

Literary Theory Today

Edited by PETER COLLIER
and HELGA GEYER-RYAN

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Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism

I

Literary and cultural theory are in ferment today because literature and culture themselves appear threatened in our 'postmodern' age, a post-industrial age of instantaneous electronic communications, where the privileged status of the text and the coherence of cultural activity are increasingly destabilized. Jean-François Lyotard has described this world (too indulgently, perhaps) in *The Postmodern Condition*. But although it could be argued that this 'postmodern' ideology is itself a product of the anarchic liberalism of the new right, disguising prescription as description when it declares modernism to be played out and artistic experimentation and ideological critique outdated, one has to admit that there is little virtue in trying to revive an idealized past. Moreover, the crisis of culture and its theory indicate above all the precarious state of what Habermas has called 'the project of modernity', thus threatening the most vital discourses of legitimation and critique which we have inherited from the European Enlightenment. Even in the recent past, cultural discourse seemed regulated by what Lyotard calls 'grand narratives', which included the reassuringly subversive discourses of twentieth-century modernism – formalism, marxism, psychoanalysis. The arguments of Saussure, Marx and Freud initially inspired the most acute languages of modern literary criticism, seemingly able to make the poem or the novel totally explicable by an all-powerful theory. But our late twentieth-century world has seen these originary, totalizing theories called into question and their unquestioning exponents lose their authority. Perhaps the very sophistication of their later practitioners, cutting the theories loose from their original, specific militancy, has weakened their claim to reveal hidden meaning. Roland Barthes moved from complex systems of coded semiotic meaning to a position of apparently capricious textual enjoyment; Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser argued that the ideology expressed by a text was a practice largely independent of the socio-

economic infrastructure; Lacan, moving beyond Freud's study of the process whereby the artist unwittingly impressed his own symbolic meaning into the work of art, found that there was no essential self behind the shifting mental hall of mirrors which constituted the 'subject' of thought and discourse.

The claims of criticism based on such universal and holistic premises, then, have come to seem increasingly 'perverse', and have been radically challenged by less totalizing movements like 'deconstruction', 'new historicism', or 'feminism', which are as partisan in their way as the 'grand narratives', but which acknowledge and assume their own partial character. There is none the less much continuity – deconstruction, for instance, derives its model of close reading from formalism, its ideological demystification from marxism, and its hermeneutic reversal from psychoanalysis. So it seems to be possible to acknowledge the strength of Lyotard's postmodern analysis, agreeing that there are no transcendental foundations of knowledge, no privileged viewpoints – and yet not feel bound passively to lament the loss of 'the project of modernity' and the lack of any effective modern critique, or actively to connive at the creation of a world where all cultural activity might be judged equally meaningful or meaningless. Thus the authors of the essays in this volume all acknowledge the crisis in literary and cultural theory, but they all suggest ways of working through and beyond it.

Even a postmodern critic like Lyotard does in fact assume the powers of critical discourse, while refusing to elaborate any 'narrative' of its legitimization. And although the dominant current of poststructuralist criticism today, deconstruction, eschews legitimization, since it pursues a negative hermeneutics, showing in every author studied a self-contradictory discourse, and since it follows no principle other than the quest for 'difference/deferment' (rejecting, as metaphysical illusion, any originary discursive meaning inscribed within writing, or any founding humanist significance), its representatives have none the less in practice directed their theories towards the dissection and subversion of the powerful symbolic institutions which support the status quo. However, what these dismantlers of ideology and symbolic domination still tend to avoid is a theoretical rationale, for fear of complicity with the very metaphysics and essences which they have attacked not only for being false but also for supporting an oppressive social hegemony. In his post-Marxian *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno already tries to banish transcendental aesthetics from his appreciation of the fragmented, negative artifacts of his archetypal modernist artists, Beckett, Kafka and Celan. Beckett's work, for instance, is designated as a tendentiously silent artistic act of resistance to the meliorative project of bourgeois aesthetics. And Derrida, the philosopher who haunts all poststructuralist criticism, has found a blind spot vitiating the conscious project of every philosopher and writer he has discussed, from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Rousseau to Freud.

Yet a series of recent articles and books has revealed the cruel paradox which lies at the heart of this deconstructive purism. The pro-Nazi stances

of Heidegger and Paul de Man, both writers who had seemed dauntingly, quintessentially independent, have been experienced retrospectively as catastrophic. Whereas the right-wing politics of Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Lewis, not to mention Marinetti, Céline or Gottfried Benn, have long been the subject of critical discrimination between degrees and kinds of commitment in expression and action, Heidegger and de Man were somehow assumed to have deactivated the crude relation of philosophy and literature to personality and society, making their play of argument sublimely inclusive of, yet untouched by, contingency. So that the shock was the greater when, at the height of the sway of American deconstruction (when it appeared to have subsumed the other languages of criticism into its negative hermeneutics), there was a return of the repressed voice of its political and philosophical 'other'. Indeed, in the crisis unleashed by the revelation of Paul de Man's wartime collaboration, the political repressed resurfaced in its most grotesquely 'uncanny' form, as fascism. For the languages of modern criticism, even in their poststructuralist forms, supposed at least a negative principle behind their critical practice: rejecting the dangerously simplistic languages of fascism – racism and imperialism, patriarchy and coercive identity, strictly monological or binary thinking, utilitarian rationality. Yet one advantage of the crisis is that now, the history of modern literary theory has to be scrutinized and its unresolved questions used to rethink the future.

