

**The Break of Paul de Man:
A Critical Synopsis**

University of Tampere
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Jarkko Toikkanen
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TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä sivuainetutkielma käsittelee Paul de Manin kriittisiä ajatuksia kielestä ja kirjallisuudesta yhteenvedona meneillään olevasta väitöskirjaprojektistani. Aiheen menestyksekkäs käsittely vaatii tietynlaista ajattelutapaa, johon kuuluu, että kirjallisuuden kieltä tutkitaan keskittyneesti ja huolella. Myös Paul de Man toimi tällä tavalla oman uransa aikana. Tämä ei kuitenkaan tarkoita, että suoriutuakseen käsillä olevasta tehtävästä tutkijan täytyisi niin sanotusti hylätä ”ulkoinen” maailma odotuksineen ja vaatimuksineen. Päinvastainen toteamus on paremminkin totta, sillä kirjallisuutta ei voi toivoa ymmärtävänsä muuten. Tämä totuus ei tosin avaudu helposti.

Paul de Man syntyi vuonna 1919 Belgiassa, josta hän muutti 1940-luvulla Yhdysvaltoihin. Atlantin toisella puolella hän loi itselleen pitkän, ristiriitojen värittämän akateemisen uran toimien monissa maan tärkeimmistä yliopistoista, tullen kuuluisaksi erityisesti Yalessa. Kuollessaan vuonna 1983 hänet tunnettiin amerikkalaisen dekonstruktion teoreettisen liikkeen johtohahmona. Yleisesti ottaen tämän teorian ymmärretään merkitsevän, että mihinkään vakaaseen totuuteen pohjimmiltaan perustuva inhimillinen ymmärtäminen on mahdotonta (minkä toteaminen on jo paradoksi itsessään). De Manin tavoite oli osoittaa kirjallisuuden ja filosofian klassikoiden (mm. Rousseau, Hölderlin, Hegel ja Kant) olevan täysin tietoisia tästä periongelmasta. Nykyään taas dekonstruktiiivista metodologiaa useimmiten sovelletaan kaikenlaisten kulttuuristen tekstien tutkimukseen. Tarkoituksena on tällöin tehdä ilmeisiksi ne epävakaaat kielelliset rakenteet, joihin kulttuuriset ilmiöt perustuvat.

Tutkielmani otsikko on merkitykseltään monimielisesti ”The Break of Paul de Man”, sillä englanninkielinen genetiivirakenne ”break of” viittaa sekä transitiivisesti de Manin toisten kirjoittajien teksteistä löytämään ”totuusrikkoon” että intransitiivisesti minun hänen ajattelustaan väittämäni, hieman toisenluonteiseen tiedon särkymään. Tavoitteeni on toisin sanoen osoittaa de Manin olevan omalla tavallaan syvällisesti oikeassa teoreettisessa toiminnassaan, ja että hänen tapansa voi väittää olevan kriittisesti ylivertainen moniin ”huonommin lukeviin” tutkimustapoihin nähden, mutta että hänenkin toimintansa kuitenkin lopulta pohjautuu tiettyihin (kielellisiin) oletuksiin, jotka jättävät toisia luonnollisia tosiasioita huomioimatta. Kirjallisuuden ymmärtäminen on vaikeaa – paljon vaikeampaa kuin usein ajatellaan ja/tai sovelletaan – mutta tästä ei seuraa, että se olisi tarpeetonta, käsittämätöntä tai muusta maailmasta irrallaan. De Man on samaa mieltä mutta pidättäytyy toteamasta sitä näillä sanoin. Lopputuloksen voi sanoa merkitsevän vaatimusta uudesta ajattelemisen tavasta.

ASIASANAT: kirjallisuusteoria, kriittinen teoria, dekonstruktio, kielen filosofia

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ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this study, references to the followings books by Paul de Man and some of the most extensively discussed essays within the books are abbreviated as follows:

- AI *Aesthetic Ideology*. Ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- AR *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.
- BI *Blindness and Insight*. Second Edition. London: Routledge, 1983.
- CW *Critical Writings 1953-1978*. Ed. Lindsay Waters. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- PMK “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” in AI 70-90.
- PT “Patterns of Temporality in Hölderlin’s ‘Wie wenn am Feiertage...’” in RCC 50-73.
- RCC *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*. Eds. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark and Andrzej Warminski. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- RR *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- RT *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- RTS “Rousseau and the Transcendence of the Self” in RCC 25-49.
- S “Self (*Pygmalion*)” in AR 160-87.
- SS “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*” in AI 91-104.

It should be noted that further abbreviations of references to books by authors other than de Man may also appear in the course of the study. These are indicated in pertinent footnotes.

1. Introduction

This second subject pro gradu thesis is concerned with Paul de Man's critical thoughts about language and literature, and it provides a summary of most of the main issues discussed in-depth in my ongoing Ph. D. thesis which is also nearing its completion. The thoughts raised herein beckon constantly in a single direction: into thinking about the language of literature with focus and attention, much like Paul de Man would have appreciated it. This is not to say though that the "external" world, together with its expectations and requirements, would need to be abandoned in order to pursue such an interest. On the contrary, a good understanding of literature demands that the opposite be true. It is only, as this study throughout strives to show, that such truth is difficult to arrive at.

Paul de Man was born in Belgium in 1919 from where he emigrated to the U.S. in the 1940s and made a long, controversial academic career for himself. Holding appointments at several major universities, Yale in particular, he eventually became best known as the leading light of American deconstruction, and as that he has remained even though the popularity of deconstruction itself has ebbed and flowed ever since. Therefore, in the current scene inundated with culturalist criticism, the prudent thing to do is to recognise the influence de Man and deconstruction have had on present theory (which is profound) and acknowledge its limitations (which remain elusive). These are obviously all arguments which must be accounted for, and that is what I intend to do in thesis. What's more, I will take the critical thrust of the theory involved seriously enough to push it to the eventual breaking point, much like Paul de Man attempted to do.

What is "the break of Paul de Man"? That is the research question to begin with. The break, as is to be demonstrated, concerns not only theory and/of literature, and the kind of results we may expect from studying it, but the possibility of human understanding in its most general sense. How *can* something be known, and known for certain? This philosophical premise already shows that we

will be entering perilous territory with the inquiry. In that place, nothing is to be taken for granted and, in that fashion, the very truth of the things around us is at stake. And, as the break of Paul de Man is realised along these lines, for this study and for the mind that struggles with it, the phenomena of poetry and literature will be the “things” which always seem to be the most aware of the nature of the predicament. That is the reason why the critical interest on show constantly tends in that direction.

Literature is a linguistic phenomenon and that is why de Man is attracted by it. Since he seeks to express through his theory a certain break of human understanding at its ultimate point, this issue sets forth the objective of this study. In the first chapter, I will account for my claim that the research question (“What is the break of Paul de Man?”) can be made universally valid beyond “mere” theory and/of literature. This will be done by re-asking the question in the form of a question about language itself, much like Paul de Man does. Poetic evidence for this will be found in Baudelaire and Mallarmé early in his career. In the second chapter, I will look into de Man’s finding of the break in his discussions on Heidegger and Hölderlin. In the third, the same is done with Rousseau, and, in the fourth, with Hegel and Kant. These seven authors make up some of de Man’s most important sources, and so that warrants their selection. (The final Ph. D. thesis will also include further names like Wordsworth, Friedrich Schlegel, and Nietzsche.) The presentation will be ordered chronologically in accordance with de Man’s own writings to show how his understanding (along with the conceptual toolkit resorted to) develops on the way. Nonetheless, in the end, it stays lodged in the same place it started out from, and it will be the main burden of the conclusion to illustrate the notion. At the same time, ways will be pointed beyond it in order to sense truth and nature differently, to ask the big questions again. That insight, however, will never heal the de Manian vertigo which led it there.

2. Paul de Man and the Question of Language

As a critical thinker, Paul de Man makes a lot of claims as to why things go wrong in the sphere of human thinking; therefore it must be that there is something crucial about how we decide to understand the nature of this sphere. When it is so much easier and it feels better to think that things can work, in theory and in practice, why should one devote all of his (or her) career towards asserting that things do not work? And do that by asserting that they do not work because they *cannot* work, even if at times they appear to, simply because there is something so intrinsically problematic and difficult to grasp in the way our thinking works that things literally (and figuratively) fall apart when we try to make them stay together? Other people fail to understand us, they do not get our meaning, we feel sad and hurt and frustrated, we fight and argue and even start wars over seemingly trifling matters, and it just does not satisfy our intellect merely to stand back and make do with the inadequacies of everyday communication either. *Why* are things like this?

It follows that for someone interested in analysing the nature of this human predicament, the weight of the study gravitates towards this very point. Consequently, the research problem must be formulated along the same lines and traced back to what is found to be its source. The problem inherent in doing this, the radical disparity of having to ask the question “why”, becomes a necessary element of the tracing itself, of simply being aware that a question is being asked. And so the problem of radical disparity becomes a given that directs the doing of the analysis itself, a practical and theoretical given that says a study is being performed, an unspeakable break between the thought and the action that *makes up* the question being asked, the question of “why”. The predicament of things working and things not working, the problem of good and bad which the thinker-writer prepares to address is thus foreclosed from the thought of absolute closure; as long as the question “why” can be asked, about any thing, the predicament will still be there because the question *is* the predicament. The imagined answer of “how”, the “how” of making do with the

inadequacies, changes nothing about it since there is no awareness of “how” without an imagined “why” always already. As long as there is another equation for the scientist to solve and another situation for the common sense man to cope with, the logical priority of “why” remains in effect. The source of the mechanism of thinking is founded in this formal necessity.

For Paul de Man the question of “why” is a question of language and he traces all his conclusions, theoretical, philosophical, or simply critical, back to this question only, with the awareness of the necessity of its radical disparity never leaving his (writing) mind. By being perpetually conscious of the break that he senses in the ceaseless positing of the one question, the “why”, he moves through a welter of shifting paradigms, disciplines and terminologies in the course of his career just to arrive at the very same place he never leaves to begin with. Ortwin de Graef, one of his most astute and thoroughgoing readers, as well as the revelator of his posthumous infamy,¹ frames this type of consciousness in terms of forever being “back in the laboratory”² which the young chemistry and civil engineering student de Man forsook in the 1940s in order first to pursue social studies, then journalism, and finally literary theory. As we imagine it, the laboratory is a place for testing and compounding materials, for seeing whether they add up to anything new and/or useful, for proving in clear scientific terms the validity of a result, and it is in this mindset that we find the most profitable approach to the import of de Manian criticism also today. “Why?” one might ask, and answer their own question just by the asking. The form of language returns to test us. It returns as literature, for instance, since as that, language never ceases to be aware of itself as language. It is a vast resource for the aware reader, and Paul de Man, as he gains in understanding, certainly comes to make the most of it. By his word, no gods, natural laws, or human subjects using or making possible the gift of language may escape the test of the question of language. Neither does the literary theorist or the critical thinker, but for them, the upside is having

¹ A host of articles written by de Man for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir* during WW2 surfaced in 1987, tainting his name posthumously. An outrage followed in the academia and the press, and went on for some time.

² Ortwin de Graef: *Serenity in Crisis: A Preface to Paul de Man 1939-1960* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 11.

asked the question, and continuing to ask it, rather than pre-empting the important work with an overriding, transcendent answer in place in advance.

The relevance of de Man to the current academic scene, as well his impact upon it, needs to be articulated in this way exactly or risk failing its own questioning immanency. The form of the (reading) theory (being read) is what matters, not the transposition of perceived de Manian endpoints to thinking, good or bad, into a public field – that would be mere repetition of simple error, the inability to unclothe thinking and inquire beyond the “how”. But, in order not to fall in the same trap in a different way, a repetition of de Man’s “own” lesson transposed into a method of reading (literary) texts must also be avoided: discipleship, whether complete or just opportunist, will not work either, or, better phrased, it will not work the way intended by the logic of the question being asked. In de Man’s wake, “de Manian” criticism must recognise this fact; it must be conscious of its own reading of de Man and further the awareness of the problem being sensed. De Man’s own endpoints to thinking come to the light of insight, out of blindness, only then. The analogy of the laboratory, the scientist’s mindset, the presupposed but never attained results, the edge of language never left, the dark and nihilistic rhetoric which characterises his writing,³ for all the statements these things (break and) produce, they still come across as limits, as “limits” to “us”, things that transcend and stand beside us, things that we have nothing to *do with* but which only *act upon* us. All through his academic career, this is the “law” which de Man seeks to articulate, by way of the various names, processes and paradoxes that mark his endeavour in the different decades. Somehow literature just fails to connect, radically against E. M. Forster’s famous maxim (“only connect!”), but so do all the other entities of language, as well, and it is at least literature’s triumph to be aware of this and make it known. For anyone resolute enough, that realisation comes with a certain clinical gravity.

³ “Because at least a nihilistic stance at [the] moment is possibly preparatory to a historical act.” (“Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’” RT 103). The problem of history, historicity and what it means to be “prepared” for them will emerge many times in the course of this thesis.

In the Laboratory of Nothing

One way of attempting to understand de Man's "laboratory mindset" and how it is reflected upon the texts he reads, to start with, may be traced by applying the biographical method. In *Serenity in Crisis*, Ortwin de Graef does this very thing in order to show how the 1940s de Man's rather coarse understanding of what the results add up to in different types of prose literature. (Basically, what are called sociological novels are naïve because they forego literature for social truth and what are called psychological novels are mature because they question their own environment by refracting the contradictions of their story and characters back into it.) And although "art can be a valid object for the study of human beings", it is not the *artist* who is "the 'appropriate person' to undertake such a study".⁴ In steps the scientist, the art-historical scientist, who, in confronting a domain completely alien to his common space and sense of subject matter for usual laboratorial investigations, will take his scientific method to face and to measure this new world, that is, art and literature. However, as this mindset imagines it, since all human activity happens by way of human thinking, there can be no kinds of thinking that would be radically alien to one another, or the kinds would know nothing of each other and so be lost.

Therefore, much in accordance with transcendental forms of Kantian apriority that legislate thinking and/or the logic of Hegelian reason that finds itself implicitly present in all things in the world, the scientist quickly deduces that the domain of art and literature can be thought of in the way that science is. From that idea, for one to be able to start making fully-fledged claims, it is only a short step to saying that the domain of art and literature *must* be thought of in this way. For de Man, this mindset means that, without the valid scientific results based on laboratorial testing to back them up, art and literature mean *nothing*. It follows that de Man will spend much of his career puzzling over what the form of this "nothing" in-and-for itself might be. As it is a fact that we

⁴ De Graef 18. De Man quoted within the quote.

attempt to know the world's things, want to know them, but somehow seem to be apart from all of them: we are united only in our outward sensing of these things – we are not united as subjects, independent or acted upon, or as inward entities endowed with a tacit total form. The “nothingness of human matters” (“le néant des choses humaines”) that the early de Man borrows from the eponymous heroine of Rousseau's *Julie*, feeds off this unhappy experience. We, not “we”, are literally the world, but this thought forever risks incomprehension, sets up dangerous temptations, and so becomes settled, fixates itself, gets snared in its own wild imaginings. De Man's theory constantly cautions us against this and ultimately finds the privilege to do so: art and, specifically, literature, the explicitly linguistic medium of art. In the ceaseless ironies of a Montaigne and the anxious warning songs of a Hölderlin, the true state of human awareness is expressed palpably. Jan Rosiek describes the developing sensibility as de Man's move from an early, somewhat resigned existentialism (derived from Kojève and Sartre) to a “hopeless struggle” against the turbulent chaos of literary understanding. And in this state, the “fictive temporality” of literature provides the only “pocket of resistance” that remains of “the grand project of unity”.⁵

In some of de Man's (relatively) early American essays (“The Double Aspect of Symbolism”, 1954-56, now published in RCC, and “Process and Poetry”, 1956, CW), the sensibility comes into light in the comparative analysis of Baudelaire and Mallarmé's work with the conclusion that the former “develops a poetics that would result in a sacrifice of consciousness” whereas the latter's “enterprise would result in a sacrifice of the object”.⁶ What could this apparently simple division of poetry into two categories, into two “‘alternate roads’ between which poets can choose”,⁷ mean in face of the scientific method being executed, the question being asked, in attempt to “validate” any one of them? What is the sacrifice being spoken of, who offers what to whom and what does the offerer expect to receive from having done this? *Why* do it at all in the first place?

