by myself undertaken the task of establishing such a collection [of early essays] and, grateful as I am to Bill Germano for his initiative, I confess that I still look back upon it with some misgivings. Such massive evidence of the failure to make the various individual readings coalesce is a somewhat melancholy spectacle. The fragmentary aspect of the whole is made more obvious still by the hypotactic manner that prevails in each of the essays taken in isolation, by the continued attempt, however ironized, to present a closed and linear argument. This apparent coherence *within* each essay is not matched by a corresponding coherence *between* them. Laid out diachronically in a roughly chronological sequence, they do not evolve in a manner that easily allows for dialectical progression or, ultimately, for historical totalization. Rather, it seems that they always start

again from scratch and that their conclusions fail to add up to anything. If some secret principle of summation is at work here, I do not feel qualified to articulate it and, as far as the general question of romanticism is concerned, I must leave the task of its historical definition to others. I have myself taken refuge in more theoretical inquiries into the problems of figural language. Not that I believe that such a historical enterprise, in the case of romanticism, is doomed from the start: one is all too easily tempted to rationalize personal shortcoming as theoretical impossibility and, especially among younger scholars, there is ample evidence that the historical study of romanticism is being successfully pursued. But it certainly has become a far from easy task. One feels at times envious of those who can continue to do literary history as if nothing had happened in the sphere of theory, but one cannot help but feel somewhat suspicious of their optimism. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* should at least help to document some of the difficulties it fails to resolve. (“Preface”)

What can one do with this eloquent, severe judgment — “I have myself taken refuge in more theoretical inquiries into the problems of figural language” — this autobiographical passage written by a man who wrote that “autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (“Autobiography as De-Facement”)?

One of the key elements in the development of Paul de Man’s understanding of literature was his perhaps eccentric reading of the work of William Butler Yeats. De Man’s Harvard thesis dealt with Yeats and Mallarmé, and an essay, “Symbolic Landscape in Wordsworth and Yeats,” had been published in Richard Poirier and Reuben Brower’s collection, *In Defense of Reading*, a book which appeared in 1962. We “Demaniacs” (a term invented by my wife Adelle and me) at Cornell were aware of that text as well as of a piece written in French, “Structure

intentionnelle de l'Image romantique," published in 1960 and reprinted in English in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. (In this essay de Man coined a phrase which resonated deeply with us: "la primauté ontologique de l'objet sensible," the ontological primacy of the thing — the sensory object — in poetic language.) In his writings on Yeats, de Man argued that Yeats' last poems (poems like "The Circus Animals' Desertion") constituted a vehement attack on the poet's entire life's work. The central text for Yeats is "Her Vision in the Wood," particularly the point in the poem at which the old woman says,

They had brought no fabulous symbol there
But my heart's victim and its torturer.

In 1966, Signet Classics published *The Selected Poetry of Keats*, edited by Paul de Man. Here too de Man argued that the poet's last poems constituted an attack on his previous work, that they arose out of a realization that there was something inauthentic about everything he had written up to that time: "The landscape [of the last poems] is that of Keats' real self, which he had kept so carefully hidden up till now under poetic myth and moral generosity. . . . The power which forces a man to see himself as he really is, is also called 'philosophy' in the later Keats":

With the development that stood behind him, this final step could only take the violently negative form of his last poems. . . . After having acted, in all his dreams of human redemption, as the one who rescues others from their mortal plight, his last poem reverses the parts. Taking off from an innocuous line in *The Fall of Hyperion* ("When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave") he now offers his hand no longer in a gesture of assistance to others, but as the victim who defies another to take away from him the weight of his own death. . . . For the great romantics, consciousness of self was the first and necessary step toward moral judgment. Keats's last poems reveal that he reached the

same insight; the fact that he arrived at it by a negative road may make him all the more significant for us.

Was Paul de Man's "moral judgment" on his own work an example of "the power which forces a man to see himself as he really is"? Or is this final judgment, made in the shadow of death by cancer (de Man punned with dark humor, "Tumor"/ *tu meurs* — *you die*, intimate form) something different and less "violently negative"? At this point he is after all *himself* "the victim who defies another to take away from him the weight of his own death." Is there something ironic, even deliberately "blind" in this statement in which words like "shortcoming" and "failure" resonate?