For these reasons Barbara Johnson's critical review of Paul de Man and the politics of deconstruction, which urges a reinterpretation of the political mistakes and misconstruals of the founder of American deconstruction, opens this book's reassessment of modern literary theory. It exemplifies a crucial conjuncture in the postwar history of literary theory. Johnson rejects the charge that deconstruction must lead to a total uncertainty of language and ideology, and shows how an analysis of de Man's wartime collaborationist writings, and of their suppression, just like Schiller's denial of violence in Kant's aesthetics, can teach us the need to admit the political parameter into literary theory.

The separation of the literary text from society and with it the repression of the problems of interpretation and literary value are discussed by Peter Bürger in a critique of Pierre Bourdieu, whose authoritative *Distinction* shows up the social strategies and identifications disguised behind positions of aesthetic taste and judgement. Bürger admits that all criteria of evaluation are historically limited, although he is suspicious of Adorno's tendency to interpret the innovations of the artistic avant-garde as manifestations of an objective development of the artistic material. For Bürger it is vital to assert the continuing possibility of differentiating aesthetic values against what he sees as a pessimistic reduction by Bourdieu of cultural consumption to social determinism, where literature and culture are considered primarily as an apparatus for the distribution of cultural 'capital' and social distinction.

The philosophical implications of both Barbara Johnson's revision of deconstruction, and Bürger's challenge to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, are explored in Albrecht Wellmer's analysis of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a

concept of reason conscious of the seductive alliance between the power of critique and the temptation of metaphysics. Despite Adorno's attempt to replace Kant's faculty of reason, judged metaphysical, with concrete artistic practice, Wellmer argues that the theories of Derrida show that Adorno himself was tempted to invest aesthetics with metaphysical presence.

In fact, the essays by Johnson, Bürger and Wellmer, which constitute Part I of this book, form the cornerstones of our field of investigation: the repositioning of critical practice after the misadventures of theory, once its lingering metaphysical assumptions (as to truth, value, use) and its discursive integrity (seeking a pure position from which to approach other positions) had been called into question. Their essays tackle the extremes of political collusion, the collapse of aesthetic values, and philosophical nihilism, which seem to threaten the deconstructive position. All three argue that critique is still possible despite the crisis but that it can only advance by taking its very difficulties as the starting point of its analyses.

II

The paramount importance of history in shaping, determining and legitimizing our perception and interpretation of works of art, and creating an archeology of texts from the past, is the theme of the second part of our book. Both Hans Robert Jauss and Stephen Greenblatt are concerned with the dialectical process which establishes relations of continuity and/or difference between past and present. Jauss's 'reception theory' takes as its starting point the context within which commentators on the Bible established different interpretative strategies, according to whether they saw themselves retrieving original meaning, recording accreted significance, or reinterpreting in the light of new situations. Jauss moves in the last analysis to emphasize the historical continuity of the activity of interpretation, despite the shifts of content and context emphasized by reception theory, where the parameters of meaning are displaced by the creative input of the reader.

Greenblatt, like Jauss, insists on 'the historicity of texts' and the 'textuality of history', and he too rejects universal criteria of value and meaning. Yet he goes further than Jauss in foregrounding discontinuities in the encounter between past and present. His 'new historicism' questions the acts of cultural interpretation and selection which assign value to some artifacts rather than to others. He considers the fate of the divergent objects which are invested with value by museums, and which are caught in the dialectic of the respectful 'resonance' which the work's rooting in a cultural context tends to inspire, and the shock of 'wonder' which original (and hence alien) creativity may provoke. Greenblatt gives preference to the specificity of the historical moment and its alienating, disruptive effect on the normalizing assumption of continuity, accepting the fact that the historical perspective of his *own* theory is thereby called into question. And, in formulating the

challenge that his 'new historicism' offers to teleological aesthetics, Greenblatt traces the contingent historical accidents of his personal trajectory and research.

But the problems of founding such an interpretative strategy may well seem to threaten to render all cultural production entirely arbitrary. And it is against the danger of turning the precariousness of representation itself into an ontological absolute that Robert Weimann, adapting the Marxian concept of appropriation, shows how different literary forms represent different stages of the crisis of representation. He rejects the two extreme poles of the relation of language to reality, the structuralist position that sign-systems are autonomous, and the vulgar Marxist view that they directly reflect reality. In constructing a history and sociology of modern forms of self-reflexive literary representation, he shows how certain key works by Flaubert, James and Hemingway signal self-consciously and self-critically the reference of their own texts to the world they attempt to appropriate.