⁵ Jan Rosiek: *Figures of Failure: Paul de Man's Criticism 1953-1970*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992. 51.

⁶ De Graef 64.

⁷ *ibid.* 65.

Baudelaire and Mallarmé write poetry because they sense that the world's things (some or most) do not work, in theory and in practice, and this is not a special claim about their psyche or character, it is merely a definition of the poet. So, if we feel the same way about things, we do well to read the poetry. And so we come across the "sacrifice" spoken of therein and we need to understand its significance, interpret its meaning. By such an introduction, we start reading the poems (in this instance, even though they will not be discussed here in detail, Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" and Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*) and can begin to address the topic given. Just how we do this, is by reading the texts. Why we do it, because there *is* something to read. We feel a need about things, sense that something can be tested and (hopefully) attained, like the poets have done. Hence, regardless of their poetic themes, whether swans or cosmic evocations, both Baudelaire and Mallarmé make a "sacrifice" in order to attain, to know something, by way of their poetry. In de Graef's analysis of de Man's reading of the two Frenchmen, to make this effort, Baudelaire sacrifices his consciousness of himself *as a writing subject* (a poet aware of himself as a poet) in order to reach unity with the world's things, that is, everything around us. Mallarmé, on the other hand, adopts a different poetics; he *gives away and renounces* the world's things in order to turn everything into consciousness, or language, which, in Mallarmé's case, is symbolic language in which linguistic signs become the mystery of their own being. These are their attempts to know differently from what we are used to, their exertions to make things work at least a little better. Who do they do it for? By being a non-subject, a senser of things going wrong, a poet writes for nobody in particular; the poet writes in-and-for the world, and the question of language that haunts his or her mind is a non-specific, unchanging form which concerns everyone in equal measure. That gives ample cause for their writing even if the actual results added up to nothing practical in the end.

The problem that the 1950s de Man finds with the poems then echoes a logical fact. For even if Baudelaire and Mallarmé *intend* to sacrifice something different of themselves or the world in order to gain something new to the world or themselves, and de Man is right in pointing out between the

two the “puzzling pattern of symmetries and ultimately superior dissymmetries” which spring from the “unavoidable principle of the superiority of natural being”⁸ to be found in each of their poetic “choices”, they are both still deeply entangled in the mechanism which has them sacrificing *something*. Instead of offering nothing, the tested result of their work in the world outside literature, they offer something (consciousness and natural objects) within the world of their own fictions. (Jan Rosiek notes a similar exchange taking place in de Man too as he says of his later criticism that “the gesture of renunciation remains one of the major principles through all the terminological changes”.⁹) Apparently, the “nothingness of human matters” still clings on to some kind of afterlife in this curious place, and, to be fair, so it must. The question of language extends everywhere and collapses the boundaries of any simple division of an “inside” and “outside”. The poet’s heightened sense of the predicament becomes the apotheosis of true understanding; the laboratory of literature disfigures the face of reality by way of a superior moment of clarity.

However, the trouble with the criticism that reveals this circumstance, as de Graef points out, is that de Man says the poets are able to decide on the choice they make, to pick out the poetic something they go on to sacrifice. Can it be as simple as that? If I write a poem about giving away either my self-consciousness or the world around me, does that redeem me like it did Baudelaire and Mallarmé? And, if I ascribe to the early de Manian motif of there being nothing at the end of things, and of this “nothing” being most tangibly contained in the lyrical image of a void or death, does that help me in standing outside the misconceived tumult of the real world? Following the critical logic, this cannot be the case: there is no “standing inside” a more illumined world because the isolated haven does not exist. There is no special sanctuary for poets, as de Man would keenly opine at any stage of his career, but, in discussing Baudelaire and Mallarmé, he fails to see that his own criticism establishes a kind of “anti-sanctuary” for them. He does this by giving them the power to choose their way of reaching it in a world that seems all but dead to them. The poets

⁸ *ibid.* 65.

⁹ Rosiek 40.

reverse the principle of “the superiority of natural being” in using artful symmetries and non-traditional images but that does not mean they would be escaping nature into literature, into their own idiosyncratic convention. Instead, the principle of nature remains a thing-in-itself, whether “real” or not. It constitutes natural objects within the iconoclastic realm of its awareness in order to sacrifice them with an eye towards regaining at least *something* in return. The mechanism establishes an abstract reality which goes beyond and leaves us behind, albeit only partly, perhaps. This, however, should not be possible in a non-transcendent world, as de Man has explicated.

An Unhappy Philosophy

It will be of great importance for this project to discuss certain aspects of the philosophical tradition, as well as its historical impact, which stand behind and can be claimed to have influenced Paul de Man. After all, nothing and nobody is formed in a void, but that can be either a naïve or a complex thought (of course things around us have an effect on us but, then again, also a void is a form, either abstract or concrete, and so a “void”, as “nothing”, is essentially similar to the “things” around “us”). With this caution in place, in order to warn us against making up too easily permanent endpoints to thinking and between different thinkers, it is not a terrible exaggeration to say that de Man’s main philosophical thrust is derived from the (Romantic analytic) tension between Kant and Hegel’s systems, as was earlier implied in connection with the scientific mindset taking its own way of thinking into the domain of art and literature. De Graef says thus:

[De Man] retain[s] what is essential to each while lifting it up to a level on which the movement of consciousness can be thought as an incessant becoming (Hegel) rendered incessant precisely by consciousness’s inability to fully sublimate natural being (Kant).¹⁰

On one hand, in a manner of critical choice, Hegel is the philosophical Mallarmé who seeks no unity with anything but becomes aware of the world with each passing instant, projecting nothing

¹⁰ De Graef 114.

but the absolute endowment of the becoming (Spirit) itself to make up the things we find in it, to sacrifice the matter of their own mystery to mere signs of the Spirit. On the other hand, Kant is the philosophical Baudelaire who strives with all his might to resolve the predicament of having to ask the question “why” in the first place, to reconcile the predicament of the questioning self with the universe whose logical form it is transcendently part of. As the tension between the two systems is thus found, de Man resolves not to let it go. What happens is that the laboratory worker comes to prefer Kant (because situations available for full testing can only occur where such situations are imagined to be conceptually possible at all) but the philosophical need for validation finds itself on Hegel’s side (one cannot “test” sheer becoming but one can be incessantly aware of the necessity of its ongoing process). The de Manian tension springs from this one source, and from the epistemological fault lines of Kantian-cum-Hegelian thinking poetry and criticism then appear. The cognition gained of the tension is forever broken, by way of its sheer linguistic nature, but it is also unchangeable. What this state is, why it and its things (continue to) exist, and how it all works, is the one and only question which de Man ever provides any kind of method for observing.

Insofar as this method applies, posthumously or prior to death, it has frequently been the case with de Man and his antagonists that the latter have actually been unable to refute or even contest the soundness of his theoretical arguments. In retribution, he has been dragged through the metaphorical mud in a defamatory attempt to cast doubts on his morality and to excavate a possible agenda of “hidden intentions” by dubbing him an intellectual fraud.¹¹ This only confirms and (ironically) precipitates the powerful adoption of the paradox that is the epitome of de Manian criticism; the question of language as something which performs the opposite of what it intends, to a greater or lesser extent. Since things do not work, another breakdown is always just behind the

¹¹ Although it does not go quite so far in its explicit branding (and also makes a point about doing that), David Lehman’s book *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (1991) is perhaps the most famous and (somewhat) ambitious attempt to turn de Man’s theory against himself in order to deconstruct aspects of his life and readings. Says Lehman at the end of his book: “Many [signs of the times] are ambiguous, some are confusing, but they can all be interpreted, and interpreted correctly... [i]t would be a mistake to think that we cannot by conscious action do anything about them” (268, see end of note). The problem with Lehman’s book is then that what he does interpret, he interprets incorrectly – having obviously “read” only one or two of de Man’s more polemical essays. In contrast to his approach, critics like Walter Jackson Bate and Jon Wiener have found it unnecessary even to feign courtesy.

corner. And even if the failure comes here from there, nothing will change except the situation which would have changed by then already, by always being beyond our complete understanding of it. The way we feel it, this lack of control, whether theoretical or pragmatic, can do different things to us: we might hold on steadfastly to the promise of a future assurance, or we might get panicked and find ignorance to be bliss, or we might become apathetic (“what’s the use?”) or hyperanxious (neurotic “seize-the-day” mentality), or we might begin to see the world plaintively, beautiful in appearance only because removed from us. Even with the sordid state of affairs we find ourselves in, unable truly to turn any corner, we have all these different mindsets available to us.

Tracing the historical source of this consciousness, Hegel writes in *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* (1795-1800) that, once upon an ancient time, the “image of the state as a product of his activity disappeared from the soul of the citizen”,¹² and so disillusionment and disheartenment welled up from the widening gap between thought and action. The triumph of Christianity in civilisation was the ultimate result of this gradual process. The pagan religions died out because they promised unity and connectedness *in this world* and failed to deliver, the new monotheism won because it promised the reward *somewhere else*, after this one. The (idolatrous image of the) state was found to be broken; the failure of things to work here remained totally incompatible with the divine perfection of the other place. The “how” of here was comprehensively ruled over by the “why” of there. For Hegel’s system, this other place does not really exist for itself (since it can only be perfect, or absolute, in the event of its becoming), and so the positive element of its being a certain “what”, a particular place awaiting us, is discarded. Consequently, the spirit of Christianity remains, but only as Spirit, sheer becoming of absolute givenness which is neither “here” nor “there” except in a locally mediated form, an idea cognitively separate from the endowment which makes it manifest to us. For Hegel, there is nothing that can be done about this, and the unavoidable result of this awareness of separation is the lingering feeling of malcontent, the

¹² G. W. F. Hegel: *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* (extracted and transl. by Michael N. Forster) published as an appendix in Michael N. Forster: *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 575.

sensation of utter inadequacy, the “unhappy consciousness”. As a theme it is not something one feels comfortable reading or thinking about since it is not normally considered good or healthy to brood on sorrows and punishment – but perhaps, in its own way, that is the point. De Man apparently has no such sore nerve at all, and that numbness may well make him hard to take. That, however, might only be part of the rhetorical strategy to give de Man the edge in all matters pathetic (and religious). There is a curious price to pay for it though. In line with the painful emotive empowerment that his atheist criticism leaves unsaid but allows to affect us beyond its own logic, the edge appears to connect all too easily with the traditional Hegelian theme; it appears to unite “unhappy consciousness” with an actual (linguistic) awareness without flaw or disruption, to forge a positive philosophical link, an authentic aesthetic residue, between history and the things taking place in it. Of course, this might be for the show on the surface level only, as something which cannot be avoided, but, if so, the stating of it comes to contradict itself even more than de Man wants to believe. The reasons for this will be spelled out in the course of the thesis.

The Language of Philology

In terms of academic discipline, the showing of such scholarly talent as de Man encouraged has historically been made the case of philology. The “return to philology” that the late de Man espoused in an essay of the same name in 1982 called for a sharper focus among students on the “analytical rigor of their own discourse about literature”, on the critical lucidity and theoretical insight about the methods and materials put to use, and the historical import of the work executed properly. Inspired by such teachers as Reuben Brower (and later turning their New Critical lesson against them) de Man saw this as the definitive criterion which separated “the consumers from the *professors* of literature, the chit-chat of evaluation from actual perception”.¹³ The pedagogical

¹³ “Return to Philology” RT 24.

lesson learned of the premise would see him carry out his own university teaching career in this very (close-reading) fashion, much against the grain of the normative values and ideas received from the earlier generations in the American academia. On this note, it is not surprising why the “theory wars” of the 1980s were mainly targeted against, and how they were catalysed by, deconstruction and other forms of “rampant” poststructuralism. Unflinching attention to a single question can do that. In that respect, it makes no difference whether the one question is the sheerly philological de Manian question of language, or if the question is how de Man is wrong and how saying the other thing opposed to him makes the consciousness happy by making the world’s things finally work and its texts shine transparently.

It might be a noble idea to think the thought of this latter option but, unfortunately, such thinking betrays its own total form, its ideation, directly from the off, simply by having had to think itself, by immediately having posed the question of its own form. Grammatically, the “why” of “why do things work” is the same as the “why” of the same question in the negative, and the projected answer, the “how” of each of the inquiries springs from their non-original non-terminal source: language. Whether cognised naturally or naturalised cognitively, language remains the one unchangeable mechanism of our thinking, and it is only its forms, the situations that change. And these passing instants, religious, scientific, or cultural, make up no endpoints to thinking except those ones we think they do. The break that is the constitution of human understanding grants this limitlessness, and the de Manian laboratory, with its perpetually, maddeningly failing linguistic tests, shows us the dominion of its sphere: the place of “le néant des choses humaines”, the nothingness of our thinking as a non-material power which *connects* no-thing with no-thing and is only out there to collide into (the world’s) things without plan or completion.

However, this cognitive premise does not kill off reality or the experience of it, quite the opposite as a matter of fact. It radically reforms (or “deconstructs”) the way we understand it: *anything* can follow from *something*, and we need to be aware of this lest we lapse into self-

righteous assumptions about ourselves (which Kant criticised) or automatic servitude to other people's ideas (which Hegel exposed). Locating this resistance specifically in the language of literature, de Man says:

That there is a nonhuman aspect of language is a perennial awareness from which we cannot escape, because language does things which are so radically out of our control that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly.¹⁴

In this thesis, I intend to observe this “perennial awareness” as closely and cohesively as possible by reading and criticising the readings and criticisms of de Man in the different stages of his career. As it unfolds, the idea is not to embrace de Man's philosophy as a “whole”, or to dip into his writings for this or that theoretical tool, but even less the idea is to read him to reject him or the one question asked therein. Instead, the idea, as a non-total form of thinking, is to follow up on the line of inquiry passed along by de Man and the philosophical tradition behind him, to push the “things” which still act upon and limit “us” (tests, results, dark poetics), and in so doing attempt to sense something new and different, to think the myth that allows them. As an unsolved form of thought that contains both the literal and the figurative dimensions of language, the narratives of both fact and fiction, and the break of thought from action wedged between them, myth holds the power of language in being. In this way, the break that Paul de Man finds in others becomes a mythic action decided in advance, validated only by its own insistent logic which prevails just because the others play the same game too. Baudelaire took part in it by hurling himself away from it, Mallarmé perused the rulebook until its words shone with their own power. More examples like this will be demonstrated in the following sections. Pushed somewhere else, out of the usual ballpark, the game might just not be the “game” one thought it was anymore, and the “rules” could be written differently.