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I first heard Paul de Man's name in 1960 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I had been reading Yeats and had come across a book called *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*. The "tradition" referred to was not literary but esoteric. The author of the book, F.A.C. Wilson, was a rather dreadful critic but he had had access to Yeats' library and was aware of the considerable esoteric tradition that informed all of Yeats' work. Wilson was aware, for example, that "the fall" in esoteric writing was not a reference to what happened to Adam and Eve but to the descent of spirit into matter. Recognition of the presence of this tradition often changes what appears to be the meaning of many of Yeats' poems. I was chatting with a friend who was attending Harvard, where de Man was teaching. My friend said, "You sound like Paul de Man." I asked, "Who is Paul de Man?" My friend told me of this brilliant, not yet widely published professor who was exciting so many students. I had been attending Cornell but had taken a year off and had been visiting a friend in Massachusetts. When I returned to Cornell I was astonished to discover that Paul de Man was now teaching there.

When I was a sophomore and in love with the notion of poetry, I wanted to know as much as I could as fast as I could; I wanted to have read everything. I pulled strings and took more literature courses than, technically, I was allowed to take. What I discovered opened my eyes. I discovered that it didn't matter whether my professors were talking about Chaucer or T.S. Eliot or Emily Dickinson or Alexander Pope. They were all saying the same kinds of things. I realized at that moment that I was not in school to learn about literature: *I was in school to learn a grid*. Once I had learned it, I could apply the grid to any sort of literature. The grid I was given had to do with irony and paradox — issues raised by a group called The New Critics. There are other grids, but that was the one being presented to me. According to this grid, most of the romantics were not very good writers. Shelley, in particular — whose work I loved — was understood to be a fairly dreadful writer. Noticing the grid did not change my opinion of Shelley, but it did affect my opinion of the people who were teaching me. In the midst of this situation, along came Paul de Man. De Man did not talk about irony and paradox. He talked about *being*, about *consciousness*. For the most part, I had no understanding of these concepts whatsoever, but I did realize that *he took the romantics seriously*. And when he explicated a poem, he often articulated what I thought the poem was about — and then went further.

De Man used to teach a course in three writers from three different countries: Mallarmé from France, Stefan George from Germany, and William Butler Yeats from Ireland/England. When I took the course, Mallarmé had been replaced by Paul Valéry, Stefan George by Rilke, and Yeats by Wallace Stevens. De Man opened the course with Paul Valéry's poem, *La Jeune Parque*. He amazed us all by announcing that when he had assigned the poem, he had believed that he understood it. But he had read it a number of years ago. He had read it the previous night and hadn't understood a thing. The class was called off until the next week. By the time de Man was finished with *La Jeune Parque*, he was complaining that the poem was too clear — that it should have been far more opaque than it was. He once remarked, "That just shows that I'm getting smarter all the time." He was extraordinarily European —

no one would have taken him for an American — and he was often *funny*. In his lightly accented English, he would tell us extraordinary things about the poems he dealt with. He was also just slightly anti-authoritarian. He never really criticized M.H. Abrams — a famous professor who had published a highly-regarded book on the Romantics and who, like de Man, taught at Cornell. But there was always a slight edge to his remarks about Abrams; I was attracted by this because I had hoped to find Abrams' courses illuminating but when I took them, I discovered that they were competent but rather dull. How could anyone make Shelley and Blake dull! De Man seemed to wish us to see him as a powerful, isolated thinker who spoke out of a deep knowledge of European romanticism — a knowledge to which American professors evidently had no access. We all believed that he was writing a great book on romanticism — a book that would finally clarify the sometimes enigmatic formulations he made in the classroom. There were a few tantalizing essays, and we read them, but we took them to be only the tip of the iceberg. As it turned out, they were all there was of the great book.

There was something else as well — an obsessive, strange aspect to the man. He spoke over and over again of publishing too soon, of publishing before you should publish. And he spoke of the “shame” that ensued when that happened. In fact, he didn't publish many books in his lifetime, and his hesitation may have had something to with this notion of publishing before you ought to publish. He may have been trying to avoid that possibility by publishing as little as possible, but of course as a university professor, he *had* to publish.