¹⁴ “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's ‘The Task of the Translator’” RT 101.

3. The Early de Man: A Temporal Ontology

One modern philosopher who could be said to have tried to rewrite some of the rules of thinking is Martin Heidegger, and de Man noticed this too; he is very keen on the German particularly in the early part of his career. Much of the criticism he levels at Heidegger is concerned with the latter's reading of Friedrich Hölderlin's poems, which makes that a good place to observe their conflict. Heidegger says of Hölderlin that his poems are "like a bell which hangs in the open air and is already becoming out of tune through a light snowfall that is covering it"; after that he describes his own philosophical elucidations of this poetry as a kind of "snowfall on the bell".¹⁵ There is, however, nothing so gentle in de Man's retort to this when he judges Heidegger's musings as "heresies against the most elementary rules of text analysis"¹⁶ which, in all likelihood, rather mute than lightly shade the Hölderlin tune. A distance between the two different readers becomes apparent and leaves any third party needing to take both of the roads, at least to some length, if any originary cause for the conflict is to be traced. This is important for the ongoing project because this is one of the places which played a prominent role in de Man's critical development towards the 1970s and 1980s, and which may also be demonstrated to bring into the open some of the richest de Manian issues that, in shifting forms, he was concerned with to the end.

However, their differences notwithstanding, it has to be acknowledged that de Man very much appreciated Heidegger's contribution to Hölderlin studies since, in his work, any exegetic approach was discarded that was "not aimed at an understanding of poetic language in terms of its own essence" (PT 55). Had Heidegger not been thus disposed, his criticism would have been met with utter indifference by de Man (or not met at all), which only goes to show that, for there to be a conflict, a common area of confrontation must first be perceived. In this case, this place was to be nothing less than language itself, with Hölderlin as the specimen. De Man's ascribing to Heidegger

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, transl. Keith Hoeller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000) 22.

¹⁶ "Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin" BI 250.

the conviction of history being “the concrete manifestation of the very movement of being, a movement whose fundamental ambiguity is the origin of the historicity of our destiny”¹⁷ is an action which he desires to identify with but which comes to fail him as Heidegger’s thought turns from the strife-ridden and forever-restless ambiguities of ontological temporality (as exhibited at the time of *Sein und Zeit* in 1929) to the more patient visions of his later writings, “educated”¹⁸ by the poetry of Hölderlin. On one hand, the fact that this happens is something de Man feels compelled to deal with; the paradox, on the other hand, is the fact that the more serene the later Heidegger grows, the more involved he becomes with the question of language – that very question which lies at the heart of our inquiry as well. To someone with a radical philological tilt (such as de Man) this kind of intrusion (by what in his eyes has revealed itself as another form of reactionary philosophy) must be unacceptable. No “founding of being in the word”¹⁹ which did not come trailing the essential awareness of the linguistic break could remain uncontested, especially when the work of an author of Hölderlin’s stature was in question. Critical terminology had to be put to methodical use in order to show where Heidegger went wrong once and for all, and to offer instead such a dialectical understanding of poetry and being which resonated more truthfully with Hölderlin.²⁰ We will witness this insight clearly in the discussion of one of his hymns.

¹⁷ “The Temptation of Permanence” CW 34.

¹⁸ Julian Young: *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 72. Shades of Schiller being (aesthetically) educated by Kant linger here, and de Man did not appreciate that happenstance either (there is more on Kant in a later section). Although the entire issue of aesthetics looks very different in the Heideggerian context than it does in Kant and Schiller (with Heidegger despising the concept of modern aesthetics as a debilitating scientification of Art as Being), it is by no means unthinkable that the outward differences could melt away on a deeper level, like that of language. Whether this would then mean that Heidegger shuns “aesthetics” just because it is named so – and disregards many of its more profound aspects in doing so – poses an interesting question about the perceived peril of technologised reflecting on (or “framing” of) art. What if the “threat” of aesthetics only *appeared* to be dangerous?

¹⁹ Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* 59.

²⁰ Manfred Frank describes this pro-Romantic understanding as “the turn away from philosophizing based on a supreme first principle” (66, see end of note) and attributes its beginnings to Jacobi and Reinhold by whom the young Hölderlin was impressed, along with many other notable thinkers of the time. In an idealist philosophical retrospect, Hegel is the most famous of them. Manfred Frank: “Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism” *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, transl. Günter Zöller and Karl Ameriks (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1995).

Hölderlin's "Wie wenn am Feiertage..."

Hölderlin's poem "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." (1799-1803, see the appendix for the German original) and its readings by de Man and Heidegger show in action many of the issues so far discussed. In his essay "Patterns of Temporality in Hölderlin's 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...'", originally delivered as a lecture at the Gauss seminar in 1967, de Man takes the first few pages to expound the problem of romantic criticism, the linguistic hold of the aesthetic self over the empirical self, the premises of philology, and the critical promise shown by the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*. He concludes this part by stating how we "could thus legitimately expect from the Heideggerian premises a clarifying analysis of poetic temporality, as it is seen to act within the poetic form". These expectations, however, are then promptly "disappointed" (PT 58) and de Man goes on to analyse why this happens. After many twists and turns (more about them in a while), de Man arrives at the end result of the ending itself which connects it circularly with the beginning and the poem's wisdom is to be found in this shattered event²¹ – where the reader is warned not to believe that the "kind of enthusiasm that animates a heroic act is identical with the predominant mood of a poetic consciousness" (PT 67). The thematic of heroism (of the poem's "fellow poets" whom it "behoves to stand / Bareheaded beneath God's thunder-storms"²²), along with the important opposition of shelter and violence, thus receives a full treatment from de Man.

In a nutshell, the entire point of Heidegger's reading of "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." is to stress the need of "the sons of the earth" to have "the mediation of the holy through the gift of a song without danger". As life-preserving sanctity is immediately granted to us by god, the "danger" is that its anxiously awaited birth in song "threatens to invert the essence of the holy into its

²¹ Heidegger completes his reading of the poem based on a later version with a decisive tone, whereas de Man makes use of an earlier draft in which the poem ends in a much more disbelieving way. De Man's attitude in doing this as a philologist is somewhat self-satisfied – the "embarrassing fact remains that [the earlier lines] always had been destined to be the concluding part" (PT 65) – but this is characteristic of his writing.

²² English translation by Michael Hamburger. See lines 56-7 in the original.

opposite”²³ which will destroy it. In other words, should we seek to grasp holiness in its immediate form, the threat is that we would either be doomed by the attempt and/or simply fail to understand it, falling prey to either blasphemy or barbarianism. In order to prevent this “unholy” negation from taking place (which would forever cleave us from its divine “origin” and annihilate its presence in actuality), the immediate is immediately turned into the mediate which both keeps us and our sagacious song in its truth, allowing us to disclose it in the open. It could be argued, in terms of the general philosophical tradition, that Heidegger here criticises (and attempts to top) both rationalism (in the way of not positively identifying with a simple subject-object dichotomy) and idealism (in the way of not identifying with it negatively either), and instead seeks to establish mediation itself as essentially positive (or “holy”), a phenomenal entity escaping conceptual adequacy. That this establishment can (and should) be done then opens (or “originates”) the world for poetry and art. In this kind of reading, interpretation does indeed stop at the “steadfastness with which the poets are able to endure the approach of the gods” (PT 59) and there is no need to be detained by, or perhaps even to consider, the “self-inflicted wound”²⁴ found in the last lines of the original version.²⁵ To de Man, however, these lines are everything the poem ever points at, right from the beginning, and they turn back on themselves in a breaking action which rescinds any claim that might have been made in the course of the poem’s duration and leaves off in a hermeneutic blaze in which “the ending makes the hidden meaning of the beginning explicit” by interpreting it “in a language that has accumulated the experience necessary to bring out what was there from the beginning, but in a neutral, non-conscious state” (PT 70).

²³ Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* 94.

²⁴ Peter Szondi: “The Other Arrow: On the Genesis of the Late Hymnic Style” *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, transl. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). The quote “self-inflicted wound” (32 in Szondi, mentioned also by de Man in PT 66) is from the prose draft of “Wie wenn am Feiertage...” which Szondi frequently refers to in his attempt to get the metrical version “reconstructed” (37) in a philological fashion. Szondi’s eventual conclusion about the “element of personal suffering” in the hymnic Hölderlin and his poetic “ego... no longer recogni[sing] any arrow other than the god’s” (42) is brushed aside by de Man (Hölderlin “could never have felt very close to the problem Szondi mentions as crucial”, PT 67), and it is debatable whether it really deals philosophical damage to Heidegger.

²⁵ “But, oh, my shame! when of / My shame! / And let me say at once / That I approached the Heavenly, / And they themselves cast me down, deep down / Before the living, into the dark cast down / The false priest that I am, to sing, / For those who have ears to hear, the warning song. / There”. See lines 67-74 in the German original.

As it turns out, de Man does not elaborate on the implications of the “non-conscious state” in this context, but he does oppose it sharply with Heidegger’s “foreknowledge, a prefiguration that the later, ‘ideal’ statement makes explicit but never supersedes” (PT 71). The accusation is that Heidegger’s awaiting of the holy in Hölderlin’s poem is an uncritical fantasy which betrays the temporal dynamic of being suggested by his own earlier philosophy, forsaking real insight for a shelter of patience and pathos,²⁶ and since this accusation is entirely pinned on the poetic fact about “Wie wenn am Feiertage...” that its disruptive ending is already spoken by its beginning, a look at that fact is in order.

The first stanza of the poem begins with the lines “As on a holiday, to see the field / A countryman goes out, at morning, when / Out of hot night the cooling flashes had fallen / For hours on end, and thunder still rumbles afar”, and the second structurally complements it with “So now in favourable weather they stand / Whom no mere master teaches, but in / A light embrace, miraculously omnipresent, / God-like in power and beauty, Nature brings up”.²⁷ The situation is that of daybreak after a stormy night with the countryman going out to see how it looks now, and with the enigmatic “them” still divining somewhere in nature. This is the poetic premise on which there is no disagreement; problems start to crop up only when, in his elucidation of the poem, Heidegger identifies the “sie” on line 10 with the “Dichter” on line 16 and connects them with the countryman,²⁸ save for the poets’ ability to receive and be brought up by “another kind of upbringing”,²⁹ that is, education by nature. Without any apparent need for further figuration, the

²⁶ Julian Young refers to this patience as Heidegger’s transition from the alleged “superfluity of Nikeism” (Fascist go-getting more or less) to the waiting quality of his later “*Ereignis*-thinking” (112, the very thing that did not sit well with de Man). De Man does not directly ridicule Heidegger for having done this, but his reference to the less polite Adorno does seem to do the talking for him. George Pattison’s wondering whether this is a justified judgment about a philosophy seeking to stay us from both “blasphemy... a presumption as to our own god-likeness” and “the superficiality of idle talk” (175, see end of note) is a question of its own. George Pattison: *The Later Heidegger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁷ See lines 1-4 and 10-13 in the German original.

²⁸ De Man follows Heidegger’s double action halfway through, that is, he too identifies the “sie” with the “Dichter” but, along with Peter Szondi, goes on his separate way after that (more about that in a while). The action is of suspect validity, and it is interesting that it should go unnoticed here, especially with a similar debate surrounding the elusive “prince of the feast-day” (“den Fürsten des Fests”) of Hölderlin’s late-discovered “Celebration of Peace” (“Friedensfeier”).

²⁹ Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* 75.

opening for the embrace by the holy is thus endowed as long as it is understood in its mediate form and non-identical divinity. Song is born out of that; and de Man turns against it. Calling on Hölderlin's other work (the play *Empedokles*, among others) to characterise such noble role-casting as "a sacrificial urge" which is "a form of hubris" and its ironic reversal through the last lines of "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." as a "metaheroic tonality [which] Hölderlin calls the 'ideal' tone" (PT 69), de Man attacks Heidegger's easy connecting of the poets with the countryman. As that figure has been safe at night, de Man wonders whether it would be truer to the poem if we agreed with Peter Szondi³⁰ and linked the "sie" (the poets) with the "exposed trees, objects that were never sheltered from the direct impact of the lightning" on lines 5-9, instead of having them first stand outside nature and, like the countryman, come out only "after the moment of greatest danger" (PT 61). The focal question is not that of any socio-historical reference (as de Man grants to Heidegger), because Hölderlin's "nature" contains within it and admits all such speculations (including knowledge of war and mythology), but it is that of identification and the function of the thing identified with. If the poets are such initial absentees as de Man reads Heidegger's poets to be, there is no basis for arguing that they are in the reception of anything immediate like Heidegger would have us believe. Their being collapses in an original outsideness.

If, on the other hand, the poets risk nature as trees do, they are bound to be consumed in the violence of their own heroism, unable to preserve or communicate anything to the rest of us. And therein lies the deepest breach of Hölderlin's poetry: neither of these two options, the choice of

³⁰ In referring to the "sie" on line 10, Szondi states in no unclear terms that "[t]hey' means the poets. It is necessary to guard against a misapprehension right at the start" (Szondi 27). As stated in footnote 21, Szondi makes frequent use of the prose draft of "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." in explicating the hymn itself, and in this instance he quotes the draft as having had the future line 10 ("So stehn sie unter günstiger Witterung") originally sketched down as "So stehen sie jetzt unter günstiger Witterung die Dichter" (endnote 8), which, had it ended up in the poem, would naturally have given it a very different look. It did not, however, end up there, much in the same way the "self-inflicted wound" of the prose draft did not, and it is crucial to recognise this fact. For all of Szondi's remonstrations on how "philological proof" ("On Textual Understanding", 16) is given, his reliance on the "genetic" reconstruction of an "ultimate" work of literature through earlier versions and other bits and pieces contradicts and finally compromises the unique and ambiguous nature of poetic creation. (Even though there are other places where he apparently endorses it; in talking about a tricky passage in Kleist's *Amphitryon* with different interpretative possibilities he says that the "important question to ask is *whether any decision is called for here at all*, i. e., whether the alternative does not lie within the subject matter itself", 19, my emphasis.) As it happens, in the case of the hymn "Wie wenn am Feiertage...", the absence of "Dichter" from line 10 makes it into a very different poem – quite like the additional fragmentary final stanza does.

shelter or the choice of violence, can be articulated in a way which would endow us with any control over our own destiny or command of Heideggerian Being. We either die fast in the “violent temporality (*reissende Zeit*) of action” or wither away in the “sheltering temporality (*schützende Zeit*) of interpretation”³¹ and so, as the de Manian project would have us understand it, the only way to survive into another future is to be aware of the madness which we are caught in. If this linguistic wisdom is not grasped, all the “happy” readers of the world are able to go on insisting on a fallacious understanding of poetry that “does not coincide with the mode of totalization of the poem’s own language” (PT 65), and their readings are left as either worthless or wildly erroneous. Whereas in de Man’s reality, the oblivious poetic present has us tossing back and forth in a vortex of temporal reversals which we hold on to for dear life and its aesthetic illusions.

However, since both Heidegger and de Man immediately identify Hölderlin’s “sie” on the first line of the second stanza with the “Dichter” on the seventh, it proves a burden not only to the former’s elucidation of the poem as an all-too-easy embracing of (or connecting with) the holy, but also to the latter’s total dependence on this identification in trying to disrupt the totalising reading. The fact that in “Wie wenn am Feiertage...” de Man links the poets with the trees (as natural things which in themselves escape cognition) rather than the countryman is a decision in line with this thought. The final fragmentary stanza can be read in a similar way and, by bringing it back together with the “neutral” beginning, de Man is able to validate his own non-closing hermeneutic reading while also asserting its critical superiority over Heidegger. And yet there is a problem to this method, no matter how convincing it may sound – the fact remains that, in this version of the hymn, there is no formal grammatical reason to identify the “sie” on line 10 with the “Dichter” on line 16. The expression “So now in favourable weather they stand / Whom no mere master teaches” can also float free of the explicit reference to the poets five lines later (first one of its kind in the poem); “The poets’ faces likewise are sad, they seem to be alone”.³² Prosodically it is interesting that de

³¹ “Wordsworth and Hölderlin” RR 63.

³² See lines 16-17 in the German original.

Man does note the grammatical connective “Wie... so” between the beginnings of the first and the second stanza – which has one “certainly tempted” (PT 61) to agree with the connection Heidegger makes – but he disregards the “so” at the beginning of line 16 in the German original (Hamburger’s translation pulls it up to line 14 but does not lose it). This “so” gives a strong feeling of alternation and difference between the two halves of the second stanza divided by the full stop on line 13. What’s more, the other full stop on line 17, neglected by Hamburger, makes it four lines for each of the first two parts and leaves the final Pindaric line³³ as something of a final lingering before the “breaking” of the day and the “my word” (“mein wort”) speaking in the subjunctive in the first two lines of the third stanza. [And by that lingering, a stark division is again established between the restlessly creating poets of the day, unreliable in the truth of their word, and the mighty elusive “them” brought up by sleeplessly creating omnipresent nature.] Yet all this is not to say, by any criteria, that in the second stanza “they” *could* not mean the poets but, more importantly, it does not say that “they” *must* mean the poets.³⁴ Moreover, it does not say that, if the above is the case, “they” should be then primarily identified with something else, such as the countryman or the trees or the combination of either of these in connection with the poets. To make any identification or combination like that, and to be concerned with it and its hermeneutic consequences exclusively, arguably misses the main point of the poem.

As a result, it can be claimed that the first critical question in “Wie wenn am Feiertage...” is what it means for the faceless, not-alone, not-seeming “sie” to float free³⁵ and whether the stepping into someone’s shoes (like the “Dichter” form) can be warranted at all, and what follows from that – be it sad divining or unreliable speaking of the word. Moreover, apart from the beginning of the

³³ Line 18: “Denn ahnend ruhet sie selbst auch.” / “For divining too she herself is at rest.”

³⁴ As a matter of fact, the poets may indeed be the most “commonsensical” thing for the “sie” on line 10 to be identified with (as it would be also possible to identify the “sie” with the trees themselves without connecting them with the poets at all, but this alternative might be considered obscurely symbolic) but, in criticism, this action must not take place as peremptorily as it does for Heidegger, de Man and Szondi.

³⁵ Hölderlin’s use of the German “sie” is as wide and complex as the language allows; the second stanza in the poem, for example, has it referring in at least three different ways: the totally ambiguous, free-floating “sie”, the feminine pronoun “sie” (to connote Nature in the singular form on lines 14 and 18 but not, crucially, on line 10), and the identified-with-poets “sie”. This wide use of the word and the formal deictic structure it is part of is highly interesting in Hölderlin as it suggests the kind of poetic reference which forever brings together but nowhere lets itself be reached.

poem, there are other places in the poem where the same issue emerges; “they who smiling worked our fields for us, / Assuming the shape of labourers” in the fourth stanza, and “Do you ask where they are? In song their spirit wafts”³⁶ in the fifth; and it is the same overruling concern for the *possibility* of identificatory thinking (and not its misuse, either positively or negatively), as well as it still having its source in unattainable nature, which is to be experienced here and now. And *that* it is. In a sense, Hölderlin plays into the hands of both Heidegger and de Man but not quite in the manner either of them thinks he does; the fact that they work from the general identification of “*sie*” with the “poets” steers their own readings in decisive ways which close down the poem’s world from others. For the former, the way is the poets’ ability to receive the holy that separates them from the countryman’s tendency towards “use and service”³⁷ only, while for the latter it is a manner for his vertiginous reading of “metaheroic” indecision between withering in shelter or dying in violence.³⁸ Should, however, the “*sie*” be left on its non-identical own and allowed to float free in its various contexts (including that of its own context), a kind of reading may emerge which contains each of the conflicted positions. Then the unquestionable “*sie*” does become the “miraculously omnipresent” (“die wunderbar / Allgegenwärtig” on lines 11-12 in the original) which for Hölderlin animates, unavoidably, not only the poets (before and after) and the countryman (in the present), but also non-temporal nature (the trees), “high Aether” and “low abyss” (“Aether” and “Abgrund”, line 24). It allows daredevil standing in the storm or cries of warning against doing that or being able to sound such a warning in the first place. Given the chance, the Romantic never fails to find nature but he falls away from it immediately as he does; yet even the fall is a finding and so nature. And the awareness of this is eternally that which is holy.

³⁶ See lines 34-5 and 37 in the German original. In “Celebration of Peace”, the same idea of elusive shape emerges in connection with “the prince of the feast-day” mentioned in footnote 25. There the figure is addressed in the second person to “Cast down your eyes, oblivious, lightly shaded / Assuming the shape of a friend, you known to all men” (“Dein Auge senkst, vergessen, leichtbeschattet, / Und Freundesgestalt annimmst, du Allbekannt”). Here the elusiveness is expressed through the “you”.

³⁷ Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* 87.

³⁸ For de Man there really is no middle state between these two extremes except for the “solution” he himself is claiming. This pops up at different places in his writings, and it is often connected not only to Hölderlin and Heidegger but also Rousseau (see next chapter) and Wordsworth.

It follows that the cognitive mish-mash which directs the reflecting on these different things does not extend to the endowment (nature, that is) which grants them all but which cannot be revealed, except in a deictic, free-floating form.³⁹ In Hölderlin, this form may refer to *anything*, and when it does, it both does and does not: the dialectic thus constituted is subsumed in the possibility of its inevitably coming to the (poetic) open. That this brings down Heideggerian separations between holy being or being of “use and service” only, as well as the cognitive identification of reception with preparedness, is something that does happen, but it also happens that de Manian temporal reversals lose their essential madness: they are parts of one and the same thing. In that sense, Heidegger’s pursuit of Being *is* always valid, but it is also always bound to disappoint in its drawing of identifying lines, and this de Man criticises well. However, that does not mean his own appropriations of the lines would simply succeed. He takes them in order to show us that they add up to nothing in the end, that the ontological synecdoche they appear to suggest does not exist, but then he re-commits the error of figurative identification himself by showing us, and dedicating himself to, the local hermeneutic forms he has identified (such as the exposed natural objects). As a result, the forms continue to live on behind his back as poetic matter each time he appears to have banished them, and so it turns out that the early de Man comes to require something critically more radical in order to keep his understanding-breaking project in motion.

4. The Middle de Man: Reading and Figurality

De Man says in the preface to his second book *Allegories of Reading* (1979) that the work on it began as a “preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism” but that the initial idea got stalled in “local difficulties of interpretation” (AR ix). He does not elaborate on these difficulties so it remains up to the comparative reader of both early and middle de Man to find out what he might

³⁹ Another such form in Hölderlin is the notion of the “Feiertage”; “holiday” (“holy-day”), “festival”, or “celebration”. Heidegger finds it appealing in many of his later writings.

have meant by them and how his theoretical discourse was shaped by the failure. On the surface, it could be that he got frustrated with his inability really to erase the hidden spaces of hermeneutic readings, when the deep aspiration was to shatter the (Romantic) interpreter's chance to found (organic) cohesion and unity between nature and the human in literature. By acknowledging the ambiguous inwardness and intentionality of any literary utterance, the aim was to blur the border of fact and fiction and to determine the existence of the erratic subject therein together with a stunted ability to reflect on, and identify with, this state. In a world of mediated (no-)things, we were the medium of truth but the truth was forever banned from us because temporality intervened. The literary figure attempting to tear away from this limbo was doomed to be destroyed violently and the one merely taking refuge in the recognition betrayed the very movement of immanent consciousness. The reflection, whether tragically disposed or not, had to go on unceasingly, re-closing and re-opening the imaginary world whose comprehension forever eluded us. This would be one way of describing the "stalled" message of the early de Man.

How severe must these "local difficulties of interpretation" then have been for de Man, seeing that they were enough to persuade him to abandon the project of what *Allegories of Reading* was first planned to be? They must truly have been formidable since, four years later still, in the preface to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1983) he admits that, in spite of all the hard work to the contrary, Hölderlin remained "the obvious stumbling block" (RR ix) of his own enterprise. There is not much talk of the enigmatic German (or Heidegger for that matter) beyond the outward terminological about-face of the 1970s which had him taking "refuge in more theoretical inquiries into the problems of figural language" (RR viii) and transported him to other battlefronts. Jacques Derrida's influence on this happening can hardly be overestimated; after all, it is in his writings that de Man says he "consciously came across 'deconstruction' for the first time" (AR x). These writings date from the late 1960s and, with the seminal *Of Grammatology* (1967) among them, even to this day they signal something radical – as indicated by endless critical altercations spawned in their wake.

But none of this might have happened without de Man sympathising with Derrida, or without later becoming affiliated with the Yale School, and it is the express intention of this section to study how it all unfolded in the change of de Man's texts during the 1970s.

As the power of temporality as a breaking force *par excellence* wanes for de Man into a mere poetic trope of duration subject to its own paradoxicality (into something unable to mediate anything), the model of imperfect hermeneutics no longer provides any way beyond historical "local difficulties of interpretation" because, applied as such, the model needs to assume itself existing fully in each single local instance. In effect, this would entail the ineffable universality of the model with only the instances (and their "local difficulties") as variable, and, of them, some would provide the astute reader with insight, others with blindness. At the center of this process, at the heart of the hermeneutic circle, regardless of the outcome, there would still remain the *logos* of the relative knowledge gained. (And, as we know, this very logocentrism is what Derrida totally resists.) The possibility of this epistemology then becomes the core question for the middle de Man and, characteristically enough, as soon as the trouble brews, any future answer is *a priori* declared invalid. We will see this in this section by focusing, along with de Man, on the *reading* of Rousseau, with all the technical complications the term implies.

However, it takes some time for de Man really to get started with them. He writes essays with great innovation and suggestiveness in which he is able to confront several important authors (Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Wordsworth, Stendhal) from a new angle,⁴⁰ but he still somehow seems to lack the real authority to outline his newfound project. A consolidating voice appears to be missing. What he needs is someone like Hölderlin in dealing with Heidegger and then he finds him: Rousseau. Who better to speak for de Man, the critic "who never had an idea of [his] own",⁴¹ than the spiritual mentor of Hölderlin who had already been an asset in taking on Heidegger too? A new reading, a new understanding of Rousseau was certainly required for the purpose (moving on from

⁴⁰ For instance, "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in BI.

⁴¹ "An Interview with Paul de Man" (by Stefano Rosso) RT 118.

the bounded necessity of inward reflection to the very impossibility of that reflection), and that is exactly what the project of *Allegories of Reading* transformed into after its inauspicious beginnings on critical fields about to be left behind.

For the purpose, the scope of “literature” also needed to be expanded (reminding us of Nietzsche who always spoke his lesson “in the most general sense possible”⁴²) but the plan needed to be executed with great discretion. As an author of far and wide aspirations but perhaps most celebrated as a literary writer, Rousseau proved a good specimen in that respect, as well, because the problem of human enterprise “becomes more intricate when it is restricted to literature”.⁴³ From that (absence of) origin one can go anywhere, and Suzanne Gearhart recognises the ploy when she observes that “for de Man, literature (or ‘literature’) occupies a commanding position from which it cannot be moved”.⁴⁴ In the 1970s, the reading of Rousseau is the key to all this and the trick is to encounter it, in the way that we as readers only can. And since we all seem to have a reading “self” to do that, as will be demonstrated, it could turn out that something is going to happen to it. Apart from the specious shift towards philosophy (noted by Rodolphe Gasché, among others), there appears in de Man’s writings in the 1970s a simultaneous change in “the conception of the source of error”, of the origin of mind’s failure to settle things once and for all, and according to Jan Rosiek, that change is the shifting of the source “from self to language”. And that is why it, the previously ontological “me” pressured around by secret forces, just will not be the same afterwards.

Rousseau’s Deconstruction of the Self

A trajectory of de Man’s developing conception of the “self” from the late 1960s to the late 1970s can be demonstrated by a comparison of two essays: “Rousseau and the Transcendence of the Self”

⁴² “Literary History and Literary Modernity” BI 151.

⁴³ *ibid.* 151.

⁴⁴ Suzanne Gearhart: “Philosophy *before* Literature: Deconstruction, Historicity, and the Work of Paul de Man” *diacritics* (winter 1983) 71.

(the 1967 Gauss seminar, in RCC) and “Self” (in AR). Both of them have the same three main references: the critic Jean Starobinski and the plays “Narcisse” and “Pygmalion” by Rousseau, and in that order too. In the earlier essay, de Man sets his own hermeneutic interpretation of the works against that of Starobinski who is said to find in Rousseau not a “dialectical process of inwardness and objectivity” but instead an alternation which occurs “without mediation, between the two extreme antithetical poles of this process”. One of these “poles” is called “obstacle” and the other “transparency”; and, as Starobinski is said to understand Rousseau, there is no middle ground between them. The obstacle is “beyond” the place of “reflective thought”, a pure object appearing out of our reach, and the transparency is “before” (RTS 35) the domain, in perfect continuity with it. What Rousseau does is switch between the two without respite, identifying with the one or the other. Now, whereas this seems to correspond with an antithetical birth of origin (with knowing and not-knowing encroaching on the subject’s world in order to disrupt it), and it constitutes the axis on which Starobinski operates, it has an intrinsic danger to it. De Man states that, within this alternating model, the “oscillation is not even a true polarity, but merely a succession of flights from self-knowledge” and that is why, in spite of demanding active cognition, “[t]here is no real disjunction, since it is in fact always only the empirical self who governs the activity of the imagination for its own purposes” (RTS 38). The lack of “real disjunction” is the danger and betrays the original failure of Rousseau’s primal self; “it” cannot be said to be in flight because it has never existed.