He knew, but we did not that as a young man he had published a considerable number of articles for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper, *Le Soir* — a newspaper controlled at that time by the Nazis. *Wikipedia*: The articles “were discovered by Ortwin de Graef, a Belgian student researching de Man's early life and work. De Graef contacted [Samuel Weber](#) who, in turn, consulted [Jacques] Derrida. Derrida would later arrange for the collection and publication of de Man's war time journalism.” The articles contained clearly anti-Semitic sentiments, and

they were written at more or less the same time that the first trainloads of Belgian Jews were being sent to Auschwitz — though de Man would have had no knowledge of what was going on at Auschwitz. Frank Kermode writes, “This writer’s subsequent fame — and the continuing row between deconstructive admirers and more conservative academics — ensured that people were interested, some hoping to use the wartime pieces to discredit de Man and the movement associated with him, the rest needing to defend themselves and their hero.” *Wikipedia* adds: “Subsequently, several facts that have come to light rendered any sweeping anti-Semitic allegations questionable: ‘. . . in 1942 or 1943, about a year after the journalistic publication of his compromising statement, he and his wife sheltered for several days in their apartment the Jewish pianist Esther Sluszny and her husband, who were then illegal citizens in hiding from the Nazis. During this same period, de Man was meeting regularly with Georges Goriely, a member of the Belgian Resistance. According to Goriely's own testimony, he never for one minute feared denunciation of his underground activities by Paul de Man.’”

When I heard about those articles and these accusations, made only a few years after de Man’s death, I remembered the “shame” to which he had returned many times over in his classes. I think as well of his hesitation to publish his ideas.

There have also been allegations that Paul de Man was in his personal life — in Artine Artinian’s phrase — “an unspeakable cad.” He is accused of, among other things, having abandoned his first, European wife. David Lehman writes, “He abandoned his European past and started a new family — and a new American identity — by marrying one of his students without first obtaining a divorce from his wife.” Lehman goes on to quote Artine Artinian’s statements that de Man “left behind a trail of bad debts, bouncing checks and landlords left in the lurch. When the heat was on, he ‘lied about everything’” (<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/24/books/paul-de-man-the-plot-thickens.html>).

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The first English translation of Martin Heidegger's masterwork, *Sein und Zeit, Being and Time*, appeared in 1962. De Man immediately offered a seminar in the book, and we all attended — though very few of us really had time to read Heidegger's immensely complicated, life-changing book. (I read it a few years later and referred to notes I had taken in de Man's class.) Despite his interest in Heidegger, the central issue for the de Man of this period was "inwardness" — what he called, citing Rousseau, "conscience de soi," self consciousness. I remember his looking at his dog, who was very old and blind and barely aware of the world around him: de Man smiled at him and said, "Pure inwardness." As he writes in his essay on Keats, "For the great romantics, consciousness of self was the first and necessary step toward moral judgment." Self-awareness is so central to his understanding of literature that in "Autobiography as De-Facement" he insists that "all texts are autobiographical," all texts are self-revelatory — though he immediately adds that "by the same token, none of them is or can be." The notion of "the landscape . . . of Keats' real self" has morphed by this point into a more sophisticated and ironic conception. All literary language

is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time. All representational poetry is always also allegorical, whether it be aware of it or not, and the allegorical power of the language undermines and obscures the specific literal meaning of a representation open to understanding. But all allegorical poetry must contain a representational element that invites and allows for understanding, only to discover that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error.

If what de Man calls "allegory" reveals "the real self," literary language also conceals the deepest aspects of its own revelation. The

writer regularly *fails to recognize* what is in fact the fundamental cause of his writing. Others — critics — may recognize this cause, but their writing is equally affected by the blindness of literary language, so that their revelations contain elements of obscurity as well. Probably the greatest insight of the now defunct twentieth century is the notion that certain parts of the mind *don't know* what other parts of the mind are doing. The “self” is thus not a unified entity but some sort of multiplicity — possibly even a chaos. It is *this* notion of the mind that Paul de Man brings to criticism. A critic must work with the awareness that a good deal of what he is writing will carry implications *of which he is totally unaware*. In such a situation, criticism can not retain its status as an authoritative language articulating the deep meaning of literary texts, but it can join up on the ship of writing and assert itself as no less deceptive an activity than the text it is simultaneously describing and failing to describe.