What this reiterates is the early de Manian objection to conventional Romantic criticism (in this case Starobinski and other Geneva critics such as René Girard, Marcel Raymond and Georges Poulet) and it proves the main burden of the 1967 essay, even if he does proceed from there to examples. And these, apart from analysing Rousseau, are interesting for the fact how well they underline de Man’s articulations of his project at the time. For instance, the play “Narcisse” is described as “one of mutual mystification” where the protagonist falls in love with his own, slightly

altered portrait (showing him as a woman) and as the whole “exchange” occurs within vanity (or “*amour-propre*”), the “self here never really becomes another but remains all too much its own interested self” (RTS 41). The failure of the hermeneutic circle to close properly does not come through with full force since the interpretation can be shown to stop at the non-referential figure of Narcissus. And because of that, with certain latent elements aside, the play constitutes neither “a genuine work of art” (RTS 41) nor a true representation of “aesthetic consciousness”. This, however, is not the case for “Pygmalion” whose end scene “symbolizes the full authenticity of the fictional figure” (RTS 42) and thus returns to the play a “movement of consciousness toward something that it has lost, toward something that it wants to possess in order to be complete”. This movement is “desire” (RTS 45), and desire is “not the result of a dualism, of a body and soul or a subject-object relationship” which would make it into a force of fulfillment. Instead, desire “is a temporal predicament, the feeling of loss experienced at being removed from the source of one’s own being” (RTS 46). Described thus, it reminds the reader of the early de Manian motif of uncontestable, awareness-legislating nothingness.

The somewhat psychoanalytical formulation of the above passage puts the experiencing subject that we find in the play (the “*moi!*” of “Pygmalion” who longs for “entire identification”, RTS 47) at a non-transcendental distance from the “full pastness of knowledge” which he or she can never reach but which nonetheless exists. This might be a tragedy but it does not have to be – “Narcisse” implies something like this but the unreachable centre cannot be found there because the facility of the drama does not allow it. The only figure to have the authority to change this is the image of the conscious subject caught in the middle of it, like the more mature Rousseau of “Pygmalion” or the more proficient de Man of the middle period. As the real figure is lost and not just let slip by, only then the pathos of the predicament truly comes to a head: the loss of the “loss” finally becomes the (questionable) gain of the feeling of loss.

By 1979, the criticism has developed to show “Narcisse” as a “self/other tension... [that] has become objectified in an autonomous entity, the portrait”, and this entity “is not entirely fictional but exists in the mode of a simulacrum” (S 168). The dimension that actively operates imagination is no longer time because temporality, like mediation, is not an agent endowed with any such function anymore. The ruling dimension is now space but, in the reality of presence, the sensation we glean from the portrait is not even an illusion (because that implies full presence for the image somewhere else) but rather an inert displacement (existing because it must but without anything to validate it anytime or anywhere). This displacement is the figural entity of allegory, which is “an intolerably suspended state” (S 161). The intolerability is the result of its defying our sense of reason, and the singularity of selfhood is the original epitome of its dominion. De Man confirms this unsettling reading of Rousseau as he states that “already in this absolute and inconceivable state of solitude, [the self] can be the spectator, the concern and the judge of his own singular being” (S 165). In other words, the transparent kind of self-love (“*amour de soi*”, a good thing for Rousseau) which enables the subject’s reflection of his or her own self (and allows it to connect with other “selves”) does not exist in this state because the self involved is unable to reflect in any such way. It can only “spectate”. Just how this odd hypostasis of perception is possible is not de Man’s concern because he reads it out of Rousseau (and finds incredible transpositions for it later on in his career) and is therefore just in the process of making do with it, of deconstructing it.

De Man feels completely validated with his reading of Rousseau by the truth of Rousseau pictured in the displaced allegory found in the play. As “the representation of a consciousness”, the portrait of “Narcisse” is not “itself a misreading”, or an open interpretation, because it does not question the “status of the representation... as such” (S 167). Instead, it recalls the full figure of vanity (or “*amour propre*”) because the main character is not clever enough to understand what is going on. The intelligence to do that is the exclusive province of the reader. Trapped in the tale, the fictional entity of Rousseau’s play remains ridiculous, bent on being in love with “resemblance...

because it can be interpreted as identity as well as difference and is therefore unseizable, forever in flight” (S 167). But because he *is* a fictional entity, he remains blameless for his own ignorance; the same advantage, however, is not available to the actual reader. De Man uses the word “flight” to describe the foolish error of the protagonist, and, incidentally, the same word was used to refer to Starobinski’s reading mistake in the earlier essay (where there was “a succession of flights from self-knowledge”). It is nothing short of a damning verdict of the Genevan critic’s brand of Romantic criticism, and this may partly be due to the fact that Starobinski, in his study, appears to address the question of language, too:

[For Starobinski], [t]he statement of the enigma that gives language its necessarily referential complexity might itself be no longer a representation but a single voice that, by the rigor of its negativity, finally coincides with what it asserts. (S 172)

The possibility of stating the “enigma” of literature, and the chance of re-establishing its unity at the far end of language, sets off de Man’s alarm and makes him turn against Starobinski even though he finds his theoretical method operable. But since what Starobinski seems to understand by the speaking poetic self, and what power he allows to it, comes to involve something far more symbolically substantial than de Man is able to approve of, the dialogue shuts down in the end.⁴⁵

In de Man’s advanced writings of the 1970s, “selfhood is not a substance but a figure” (S 170), and the awareness of this is the “willful assertion of a likely aberration as a resignation to the possibility of this error” (S 172). In the case of Rousseau’s “Pygmalion”, a play which suspends all referentiality of any transparent self without question and which makes no exceptions for negative mystifications either, the “totalizing symmetry of the substitutive pattern is thrown out of balance: instead of merging into a higher, general Self, two selves remain confronted in a paralyzing

⁴⁵ It is interesting that, in his *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, Starobinski does claim the “self” as hardly substantial when, talking about the “allegories” of ego and truth, he says that, in Rousseau, “consciousness manifests itself as an absolute beginning, an inaugural act totally distinct from the prior unveiling, which, being merely the end of an illusion, inaugurated nothing”. The response to this could be that Starobinski agrees with the *images* of the self in Rousseau being necessarily self-deconstructive; the thought, however, lingers that the self *in itself* remains essentially intact, furthering its own dramatic narrative. Jean Starobinski: *Jean Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 79.

inequality” (S 185, my emphasis). This state is the unavoidable eternity of inevitable inequality which language first gives rise to and which the singular self is unable to resist, simply because the resistance itself is its origin. This speaks the staggering paradox of Rousseau (and also the main concern of the famous “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality”, known as the *Second Discourse*). In the play, the sculptor Pygmalion and the statue Galathea’s meeting one another is intolerably conditioned by the subject’s fear of a sense-defying state where the “selves” involved can do nothing but “spectate”. That is all they are able to do. Unity between them is disallowed because there is no way of doing away with the spectating selves either; “the attraction of the individual stems from its prior general model that is, in fact, an *emanation* of the self” (S 183, my emphasis). This allegorical emanation is the image of Rousseau’s isolated singular self and, in the case of Pygmalion and Galathea, it assumes the form of the uncanny and the awesome just because Galathea appears godlike and the sculptor himself becomes “paralyzed by the feeling of awe that is characteristic, to use Kantian terminology, of the sublime” (S 177). The sublime is the inconceivable residue of the divine or the appearance of it (which retains it for the later de Man too), and it draws its power from the figure of the fatally flawed original self which still exists displaced in space although it never existed in time or the reality of presence.

The play “Pygmalion” speaks this disrupted ontology with great intensity because, according to de Man, the levels of awareness are there at a more advanced stage than anywhere else in Rousseau (so far). This is even more so as the text comes to achieve “a higher degree of dialectical complexity” and “the dialectics of desire are allowed to develop along consistent lines” (S 181). For the reader (or supposedly the theatre-goer), this leaving behind of the initial cognitive paralysis in a yet-suspended state of awe being carried on to the next level by the otherworldly author (“Rousseau controls the rhetoric of totalization inherent in all supplementary systems”, S 181), sounds like a fantastic experience, and, even better, in order to receive the “glorification” of its “holy fire” (S 184) one needs not to be a mythical Blakean “Sage”. Yet, amidst it all, the potential rapture is

broken down as soon as the temptation is resisted and the earlier mentioned “paralyzing inequality” is realised. The accelerating exclamations of the isolated selves slip away from ecstasy and settle into a tone of “resigned tolerance” (S 185); the sacrificial epiphany of Galathea coming alive to make two become one “does *not* occur” as anything else but the loss of transcendental hopes. The hope of recuperation lingers but gets smothered in an endless linguistic “sequence of reversals”. In the end, it is only the “text-producing power” (S 186) of Rousseau’s play that survives to interact with another text another day. It is the literary text itself which becomes Rousseau’s self, hoping to meet other selves, other texts, waiting alone in its own undone, displaced space:

The energy that succeeds at last in forcing the exchange is the deconstructive discourse of truth and falsehood that undoes selfhood as tragic metaphor and replaces it by the knowledge of its figural and epistemologically unreliable structure. When Galathea comes alive, Pygmalion is no longer a tragic figure but, like Ricoeur’s Freud, a deconstructive interpretative process (a reading) that can no longer tolerate the pathos of the self. (S 187)

The veracity of the anthropomorphic allegory, the “self”, is destroyed by the pathos of its isolation, no more quickened by any hopeful discourse of poetic unity or social equality; in their place, in the desolation of the artist’s studio, burn the “colder fires” of the allegorical entity of the mechanical text. Yet even within that event, displaced and simulated, one still “speaks more effectively to the eye than to the ear”.⁴⁶ As language breaks out of stone, *ut pictura poesis*, long live the new allegory. From this point of view, as de Man says at the end of his middle period, the primal, desiring self is definitely “not a privileged metaphor in Rousseau” (S 187). It is rather a blank ghost, the alienated product of a technological ekphrasis, the totally automated description of meaningless visual images for which there is no off-switch. But there is nothing else either – whether in society, nature, or the ongoing conventions of rhetoric lined up through the ever-present question of language. Being thus exposed, thinking is probably bound to resort to irony at some point to try to remain sane. For

⁴⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Essay on the Origin of Languages” *On the Origin of Language*, transl. John H. Moran (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966) 8.

Rousseau and Hölderlin that did not really happen. *Can* there be any basis for such an eventuality (of secure resorting) then?

5. The Late de Man: Parabases of Irony

De Man says in the essay “The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (transcribed from a 1977 lecture predating the publishing of *Allegories of Reading*) that “[p]arabasis is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register”⁴⁷ and that “irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes”.⁴⁸ From these two statements he then proceeds to Friedrich Schlegel’s thoughts on the nature of language, with references to Hegel, Kierkegaard, Proust, and Benjamin. The terminological toolkit used reveals its affinity with the general tenor of the middle de Man, but it seems there is something even more pressing already going on here than the sheer “omni-rhetorisation” of the literary linguistic subject mechanised by de Man’s deconstruction of Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*. In a manner akin to the essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity” from 1969 which already started in its own time to break away from de Man’s early understanding of history as a total temporal horizon, the “permanent parabasis” that “irony” is without exception made to be in “The Concept of Irony” challenges some of the more localised assertions (apparently) restricted to literature that are to be found in *Allegories of Reading*. Keeping the de Manian momentum going, the human predicament that is the question of language is thus induced on to an even more expansive level, beyond the rhetorical technicalities of the discipline – to the level of all human discourses and the sciences based on them.

This section in the thesis is concerned with the late de Man’s crystallisations, as it were, of his own critical development in the course of his academic career. What this highly advanced work wants to communicate is its own ultimate incommunicability. The aporias involved in this

⁴⁷ “The Concept of Irony” AI 178.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 179.

paradoxical but inescapable process fail to make any sense of themselves but nonetheless persist in asking the question of their own being (and relation to other beings) because without the asking, there would not be awareness of any kind. It is claimed that this is the bewildering (para)basis of all cognition, and to question it is, once again, to ask the question of language. *That* is the only de Manian necessity there is, in life and literature, and in this section, we will see how this fact leaves unaffected neither the history of human Spirit as philosophical sublation (Hegel), nor the rational logic of being able to make voluntary judgments (which are the transcendental imperative of Kant's philosophy). We will witness de Man leaving no stone, metaphorical or otherwise, unturned in this sheer process of criticising by language; none of thought's domains will be able to stand apart. Eventually, the ghostly contours forming around de Man's critical theory in its different stages – from the 1940s literary anti-chemist to the 1950 and 1960s temporal ontologist to the 1970s automated allegorist to the 1980s maker of the material event – come consistently into light along undrawn lines. What they show is the incomplete figure as what it is: a holding container of its own (and the other) power, similar in being aware of language, an invaluable, totally mythic form.

Hegel and History

However, before going on to any particular conclusion about such a form, it will be very useful to see what happened to de Manian "history" in the wake of his deconstruction of Nietzsche and the idea of literary history (as opposed to literary modernity) which had already been heavily undermined early on in de Man's career. Tracing the evolution of the aporia of history in these terms (as something which both permits and breaks human understanding), on one hand, Kevin Newmark says that in late essays like "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*" (in AI) de Man harbours "a very strong sense of rejection" of historical schemes "based ultimately on *organic* (that

is, nonlinguistic) referential models”.⁴⁹ Fairly enough, this is what de Man does express both there (with Hegel’s end-of-art thesis as the ultimate “irony of literary history”, SS 94) and in the older, already mentioned “Literary History and Literary Modernity”, in which every single “positivistic history that sees literature only as what it is not”⁵⁰ gets scrapped. On the other hand, there lingers in the late de Man also a different kind of history, brought into the open in essays like “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” (in RR). This alternative history Newmark calls “a history that is neither genetic nor empirical, but [one] that also does not represent a refusal to acknowledge the complexities of language”,⁵¹ and what better way to observe the de Manian mindset than by exposing such critical interests?

For its materials, the essay is concerned with a revisiting of Baudelaire and the reading of two of his most famous poems, “Correspondances” and “Obsession”. What Newmark finds de Man to do there pivots on the particular form of the “temple” grounded in the first lyric:

A temple is a *verbal* building because it stands on consecrated ground, on ground that has been marked out *verbally*... a temple is holy only so long as it is verbally marked as such and such a temple. In other words, there can be no temple without an *act* of language that marks out its ground as the site for a temple, and some form of *memory* or text in which the act is inscribed. Such an act which, like the temple, establishes the limit for all else in the poem, and because it is indisputable and infinitely iterable, is the only thing in the poem that is truly *historical* in the sense of being an actual occurrence necessary for any reading of the text.⁵²

In the way of history thus being “a linguistic event, the arrangement of verbal buildings, a syntax of inscriptions that exists to be memorized and then read”,⁵³ the ambiguous tropes of “*comme*” and “*transports*” in Baudelaire’s poem become devoid of any organic (natural) or sacred function they might be thought to have in grounding and connecting the different levels of the poem’s experience, and the ontological unity striven towards is irredeemably lost. In this use of it, “history” is a breaking force *par excellence*, ultimate inhuman performance, kept in check (in our awareness)

⁴⁹ Kevin Newmark: “The History of Paul de Man” *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 122.

⁵⁰ “Literary History and Literary Modernity” BI 164.

⁵¹ Newmark 122.

⁵² *ibid.* 132.

⁵³ *ibid.* 133.

only by its never-ending glances (“inscriptions”, “linguistic events”) against the mute matter (“temple”, “syntax”) of our material existence (“memorized and then read”). Newmark’s de Manian reading of de Man is admirable in its reiteration of these central deconstructionist concerns, and it speaks the apex of their development in proficient terms. Towards the end, the name of Hegel is again raised, and brought into the fray at its very climax.