In a discussion of Baudelaire and biography I wrote this:

The problem with biography in connection with Baudelaire is that — as Paul de Man discusses in *Blindness and Insight* — once you have it (and of course it's important) but, once you have it, you're really not much closer to Baudelaire's work than you were when you began. Biography in a sense vanishes at exactly the point at which the work begins — which is part of what is involved with what de Man calls Baudelaire's “allegorizing tendency.” The work is not a “fullness,” not an attempt to transform the life into words, but something closer to an emptiness, a void, a nothing — even a flight from the life. The work is in this sense “Satanic.” In the Christian tradition, everything that is good. Insofar as something is “bad,” it tends towards non-existence. Milton's “rebel angels” are “on this side nothing.” They *just* exist. What de Man calls “allegory” multiplies meaning but annihilates materiality, as does, in Baudelaire's version of DeQuincey, opium. In Baudelaire's “Invitation to the Voyage,” everything moves towards sleep, dream, not towards “life.” Cf. Keats:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk. . . .
("Ode to a Nightingale")

"Poetry" begins at precisely the point at which the self plunges towards nothingness — sleep ("drowsy"), death ("hemlock"), inebriation ("emptied some dull opiate"), forgetfulness ("and Lethe-wards had sunk"). "The world is all that is the case," wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in a memorable formulation (*The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). But Wittgenstein answered this statement with "Thought can be of what is not the case" (*Philosophical Investigations*). It is precisely "what is not the case" that is the center of Paul de Man's understanding of literature. This is from his essay, "Criticism and Crisis":

[This] statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge. . . . The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence. It is always against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave. "Le pays des chimères est en ce monde le seul digne d'être habité," Rousseau has Julie write, "et tel est le néant des choses humaines qu'hors l'Être existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas." ["The country of chimeras is in this world the only one worthy of being lived in, and such is the nothingness of human matters that outside of Being existing by itself, nothing is

beautiful except what doesn't exist.”] One entirely misunderstands this assertion of the priority of fiction over reality, of imagination over perception, if one considers it as the compensatory expression of a shortcoming, of a deficient sense of reality. . . . It transcends the notion of a nostalgia or a desire, since it discovers desire as a fundamental pattern of being that discards any possibility of satisfaction. Elsewhere, Rousseau speaks in similar terms of the nothingness of fiction (*le néant de mes chimères*). . . . [A]ll nostalgia or desire is desire of something or for someone; here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. . . . Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability.

Note the denial here of the word “shortcoming” — a word which shows up in de Man's attack on his life's work: “one is all too easily tempted to rationalize personal shortcoming as theoretical impossibility.” Literature for Paul de Man is *escape*. It is not “realism”; it is not “truth”; it is, precisely, fiction, a lie — an area of activity which sets up its own meanings, its own resonances, and which deliberately removes itself from what de Man calls “reality.” “Allegory,” he insists, quoting Walter Benjamin, is “a void ‘that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents’” (“Form and Intent in the American New Criticism”). Nor is de Man alone in conceiving of literature as the revelation of a fundamentally *other* world, a world which — like the Christian heaven — “is the only one worthy to be lived in.” “Once out of nature I shall never take,” wrote Yeats,

My bodily form from any natural thing
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enameling
To keep a drowsy emperor awake
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium. . . .

For such writers, literature is essentially *fiction*: “All literatures, including the literature of Greece,” writes de Man, “have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction” (“Criticism as Crisis”). The desire to write arises out of the mind’s irrepressible, deep, Narcissistic desire to *play* — to create its own worlds, its own meanings, its own (as lovers used to say to one another) “sweet nothings.”

Can literature in fact achieve this state? Can Paul de Man escape the immense burden of anti-Semitic writings he produced in his youth — writings which evidently did not represent his full understanding of what it meant to be Jewish? Can he escape from the wife he probably deserted — from shameful behavior, his “trail of bad debts, bouncing checks and landlords left in the lurch”?

Not fully — no. Biography comes roaring back into what the author had hoped to be pure mind. And yet, and yet. Can literature escape a little? Can it remind us that “thought can be of what is not the case”? Can a man become a woman through literary activity? Can a woman become a man? Can a young person become an old person or an old person young? Can a writer become a non-human creature? Can we be trees, can we be grass, can we be the words of the wind itself? Yes, of course we can. “Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability.” We exist as entities that can be made love to, hit by a car, tossed over the side of a ship — and these things happen as they happen. But when we look within ourselves, we are something quite different from that. We are creatures of “nothingness”

because we are creatures of *possibilities*. In our minds, as we consider the world — anything can happen.

From this point of view, reading becomes the same adventure of understanding and failure to understand — of *prision* and *misprision*, to use Harold Bloom's term — as writing, and the reader is a kind of writer *manqué*. But as writer and reader merge, the critic — the apotheosis of the reader — ceases to maintain his priest-like status as interpreter of the sacred text and becomes just another texter — another formulator of the whirl-a-gig of information and misinformation that is literature. He — or she — is simultaneously always right and always wrong. “The rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error. It is itself radically blind to the light it emits.” Is there anyone who can see clearly and without error all the permutations of the text — of the world? One might postulate God as such a person. The American poet Jack Spicer once wrote, “Poet, be like God.” Paul de Man's work is an extended demonstration that neither the poet nor the critic is “like God.” Both poet and critic exist in a world in which hierarchy breaks down — a world in which to be human is to be radically limited.

And yet: this radical limitation does not silence us. Rather, it drives us to talk. We bend the bow and aim at truth. “*I think. . .*” We miss! But we do not entirely miss. Truth infects us like a disease we are always trying to get over. “The observing subject is no more constant than the observed, and each time the observer actually succeeds in interpreting his subject he changes it, and changes it all the more as his interpretation comes closer to the truth. But every change of the observed subject requires a subsequent change in the observer, and the oscillating process seems to be endless” (“Criticism as Crisis”).

Paul de Man's dismissal of his life's work is presented as the privileged utterance of a dying man who knows his work better than anyone else. Shouldn't we therefore accept it? But it is the burden of his work that such privileged utterances are of little value.* The statement, deceptively eloquent as it is, takes its place in all the statements about Paul de Man, in all the essays he wrote and others

wrote. Had Keats lived, de Man implies, he would have written a very different poetry from the poetry he had produced up to that time. De Man's statement about his own work was perhaps a similar clearing of the way for a new influx of creative energy — an influx of energy which this most ironic of men knew he would never have. It is left to us, the many deManiacs, to understand and misunderstand him, just as he understood and misunderstood the many subjects of his enlightening, endarkening essays. Tumor / tu meurs.

* “The fallacy of a finite and single interpretation derives from the postulate of a privileged observer; this leads, in turn, to the endless oscillation of an intersubjective demystification. As an escape from this predicament, one can propose a radical relativism that operates from the most empirically specific to the most loftily general level of human behavior. There are no longer any standpoints that can a priori be considered privileged, no structure that functions validly as a model for other structures, no postulate of ontological hierarchy that can serve as an organizing principle from which particular structures derive in the manner in which a deity can be said to engender man and the world. All structures are, in a sense, equally fallacious and are therefore called myths” (“Criticism and Crisis”).

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Jack Foley is a poet and critic living in the San Francisco Bay area. His radio show, *Cover to Cover*, is heard every Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. on Berkeley station KPFA and is available at the KPFA web site. His column, “Foley’s Books,” appears in the online magazine, *The Alsop Review*. His poetry books include *Letters/Lights—Words for Adelle, Gershwin, Exiles, Adrift* (nominated for a Northern California Book Reviewers Award), *Greatest Hits 1974-2003*, and *Ash on an Old Man’s Sleeve*. In June 2010 he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from The Berkeley Poetry Festival.

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