One way of crossing over there from de Man’s historical Baudelaire is by way of the trope of movement itself. In Newmark’s discussion of Baudelaire’s “*transports*” (a lexical compound of “beyond” and “carrying”), he muses over the possibility of reading the metaphor as just that, literally as “metaphor”, as a semantic unit which allows for the “carrying” (“-port”, “-phor”) to be “its own subject and leave the “beyond” (“trans-”, “meta-”) as “its somewhat redundant attribute”. Read this way, the movement of a poem, a work of art, or any linguistic event would be “truly dialectical” and by its “series of discrete negations” guarantee “at once to have itself as subject”⁵⁴ – in a way reminiscent of Heidegger’s self-opening revealings of the world or Nietzsche’s eternal return. However, this is obviously not an attractive choice if one wants to hold open the question of language; the “beyond” of “*transports*” cannot be forgotten about as a “redundant attribute” if there is to be sheer philological rigour. In Newmark’s words, if a poem’s “movement is [to be] truly based on something that is itself not yet meaningful as dialectical movement, then the *trans* here has to be taken seriously”, as well. Read this way, the “beyond” becomes a subject unit of its own:

[The “beyond” becomes] a purely lexical element whose relation to the movement of meaning has not yet been established, [and so] the text prevents the carrying from going on its predetermined path, prevents the carrying from ever becoming a homogenous movement and cuts itself off from its own meaning as metaphor.⁵⁵

In this reading, no subjects remain “at once” having themselves as subjects, and the movement still existing has *nothing* to do with them, *nothing* to “carry”; it simply is “beyond” everything. The awareness of this is being aware of the question of language which thus impresses “us”, in a truly

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 130.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 130.

historical manner, with all that this entails to existing “within” it: *everything* remains broken away from our understanding, *everything* is broken, *nothing* works the way we think it does, *nothing* is the prize to be won at the end. Baudelaire’s temple is a redundant figuration of an organic fallacy, the (poetic) correspondences observed remain incomprehensible also “beyond” the poem, in all the different discourses of human activity.

Nonetheless, even with that said and done, there is still a (reading) choice involved, and this Newmark fails to recognise. Having been criticised by de Graef for this quasi-transcendental, phenomenal condition (of emergent language) already for his 1940 and 1950s writings, de Man apparently still dwells in the very same place that he did back then. What might this entail in Hegelian terms, seeing how “most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that” (SS 92), falling back as de Man does from the start to the break of understanding, the unhappy consciousness, and the need for truth which still defines us?⁵⁶ Following the selfsame logic in his reading of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*⁵⁷ as in Baudelaire’s poetry, de Man sees the concepts of sign and symbol clarified therein become jumbled, crossing into and disrupting each other, ultimately reducing the traditional function of the symbol as a dialectical trope, a “principle of signification... animated by the tensions between its dual poles [of sign and meaning]”, into a “preordained motion of its own position”, into the pure beyond of “beyond”, the “stutter, or a broken record, [which] makes what it keeps repeating worthless and meaningless”.⁵⁸ In other words, as the aestheticist’s dream is jarred awake, the symbol becomes a pure material inscription which points at nothing beyond itself, a thing which remains illiterate of its own syntax. As it turns out, it exists only by way of the “disjunction” which “will always, as it did in Hegel, manifest itself as soon as experience shades into thought, history into theory” (SS 104).

⁵⁶ “The truth is all around us; for Hegel, who, in this respect, is as much of an empiricist as Locke or Hume, the truth is what happens, but how can we be certain to recognize the truth when it occurs?” (SS 99). The same concern, truth, *is* de Man’s concern, put into test by the laboratory mindset argued.

⁵⁷ Hegel delivered his aesthetics lectures in person over a period of time between 1817-1829 but they were published in print only after his death (in 1831) between 1835-1838.

⁵⁸ “Hegel on the Sublime” AI 116.

The break of Paul de Man located by Paul de Man is thus the break by which anything ever exists at all; and the arguing of this could well be read as another disjunct symbol which is embroiled in the same aporias of signification it attempts to elucidate. In a similar fashion, as de Man's critique of Hegel divests his philosophy of its historical power to sublimate the world in the form of synthetic judgments (for which the latter is mostly famous), he shows them as self-circuitous disruptions of their claimed source (Spirit). Yet the same happens to de Man's own statements too. He reveals a bewildering hypostasis of cognition, one that leaves no sign, symbol or trope of an imagined subject unaffected, least of all the subject perhaps most readily figured, that of "I": "[t]he word 'I' is the most specifically deictic, self-pointing of words, yet it is also 'the most entirely abstract generality'" (SS 98), the subject that includes all (the other) that it does within itself by excluding itself from all that (other). If the "I" did not include, there would be nothing to sense; if it did not exclude, it would not be aware of anything as opposed to itself. Understood in this manner, "the otherness of [the Hegelian] *jeder* does not designate in any way a specular subject, the mirror image of the I, but precisely that which cannot have a thing in common with myself" (SS 98). The visual sensation of the watching "I" is thus an othered experience of pure outsideness (reminiscent of Rousseau's self), which founds no firm idea of "me" or "you", "this" or "that", and refuses to become settled in fixed patterns of cognitive reference. Hegelian syntheses falter, the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* overthrow whatever unity the previous philosophy might have endeavoured to establish, and the infamous end-of-art thesis confirms this all at once for de Man:

We can now assert that the two statements "art is for a thing of the past" and "the beautiful is the sensory manifestation of the idea" are in fact the same. To the extent that the paradigm for art is thought rather than perception, the sign rather than the symbol, writing rather than painting or music, it will also be memorization rather than recollection. As such, it belongs indeed to a past which, in Proust's words, could never be recaptured, *retrouvé*. Art is "of the past" in a radical sense, in that, like memorization, it leaves the interiorization of experience forever behind. It is of the past to the extent that it materially inscribes, and thus forever forgets, its ideal content. (SS 103)

As "a thing of the past" and being that "in a radical sense", art is at this point far more than removed from us by a hermeneutic discrepancy of intention, or a total temporal horizon, or an allegory of its

own unstoppable figurality. Rather than being *something* in isolation mediated by time, space, or unrevealed understanding, art – together with everything else cognisable – is *a thing*, the incomprehensibly material object (perceived) of natural being. In our attempts to come to terms with this supremely ironic thought, we forever lose sight *of* it, resist the insight *into* it, “forever forget” the idea of its meaning, and simply bestow it with meaning, hurried onwards in time automatically by the mnemonic signs encountered.⁵⁹ What de Man seems to think is that to be subject to this condition is only human; not to be aware of the necessity is just ignorant; to refuse to be aware of the inevitability (and do “something else” instead) is plain stupid.

In contrast, sheer immersion in the opposite, the acceptance of the idea of consciousness, brings along with it true critical power – in de Man’s words, the power of the slave. With this realisation, masters are usurped, authority assumed in its rightful place (the Hegelian slave), and “[t]he infrastructures of language, such as grammar and tropes, account for the occurrence of the poetic superstructure, such as genres, as the devices needed for their oppression” (“Hegel on the Sublime” AI 118). Ultimately, the dialectical exchange between the WORD and the word, the performing event and the constant referent, neither establishes certain results or goals to look forward to, nor does it hold up as a genuine exchange of values and/or meanings to the end. Instead, the historical (para)basis of the phenomenal question (of language) continuing to be asked guarantees it, in a radical triumph of irony, that the success of the shifting itself stays forever unverifiable and the mind desiring *jeux d’esprit* in the present remains ungrounded. And, says de Man, this irreducibility we can choose to appreciate, this non-ironic awareness in its actual turns, not the fictional, indulgent possibility of its perhaps being unnecessary for anything to be ordained or verified immediately.

⁵⁹ “[I]n Hegel... the progression from perception to thought depends crucially on the mental faculty of memorization... [which is] to be sharply distinguished from recollection and from imagination” (SS 101). In relation to this, it is interesting to see how de Man lets the Hegelian concept of “faculty” off easy but attacks it elsewhere, in Kant. One would think, as far as Hegel’s “mental faculty of memorization” is concerned, that surely learning to read by heart and without a single omission (following the lead of Rousseau’s Savoyard priest) has traces of Kantian judgment left to its (ritualistic) event: “To read poets or philosophers thoughtfully, on the level of their thought rather than of one’s or their desires, is to read them by rote. Every poem (*Gedicht*) is a *Lehrgedicht* [...] whose knowledge is forgotten as it is read” (“Hegel on the Sublime” AI 117).

Kant and Materiality

It has been said earlier in this thesis that Kant's philosophy relies on transcendental forms that legislate thinking *a priori* and in so doing provide the direction thinking *ought* to take despite being endowed with the ability to make voluntary judgments of any kind. The (perhaps happy) fate of mankind is thus pre-posed as a given which allows for individual differences but does not require the subject to submit either to dogmatic rationalism (such as Leibniz) or to skeptical relativism (Hume). This premise could be taken as a first place on which to confront Kant, and, sure enough, that is what de Man does. His reading of the *Critiques* and in particular the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,⁶⁰ was essential to his late views on what could remain of the (transcendental) possibility of our understanding after its break in language. The chance of legislating the cognitive direction of mankind without resorting to religious or natural scientific doctrine, and without falling back to an aesthetic or empirical resignation of any kind, must have seemed appealing to him. Having been driven by the very same concern all through his career, de Man's entrance to the area of Kant studies introduced the academic public to a staggering interpretation of another major European author. Almost as a sidenote to the occurrence, Friedrich Schiller ended up taking the blame for having got Kant so terribly wrong in the first place. But how exactly did it all unfold?

Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s de Man had been fighting somewhat different battles against somewhat different enemies (symbol, immediacy, metaphor), by the 1980s and the time of the project of *Aesthetics, Rhetoric, Ideology* (which was never completed and published as *Aesthetic Ideology* in its current extent only in 1996), de Man had identified the first and the last entity named in the title of that project as the final target(s) of his criticism. The opposition of poetics to hermeneutics was also subsumed under the same general aegis, as there was still the need to banish once and for all the hermeneutic traces of de Man's early work (left lingering, as we saw earlier, by

⁶⁰ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, transl. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Henceforth referred to as CPJ.

a number of the Heidegger essays from the 1960s). By coming up with the astonishing concept of “formal materialism” on the basis of his reading of Kant, de Man discovered there was no reason to leave anything lurking in the shadow. Working from the foundation (or “inscription”) of sheer linguistic principles, each and every thing could now be *accounted for*, even if not comprehensively explained or decided on.⁶¹ With such critical discovering the ideals of Enlightenment are taken to their furthest boundaries – a place where they eternally cave in on themselves all over again. What is notable here is that even after everything the rational urge to be able to account for each thing systematically is never given up, not even in de Man.

One linguistic principle de Man makes heavy use of towards the end of his career is the concept of “hypotyposis”. In his *A Kant Dictionary*, Howard Caygill defines the Kantian hypotyposis as something “in the guise of ‘presentation’ or the rendering of concepts and ideas in ‘terms of sense’”.⁶² It could well be construed as the underlying support upon which all communication, philosophy included, is founded: language. This linguistic “rendering” then further divides into the “schematic” and “symbolic” hypotyposes, of which, in Kant’s words, the first contains “direct” and the second “indirect representations of the concept”. Moreover, as the schemata do the presentation “demonstratively” and the symbolic “by means of an analogy” (CPJ 226) which acts as a “transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond” (CPJ 226-7), the gulf between the formal and the moral is once again spread out in front of us. For Kant, a schematic hypotyposis appears to be performing the transcendental function of bringing the pure concepts of understanding in line with their *a priori* principle. This happens directly and can be linguistically demonstrated.

A symbolic hypotyposis, on the other hand, is a more curious entity – one that, like art, indirectly transports any reflection upon it to “another, quite different concept”. In the essay “The

⁶¹ In a sense, de Man’s achievement goes even further than what has been called the “hyper-Kantian thought experiment” (Critchley, 85, see end of note) of Nietzsche, whose philosophy left the subject severed from God and morality in a world defined by a seething stammer of never-ending impulsion. Simon Critchley: *Continental Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶² Howard Caygill: *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) 231.

Epistemology of Metaphor”, de Man plays off Kant in dismissing Locke and Condillac’s related musings but finds himself in an interesting situation when he quotes the very same sentence that I did above, with the exception of his having used a different translation, as well as having highlighted the word “perhaps”. The interesting thing here is that de Man uses the “perhaps” not to wear down the authority of the symbolic hypotyposis (which, supposedly, is done anyway) but that of the schematic: when the impossibility of direct correspondence is “said, even in passing, to be ‘perhaps’ possible, the theory of a schematic hypotyposis loses much of its power of conviction”.⁶³ After all, how are we to keep a “clean category of epistemologically reliable tropes”⁶⁴ if the opposite device is able to perform the same function? Seizing on this observation,⁶⁵ de Man makes a Hegelian turn in which the loss of the symbolic is countered by a loss of signification which reduces the schematic hypotyposis to a “mere mnemotechnic device”, the user of which is always “guilty of reification” – which is just as bad (if not worse) as being guilty of the “aestheticism” that is the result of using the “purely symbolic”.⁶⁶ With a sleight of hand, it appears de Man manages to throw the entire schematism section of Kant’s plan into a dubious light; it now suggests itself as another “phenomenalized principle” which, erroneously and in vain, tries to keep the transcendental system intact.

What de Man overlooks though is that for Kant the schemata remain “in a *special* sense hard to grasp”⁶⁷ because they occur “*qua* activity”⁶⁸ and not *qua* what happens *in* the activity, while it is underlined that for the occurrence to come about “a mediating representation which has a sensible aspect”⁶⁹ is required. It is a de Manian rhetorical ploy which serves to emphasise the notion of each

⁶³ “The Epistemology of Metaphor” AI 47.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Loesberg: “Materialism and Aesthetics: Paul de Man’s ‘Aesthetic Ideology’” *diacritics* 27.4 (1997) 90.

⁶⁵ The argument is dubious in the sense of its sudden shift from the symbolic to the schematic hypotyposis. The failure of the imaginary symbol ‘perhaps’ ever directly to correspond to an intuition is turned into a systematic failure of its schematic counterpart, when the ‘perhaps’ could also refer to something symbolic which *our* understanding cannot ever have direct intuition of – not an infrequent reference in Kant. In this reading, the transcendental angle would hold good.

⁶⁶ “The Epistemology of Metaphor” AI 48.

⁶⁷ Sebastian Gardner: *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 170.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* 167.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* 169.

linguistic concept being of a thing which “is *not* an object of sensible intuition”⁷⁰ – just like all things are in the realm of such thinking. After the “elimination of every sensible condition” a “purely logical” meaning does remain but it does not signify the Kantian schematic “bare unity of the representations”;⁷¹ what remains is a bare scattering of representations, actually *and* transcendently. The schematic hypotyposis is a phenomenal judgment which betrays the formal, inscribed basis of language lying well beyond its reach. Such a difference can a “*vielleicht*”, Kant’s “perhaps”, allegedly make. From now on, de Man will be aware of “language” as his blanket defense term against just about any concept philosophy is able to fling at him, and this awareness is also the valorisation of literature (and critical theory) as a further logical advantage over its unwittingly sophistic counterpart.

De Man provides what is perhaps his most extreme formulation, and consequence, of this advantage in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant”. The essay starts up from the very basis of Kantian philosophy, the difference between transcendental and metaphysical principles (on the first of which Kant grounds his entire plan) and proceeds from there unstoppably. On the way, de Man first steamrolls the metaphysical, ideological, and the empirically phenomenal as false premises for critical philosophy, and then turns Kant’s own transcendental rationalism against him. He does this by showing how it fails endlessly in space (by the “geometry” of its null magnitude), in time (by the “music” of its “economy of profit and loss”), and in space *and* time (by the “astronomy” of its violent dynamicity), and, last, by revealing the failings as an *a priori* of formal language (non-schematic, non-symbolic language) with no constative dimension of performance. Afterwards, de Man stands at the last shore of redeeming the “arithmetic” of the transcendental judgment in itself. Enter the vision of the aesthetic imagination. For the remainder of “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant”, de Man discusses what has since been famous as the *Augenschein* passage in the third *Critique*, its significance interwoven with affects and disinterestedness, and its relation to Romantic

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 203.

⁷¹ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929) 186.

and post-Kantian philosophical figuration, before eventually retrieving the rhetoric of the body – formally disarticulated and mutilated to his own purposes by then. The overthrow of the entire Kantian enterprise happens almost on the side, as the “critical power of a transcendental philosophy undoes the very project of such a philosophy” (PMK 89), and it is by that event, true to the spirit of his latter writings, that de Man’s unique concept of what he calls Kantian “materialism” or “materiality” comes to dominate.

The so-called *Augenschein* passage appears in the third *Critique* in the “General remark on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments” concluding the Analytic of the Sublime. The scene with which we are there presented is one with a “sight of the starry heavens” above the “sight of the ocean” (CPJ 152) cut off from any teleological consideration or agreeable sensation one might glean from it. Whatever effect such a scene might have “for the benefit of the land” (CPJ 153) is stultified as either an “aesthetic” or “merely formal purposiveness” (CPJ 152) as all such benefits are voided by the “clear watery mirror” of the ocean “bounded only by the heavens”. The sublimity of the vision comes from the scene being seen “as the poets do” (CPJ 153), “merely as a broad, all-embracing vault”, and it is this “architectonic” vision which warrants the “pure aesthetic judgment” (CPJ 152) needed to complete the transcendental plan. Kant then juxtaposes “the human figure” in similar terms of sublimity, as well, by severing the body from any kind of an organic end where “all its members exist for determining grounds of our judgment” (CPJ 153), thus elevating mind over matter.⁷² Moreover, in accompanying terms of affect, the viewing of the sublime scene might come with the negative satisfaction of “horror” and “astonishment” were it not for the aesthetic imagination which immediately “sacrifices” its own sensible freedom to acquire the reason of “an enlargement and power which is greater” than that which it deprives itself of. In “view of the safety” in which the looker then “knows himself to be”, the scene is felt in “calmness” (CPJ 152),

⁷² Towards the end of the “General remark” Kant interestingly somewhat relents in his de-elevation of the body by saying that for “the promotion or inhibition of the powers of life”, consciousness of “the mind for itself” is not enough. Instead, such “hindrances or promotions must be sought outside it, though in the human being itself, hence *in combination* with his body” (CPJ 159, my emphasis). This thought could provide a different lead for studying Kant.

which, true to the transcendental system, is actually “antecedent” to all other feelings because it is the only one that shows the “object of a pure and unconditioned intellectual satisfaction” as the “moral law in all its power” (CPJ 153). Since “every affect is blind”, the only transcendently sublime mood⁷³ is “affectlessness (*apatheia, phlegma in significatu bono*)”, and it is then “through the dominion that reason exercises over sensibility” (CPJ 154) that the aesthetic judgment of the affectless imagination can be declared *a priori* valid. The formal, non-teleological *Augenschein* is thus claimed for the “intrinsically purposive (moral) good” (CPJ 153) towards which the Kantian sublime is geared. However, it is precisely here that de Man locates the final breaking point of his transcendental philosophy.

De Man’s take on this point has been an inspiration for quite some study up until this day, and the continued fascination among academics means it is far from being an exhausted source. Basically, the de Manian reading of the Kantian *Augenschein* revises it radically to collapse the possibility of any kind of transcendentalisation which would validate the concept of aesthetic judgment as anything other than a phenomenal, ideologised, metaphysical principle which philosophy attempts to hide under a hermeneutic guise of transcendental idealism. The formal thrust of the system betrays its own intent at critical points and leaves it irretrievably adrift from its own announced aspirations. The locations of these points, however, need some mapping. At the “architectonic” vision, de Man is happy to see as Kant appears to (or “as the poets do”) – breaking and severing each single facet of the scene (and, later on, the body) from one another, leaving the looker with nothing but how the view “turns out to be completely dis-junct from any mind whatsoever”, only with what Andrzej Warminski has called “the pure optics of what the *Augenschein* shows or what only meets the eye”.⁷⁴ In this respect, de Man’s critique in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” proceeds mercilessly through the formal scene to critical rulings such as “[n]o mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven” (PMK 82) which,

⁷³ “Mood” here understood as a state of affectivity in duration.

⁷⁴ Andrzej Warminski: “‘As the Poets Do It’: On the Material Sublime” *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* Tom Cohen et al. (eds.) (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 16.

supported by Kant's figure of the wild man from the *Logik* who does not see prior to the concept (of the "dwelling"), "but merely sees" (PMK 81), forever precludes the possibility of any "figuralization or symbolization by an act of judgment" in this "flat, third-person world" (PMK 82). At the architectonic vault, at this sky and sea "devoid of any suggestion of depth", the only "thing" we are left with is the "formal mathematization or geometrization" of the scene – and the only response, the "only word that comes to mind is that of a *material* vision" (PMK 83). The deep (Romantic) worlds of Schiller, Heidegger, and the young Hegelians, among others, fail this "material" vision immediately, and so do Rousseau's late reveries reflected off the surface of natural things and turned into a nostalgic sentiment of memory and vision. In Kant, instead of any pathetic fantasy, one finds a "formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience" (PMK 83), and that radically changes the face of critical theory for good.

It should, however, be noted that at this point de Man has not yet really turned the material vision *against* Kant – only its empirical incommensurability with the aesthetic judgment of the sublime has been implied. It can therefore be argued it is not materiality *in itself* that collapses the Kantian plan; it is not the "material trace or the material inscription that would be the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the text 'itself'"⁷⁵ that short-circuits the system, because this condition (or schema) can be transcendently *contained*. This is an aspect which I want to emphasise significantly because it allows a view on the question of language which de Man's ruthless criticism only seems to undermine (as becomes clear in his case against Schiller which I will not go into in detail here). If it is true that de Man's deconstruction of the total Kantian plan, and the legacy of the "formal materialist" theory left behind by him, suggests a perpetual linguistic disruption embodied in the phenomenised *Augenschein* scene which in itself is not enough ultimately to break the pure aesthetic judgment of the transcendental system (even if people

⁷⁵ *ibid.* 28.

like Warminski and Marc W. Redfield would argue otherwise⁷⁶), the realisation follows that the scene, no matter how allegorically it were read, is due to be contained by that very reading. When not being aesthetically judged and transformed into its own phenomenal cognition, the concept of formal materialism and its senseless performativity survives. The real world makes do with the philosophy and the entities caught within it are guaranteed their spectral afterlife. If they were not, they would never be seen or spoken about again. As a result, when conceived along these lines, the inquiry strings together questions about sensory perception which de Man reduces to taken-for-granted tokens of blank nature and dissimulates as actual experience which would only (cognitively) refer us somewhere else rather than (sensately) affect us on the spot.⁷⁷ The last part of “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” makes this point very clear but remains permeated with its own aesthetic residue which makes the baleful imagery possible. This even the late de Man cannot do away with, here or elsewhere, and he claims nothing else. But because there still is a claim, a very tangible one, which we can relate to and attempt to understand, there is a containing power in play as well. In other words, there is something that is able to bring de Man in line with Kant and Hegel and all the different discourses of human activity. The critical pursuing of this view, however, does not *mean* that deconstruction, his or someone else’s, would in effect be false, of any author at any time, quite the opposite in fact. It is just that, as part of the question of language, there is something in the nature of meaning itself (as sensed experience) that de Manian theory in conclusion refuses to express.

⁷⁶ Warminski might counter with the idea of an “emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition” (ibid. 28) which characterises the senseless performativity of formal materialism broken free of all tropological constraints, and Redfield might point out that “the condition of signification for de Man is that signification be undecidable” (44, see end of note). However, the very fact that Warminski can locate an “emergence” and Redfield a “condition of signification” shows them as coming off short. Marc W. Redfield: “Humanizing de Man” *diacritics* 19.2 (1989).

⁷⁷ Nigel Mapp wonderfully pins down this de Manian tendency when, in discussing de Man’s criticism of Andrew Marvell’s poetry, he finds him “bleaching the chlorophyll from Marvell’s reflective consciousness” (131, see end of note) by reducing the colour green in the poems into an instant metaphor. Nigel Mapp: *Critical Disenchantment: Rhetoric and Ideology in Paul de Man*, Ph. D. Thesis (Cardiff: University College of Cardiff, 2002).

6. Conclusion

Having come to this point, it is not the simplest or most straightforward of tasks to recapitulate and provide judgments of the discussion in this thesis. As a matter of fact, at times it can have been tricky even to be quite certain what exactly it has been that the claims and critical analyses have been arguing about their subject matter and whose voice it has been speaking in a given instance. This, however, should not be considered as a fatal weakness or shortcoming of the work done but rather as a welcome difficulty and an inevitability nonetheless; part of the weight of the argument and the point made, both of de Manian criticism and the attempted continuation of critical deconstruction, demands that no thinking (and reading) about (and in) language be made too simple. To be sure, this should not be seen as a wanton justification of intentional obscurity or haphazard argumentation either. Instead, the very core of the thesis has been formed around a very clear set of research questions: What is the break of Paul de Man? Where does his thinking come from and what does it lead up to? And, in practice, what does the study of this kind of question mean for literary theory and critical thinking in general? The intuition is that de Man does think differently than most but yet not all that differently; to get to grips with the idea, however, one needs to follow him the hard way and at times appear as outrageous (and dramatic) as he does. Only then can the questioning at hand be awarded the appreciation it deserves, and *only then* can the lesson learned be understood in any way adequately. Mere cataloguing of methods and statements done with this theoretical dispensation towards that predetermined purpose would be a doublecrossing of the original intention, and it would merely perpetuate the false understanding of the error of linguistic referentiality so distasteful to – but also cherished by – de Man. Obviously there was no escape out of it for him either, as this thesis has striven to show in ways more than one (and in more than de Man's own thinking appears to be aware of), and it is the duty of this concluding chapter to run all these roads back together.

From the re-asking of the original question of language to the critical deconstructions of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Heidegger, Hölderlin, Rousseau, Hegel, and Kant, in their various linguistic forms and literary valorisations, I here mirror the previous sections and reflect them onto a continuous movement which spans Paul de Man's entire academic career. In doing this, the objective is to show that everything said (and surreptitiously hinted at) has actually served a single focus and an important discovery to begin with; that of language as something even more elusive and powerful a phenomenon than commonly assumed still in our day. The project of understanding this is still in the docks and perhaps always will be – whenever we think it is going to be different in the future with the next generations we just repeat the same old mistake. It is a predicament, it cannot be denied, but it is a hand-wringing, tear-jerking state of affairs or a hateful outburst of critical elitism only for those who seek to emaciate experience by reducing it to a signifier easily exchangeable for another in a market of senseless hopes and dreams which refuse to become aware of their own reality. The road ahead is opened up to lead (or not to lead?) somewhere else just by resisting the refusal.

Recap: The Question of Language

The main object of knowledge becomes the knowledge of its failure. Not of its limits; that would be a banal attitude. The limitation of knowledge is total, in simple as well as in complex problems, for that limitation is inscribed in the very constitution of knowledge, colors its every activity, great or small. But the lucid mind can know its own subjectivity, precisely at the point where subjectivity destroys its functioning. It recognizes that its life consists in an endless series of failures of this order, and it finds that it retains the power to take stock of them all. This power is asserted, thanks to an amazing change of sign, as a positive force; just when the mind falls into the despair of its impotence, it regains all its elasticity in perceiving this very impotence.⁷⁸

It has been constantly argued in the course of this thesis that Paul de Man's theory and thought is throughout his career, in varying forms of expression, sustained by the need to provide an answer to one question only, the question of language. In a tangible way, against all his explicit arguments,

⁷⁸ "Montaigne and Transcendence" (1953), translated by Richard Howard. CW 7.

that question then becomes the idiosyncratic tool and the method of his criticism. The underlying intention, however, does not appear so much heuristic (consciously devised towards a solution, that is) as it does plain inevitable. But how does this happen? Certainly not in any simple way. For all that can be said of him, and what he may be accused of, de Man cannot be blamed for writing in bad faith: for all intents and purposes, he *does* find in everything he reads the very thing then related to us. In that form – it cannot be denied – he truly is a subjective reader, one intending to express his own understanding. But that, in turn, does not imply a wild relativism which would make his insights about the nature of language (and literature) into something that could be happily overlooked or shrugged off without risk. There is no simple way of neglecting Paul de Man's thinking because *that kind of thinking applies to all of us*. At its core, that is its function. In actuality, de Man never speaks about isolated incidents or case study curiosities; he always teaches his lesson, like Nietzsche, “in the most general sense possible”.⁷⁹ This is not part of his outward oeuvre though; it looks like he is “just” studying individual authors, one after another. But who does not do this exactly? Which philosopher humanist does not want to speak about things and their ultimate nature in general? As far as bad faith goes, to claim otherwise would be a glaring instance of precisely that. And, as it turns out, the same could be said of anyone, humanist or not. We want things to work, we want to make them work, plumber or prophet all the same. But there is always a question prior to that very desire: *Why* do things not work then, why are we constantly forced to think about them?

This sensation of forcing, together with the “endless series of failures” that are the manifestations of its order, is Paul de Man's sole concern at all points. A “lucid mind” is needed to appreciate its significance. By the power of being able to account for the events and phenomena involved, “thanks to an amazing change of sign”, positive experience is in the end rescued from the (potentially dangerous) errors and entanglements of figural delusions. Early or late de Man, the

⁷⁹ “Literary History and Literary Modernity” BI 151.

Montaigne of (post)modernity, never says anything of the kind out loud in the course of his career; that would be the logical betraying of it. In this way, he forever pre-empts his own writing and any “message” gained from the reading of the writing, except, paradoxically, the way of reading itself. That is the only lesson to be taken home here: reading, and particularly close reading, is a vital skill, considered from any point of view or cognitive angle. As a haunted phenomenon, it teaches by not teaching while it makes one aware of things. That is its most valuable gift: making the reader aware of things and their relations involved in the cognitive event, any moment that takes place. No-thing is to be taken for granted except that some-thing is happening, and happening to “me”. As one of the greatest joys to be experienced, the broken nature of human understanding is in fact a burden only to those who seek to stop asking. That is, those who seek to make things die. In a further twist of irony, against the grain of his nihilistic rhetoric, de Man paradoxically finds immortality by placing the figure in the “madness of words”⁸⁰ which never lets anything die. Hence, in effect, also his antagonists keep playing his game, one after another scoring own goals by way of badly taken theoretical set-pieces. Their efforts are not intended as “an amazing change of sign” which powers human existence as it occurs but as a desperate cry against change and the wonder of bewilderment in general. They scream for the death of thinking born out of the fear of that very death.

However, before getting carried away with this portrait-painting, two things need to be recalled immediately. First of all, none of this rhetorical ascribing of intellectual qualities is exclusive to de Man but to the heritage of thinking as a whole. It is exclusive to nothing but our continued efforts to “think better”. Differences between individuals emerge only in particular instances; it is only the situations that change. The question stays the same but different people are not all the same, no matter what their “common voice” was claimed to be. This thought, however, neither effects absolute relativism (because the thinking of that is a relativistic thought in itself) nor does it justify the oppression of one over another (as was the wish of Rousseau). Critical deconstruction shows the

⁸⁰ “Shelley Disfigured” RR 122.

ludicrousness of these claims, much as it shows the same of all claims made in the name of language. In their stead, it “shows” the sameness of the underlying tension, the “cosmic vibration” of all things existing to begin with. But that is a ludicrous way of saying it, potentially even dangerous if the “vibration” ceases to pose as a question and becomes a New Age object of thought for its own sake. The danger is always that of stopping to think.

The second thing to be recalled immediately is precisely that; the thinking of Paul de Man should never turn into a “Paul de Man” which says this about that thing, and it should never turn into an empowering figure of how to do things, even if the opposite – do not do things like that – would be just as untrue. Instead, the tension sensed in the reading (event) is all that matters; the writing itself is not intended to *empower* any cognitive figuration, it just plain *powers* it. That is to say, the writing does not project itself upon something else in advance; it just occurs, in full material reality. That is the experience of it and about as real as experience ever gets, from any point of view, through any “amazing change of sign”. How to think this then, how to interpret its enthusiastic lesson? To this there is no answer, only the question.

Early in his career, the former chemistry and civil engineering student de Man spends a lot of time in trying to learn how a preference towards material reality (as opposed to abstract knowing) comes about in poetic form in the works of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. As has been argued, the laboratory mindset which conducts these investigations never lets go of the advance premise which holds that the natural object (that is, the thing of reality which intuits the “why”) is superior to its form in cognition (the perceived result of the original intuition, that is, the empirical “what” understood through the presenting “how”); and this is the constant undertone of all of de Man’s critical labour. From French symbolism back to its Romantic origins in German Idealism and elsewhere, and onwards to the unchecked currents of 20th-century thought, the natural object never surrenders its claim as a primary component of human awareness. Hegelian sense certainty charts the progression of this claim in the history of Western thinking in the name of the Spirit, but for de

Man the naming is one step too far; up to that point he appears to follow in Hegel's footsteps quite contently. After it, which is in a way the finishing line of "common sense" thinking and pragmatist politics (de Man nowhere denies the real existence and applicability of these concepts), things start to look different. When all the isms, logics and sophies of the world take over (including the eventual metaphysics and linguistic controlledness of Hegelian idealism) in an attempt to legislate the "how" of the "why" beyond the testable line of material reality, the de Manian radar is alerted. For him, the awareness of the sound and the appearance of the signs involved *must* become purely linguistic at the moment of this very occurrence or else run the risk of becoming dangerous.

Indeed, even if logically the signs are then linguistic at other moments too (common sense and real life events), there the awareness of them being that is not very important (or interesting in actuality) because, as such, they involve no danger to thought. These moments are just to be taken care of, like physical needs; to stay confused or hallucinate over them is an unnecessary fantasy. In consequence, this means that a totalising ideology is to de Man just as anathema as a real life madness is, and so it does not show great critical verve to keep blaming him for the opposite. The early deconstructions (although not dubbed that theoretically) of Baudelaire and Mallarmé already show this; both of the poets desire to sacrifice something (Baudelaire consciousness and Mallarmé natural objects) in order to receive something else (poetic being, that is) but in the end both of them remain unable to reconcile their desire with anything because actually it is the desire that is all they (will) ever have. They reach no completion beyond the threshold of the material reality being sensed but neither can they remain satisfied without attempting to go there. The world is just as strange and absurd as it can be corrupt and jaded; and no knowing differently from the commonplace suffices to redeem it. Paul de Man's formal intention is to show how this thought can be tested and literature provides the laboratory.

One of my main arguments has then been that this intention fails to be aware of its own form while the testing is being carried out. This, in turn, leads to the perpetuation of exactly the same

kind of blindness and resistance of thinking that de Man criticises in others, especially the “villains” of the Western canon: Heidegger, Schiller, Nietzsche, the misreaders of Rousseau, and more. Sure enough, in the form of paradoxical thesis statements, de Man does confess to us the precariousness of his own position more often than he does not.⁸¹ Yet he is able, motivated by his own theory, to hide it in rhetorical pathos; it looks as if he is actually able to prove his theoretical point by making claims about not being able to make a claim. Idiomatically, this is like having one’s cake and eating it too. And, in addition, going that way is a self-circuitous road in any case; it just forever returns to where it really never left to begin with. That is the wayward gift of reading, the endowment of there being awareness, and for that de Man has to be given credit. Instead, what does need the attention of the critical eye about his writings is the (erratic) failure to be aware of that writing’s own form. For even if there is argued-for kind of irony in de Man’s relation to himself, there is none of that in his valorising of other thinkers’ awarenesses (the good guys such as Hölderlin, Rousseau, Hegel, and Kant) over those of the others (the bad guys). This discovery already throws most of his formulations about the ultimate nature of human awareness (the linguistic predicament based on the premise of the superiority of natural being) into a dubious light; the obscure non-irony of the valorising itself comes to contrast the harsh lucidity of the criticism. The advocate might respond to this by referring back to the “concept” of radical undecidability spoken for by de Man and say that such irreducible contrast is actually necessary for “undecidability” to keep on functioning;⁸² it might even be said that, on the surface of it, the shadow of the non-irony in fact redeems the light of the theory. But, in effect, that then destroys the “theory” and all traces of “undecidability”; there is

⁸¹ One of de Man’s most famous paradoxes states that “[t]he only literal statement that says what it means to say is the assertion that there can be no literal statements” (“The Rhetoric of Blindness” BI 133), while another claims that “[e]verything written has to be read and every reading is susceptible of logical verification, but the logic that established the need for verification is itself unverifiable and therefore unfounded in its claim to truth” (“Allegory (*Julie*)” AR 202). Many questions about fact and fiction and the desire for truth (see also footnote 48) obviously emerge in the wake of such sentiments.

⁸² Martin McQuillan has expressed the fact of such irreducibility by saying that, for de Man, what remains “irreducible to each text” (95, see end of note), philosophical or otherwise, is the “material event of its disarticulation” (95-6) which comes in the wake of “a rhetorical reading of a text [which] is never sufficient in itself to account for a text” (95). Thus, in transposing reading to real life, the contrasting line between “reading” and “real life” remains forever unknown yet necessary in the everyday. Martin McQuillan: *Paul de Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

nothing that ever anywhere “redeems” anything linguistic in any figural interplay. This is (or should be, if read correctly) the sheer de Manian logic.

As a result, the emergence of the breaking system from somewhere beyond which transcends (or falls short of) the necessary non-irony finally breaks itself, as well. Left without form into the brute becoming of its multiple structure, it now speaks nothing about anything anymore. It says nothing about the work of any author whatsoever and it touches on no thought whatsoever. It knows no subject or self at the heart of anything. It breaks nothing except the dialectical spectre of itself and it articulates nothing. In essence, we know nothing about it and, epistemologically, it does not matter in the slightest. Even these lines say nothing about it, and, perhaps worst of all, *it does not write anything about anything and it says nothing about reading it*. It is not a warning song, a temporal mediation of human mortality, a dramatic machine-like alienation, or a material vision-inscription. Least of all is it an event of any kind: the palpability of historic occurrence is annulled as all pathos of anything ever one-time existing anywhere is erased, time and memory included. Against this stunning logic, it will not matter at all if one against all odds continued to discover thus:

The statement of pathos, that it is in itself the form of meaningfulness, an unmediated bodying forth, is prone to the undecidability of all textual statements. Such moments are also possibly figural, not known to be literal or empty fictional.⁸³

Such pathetic undecidability as drives de Manian thinking on (as exposed in the quote above) is bound to remain crystallised within its own figurality because, in the end, that figurality is *the only thing external to it*. Internally, the thinking does not need it, but it makes use of the phenomenon out of a necessity it has itself established, out of the containing assumption that *first there are things out there, and only secondly there is awareness of them*. The old inside/outside model remains in effect after all, even if in an intrauterine form, by feeding on the familiar Enlightenment model taken to its extreme and emptied out of substantial content. From this it follows that there is no refuting of the logic within the same model armed by any similarly spawned content, and that is why mere

⁸³ Mapp 191.

antagonism, or mere rebellion, will not do. And so, ultimately, should something radically different be said, it will emerge through a different logic, a myth that will not disallow another one.

Which means, as de Man must have known, that the superiority of natural being as a premise (that breaks and lets break) is finally as flawed as the next first principle to begin with. The truth discovered in the de Manian laboratory *is* “true”, but it comes into being in the same way any other alleged truth does. The reason that this particular testing appears to hold the advantage over its counterparts results from the more careful method. But that is the keyword then, it *appears* to, and of this sensible experience in itself, of the critical testing and the aesthetic enjoying of its transactions, de Man refuses to speak. Instead, he rushes on to think the next disrupted referentiality, to provide us with ghostly insights which may only heighten our awareness of the linguistic predicament that defines us. But should we take the risk and decide to understand reality differently, in the tangible form, then human awareness would not be the becoming of things-in-reality anymore but the variant form of thinking. And this form would not be the form *of* the things but (the) form that holds and contains them, in a manner revisiting the Heideggerian “open”, with all the manifestations of its multiple structure forever making it up. It would be the sensate and material reality of the form that our thinking is; not *in* the world, but *as* the world. No ideological or other precritical slants would need to guide our minds because they would have been already forgotten except for the ongoing awareness of their question(s). The weight of the argument in this thesis, by instance of its variations, has constantly leaned in this direction. This has not belittled Paul de Man in any way, rather the opposite, but neither has it presented an insight (un)happily overlooked in his favour or shrugged off without risk just because the thinking was uninteresting or restricted to a certain author. There has been no simple way of neglecting the formal insight because *this kind of thinking (as form) applies to all of us*, Paul de Man included. If it did not, and his theory were ultimately in line with its own logic, there would be no understanding him at all, no reading lessons learned, no ires aroused. That these things *are* possible and *have* happened, shows that there

is something else at work here than sheer disrupted existence; the unbroken “why” of the questioning proves it; the word from the pen of another author expresses it. Literature knows this full well, provided it is not forced to deny it or, perhaps worse, solved to endorse it. That the “why” can have being after everything, containing both nature and cognition, is the total mark of its undying mythicity.

What is myth, then, in the real world, and how may we think it without being fatally trapped by its figural machinations de Man time after time warns us about? We do, right here in the flesh every day; it is as complex as that. And this is not (only) a commonsense conclusion as it is deeply inherent to art. Hölderlin saw it floating freely in the world, which might have tested him too much, while Rousseau despaired with just watching the manifested forms, to name but two instances. Poetic tendencies are needed for the feeling, for learning the lesson of the questioning. Such thinking might be audaciously difficult but “it” does help us to move on, beckoned somewhere else, some other time. What the poets know, the critics show, and the experiencer senses it in the bones.

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APPENDIX

“Wie wenn am Feiertage...”

Wie wenn am Feiertage, das Feld zu sehn,
 Ein Landmann geht, des Morgens, wenn
 Aus heißer Nacht die kühlenden Blitze fielen
 Die ganze Zeit und fern noch tönet der Donner,
 In sein Gestade wieder tritt der Strom, 5
 Und frisch der Boden grünt
 Und von des Himmels erfreuendem Regen
 Der Weinstock trauft und glänzend
 In stiller Sonne stehn die Bäume des Haines:

So stehn sie unter günstiger Witterung, 10
 Sie die kein Meister allein, die wunderbar
 Allgegenwärtig erzieht in leichtem Umfängen
 Die mächtige, die göttlichschöne Natur.
 Drum wenn zu schlafen sie scheint zu Zeiten des Jahrs
 Am Himmel oder unter den Pflanzen oder den Völkern 15
 So trauert der Dichter Angesicht auch,
 Sie scheinen allein zu seyn, doch ahnen sie immer.
 Denn ahnend ruhet sie selbst auch.

Jetzt aber tagts! Ich harrt und sah es kommen,
 Und was ich sah, das Heilige sei mein Wort. 20
 Denn sie, sie selbst, die älter denn die Zeiten
 Und über die Götter des Abends und Orients ist,
 Die Natur ist jetzt mit Waffenklang erwacht,
 Und hoch vom Aether bis zum Abgrund nieder
 Nach festem Gesetze, wie einst, aus heiligem Chaos gezeugt, 25
 Fühlt neu die Begeisterung sich,
 Die Allerschaffende, wieder.

Und wie im Aug' ein Feuer dem Manne glänzt,
 Wenn hohes er entwarf; so ist 30
 Von neuem an den Zeichen, den Taten der Welt jetzt
 Ein Feuer angezündet in Seelen der Dichter.
 Und was zuvor geschah, doch kaum gefühlt,
 Ist offenbar erst jetzt,
 Und die uns lächelnd den Acker gebautet,
 In Knechtsgestalt, sie sind erkannt, 35
 Die Allebendigen, die Kräfte der Götter.

Erfragst du sie? im Liede wehet ihr Geist
 Wenn es der Sonne des Tags und warmer Erd
 Entwächst, und Wettern, die in der Luft, und andern
 Die vorbereiteter in Tiefen der Zeit, 40

Und deutungsvoller, und vernehmlicher uns
 Hinwandeln zwischen Himmel und Erd und unter den Völkern
 Des gemeinsamen Geistes Gedanken sind,
 Still endend in der Seele des Dichters,

Daß schnellbetroffen sie, Unendlichem 45
 Bekannt seit langer Zeit, von Erinnerung
 Erbebt, und ihr, von heiligem Strahl entzündet,
 Die Frucht in Liebe geboren, der Götter und Menschen Werk
 Der Gesang, damit er beiden zeuge, glückt.
 So fiel, wie Dichter sagen, da sie sichtbar 50
 Den Gott zu sehen begehrte, sein Blitz auf Semeles Haus
 Und die göttlichgetroffene gebar,
 Die Frucht des Gewitters, den heiligen Bacchus.

Und daher trinken himmlisches Feuer jetzt
 Die Erdensöhne ohne Gefahr. 55
 Doch uns gebührt es, unter Gottes Gewittern,
 Ihr Dichter! mit entblößtem Haupte zu stehen,
 Des Vaters Strahl, ihn selbst, mit eigener Hand
 Zu fassen und dem Volk ins Lied
 Gehüllt die himmlische Gabe zu reichen. 60
 Denn sind nur reinen Herzens,
 Wie Kinder, wir, sind schuldlos unsere Hände,

Des Vaters Strahl, der reine, versengt es nicht
 Und tieferschüttet, die Leiden des Stärkeren
 Mitleidend, bleibt in den hochherstürzenden Stürmen 65
 Des Gottes, wenn er nahet, das Herz doch fest.
 Doch weh mir, wenn von

Weh mir!

Und sag ich gleich,

Ich sei genaht, die Himmlischen zu schauen, 70
 Sie selbst, sie werfen mich tief unter die Lebenden,
 Den falschen Priester, ins Dunkel, daß ich
 Das warnende Lied den Gelehrigen singe,
 Dort