III

The violence and constraints affecting the relation of the historical to the textual had traditionally been ignored by advocates of a strictly structuralist semiotics, from the Russian Formalists in the 1920s, who defined literature by its 'literariness', excluding all other criteria, to the French critics of the 1960s, whose semiotics were inspired less by linguistic theory itself than by its conjunction with the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. But since then there has been a revolution within linguistics itself. The whole development of pragmatics has challenged not only the self-contained systems of structuralism, but also, it would seem, the generally self-consuming theories of the lack of overarching meaning which Derrida's philosophy has inspired.

Thus the third part of our book opens with chapters by Michael Riffaterre and Ann Jefferson, who acknowledge the need to redefine the aims of a poststructuralist formalism. Their 'targets' are the 'undecidability' which for Jacques Derrida, and critics like Geoffrey Hartmann, removes key literary texts from monologic significance, and the 'literariness' which for Roman Jakobson cuts off the text from the world. Michael Riffaterre shows how an ambiguous poetic discourse can yield effective meanings without the principle of 'undecidability' paralysing hermeneutic activity; using texts by Blake and Wordsworth which are notoriously difficult to interpret, he shows how the reader calls on a wider cultural judgement to override the primary 'undecidability' of the text as provisionally segmented, and thus deploys a heightened hermeneutic awareness, leading to a reprocessing of the work in terms of a revised principle of segmentation. This second stage of interpretation then frees the meaning which was blocked within the text, but also opens it up to wider areas of public interpretation, through intertextual activity. Ann Jefferson re-evaluates the two key figures of the tradition of

Russian Formalism and suggests that Roman Jakobson's quest for stylistic universals has oversimplified the operation of language by ignoring its socio-political dimension, which is better formulated by the aesthetic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose notion of fiction as a polyphonic and carnivalesque activity is grounded in a theory of socio-linguistic agonistics.

As critics working from a linguistic basis have needed to refocus structuralism and contextualize its interpretative activities, so psychoanalytic critics have seen the power and principles of their founding exegetical system simultaneously exploited and challenged. Sarah Kofman, who has published elsewhere her theoretical studies of Freud's aesthetics, here conducts a detailed reading of one of Freud's own exemplary readings, that of *The Merchant of Venice*, in order to deconstruct an over-simplified psychoanalytic symbolism. It transpires that, even though Freud avoided being entirely constrained by the transformational structures suggested by his own model of the dream work, he still did not bring out the social dimension of meaning which Shakespeare's language and structure convey in the case of his female and his Jewish subjects, whose discourse is laden with subversive symbolic connotations and values which challenge simplistic readings.

The critique of a given and stable psychoanalytic symbolism continues in the next chapter, where all of Julia Kristeva's experiences as a pioneer of semiotics, a supporter of feminism, and a practising psychoanalyst feed in to her theoretical and discursive strategies. She demonstrates how Lacan's notion of 'identification' illuminates both a case history and a reading of Joyce. But Kristeva's essay moves beyond a position of simple Freudian or feminist ideology, for, if a notion of identity is necessary to render the psyche operational, the semiotic pleasure of readerly projection implies a concomitant strategy of reversal of identification. She finds the figure of the wandering Ulysses as significant a psychological position as that of Freud's classic Oedipus complex; her model highlights the powerful circulation of desire—not only in the modernist text, but also in the controversial transference postures she explores in her therapeutic work.

IV

The need to revise modes of analysing the expression and representation of women is implicit in Kristeva's essay, as it is in Kofman's. But the relation of the underlying ideology to the mode of reading practised, and the social position it implies, is explicitly brought into focus by Elaine Showalter's survey of the developments and prospects of feminist criticism. She shows how interpretations of the feminine are inescapably related to questions of race and class, how psychoanalytic or other theories must be contextualized in relation to their different frames of institutionalized literary and cultural activity. Showalter refuses the comforts of an essential feminine nature. But she also rejects naive double-binds like those allegedly opposing 'equality' to 'difference', or 'Anglo-Saxon pragmatists' (compiling a female literary

history) to 'French theoreticians', (conceptualizing a quintessentially female language). As she unfolds the different diachronic stages and synchronic strategies of a feminist literary enterprise she comes to the conclusion that the most urgent issue of today's theoretical debate, beyond the relationship between the concepts of difference and identity in the discourse of gender, is the power of a radically new discourse, questioning all given institutions, to displace not only literary canons and gender stereotypes, but all the parameters of critical discourse in other fields.

The consequent project, to re-situate oneself as critical subject while maintaining a position of effective agency and rejecting the temptations of (patriarchal) essentialism or (institutionalized) pragmatism, has implications beyond feminism and opens a debate on the place of the critical subject in terms of race and class, as well as in terms of the role of the teacher and critic, and the importance of non-literary cultural activity. And as Showalter unwrites patriarchal discourse, so Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak challenge the identities imposed by Western discourse in general on the third world, thus calling into question the limited horizons within which many critics tend to operate. Homi Bhabha points out the ambiguity of the most critically aware literary visions of Empire, those of Forster and Conrad, even or particularly when they claim to speak on behalf of the non-European, and he reads their limitations in the light of the contradictory ideology of non-literary administrative documents, whose repressed sub-text he elucidates using the models of Derrida's 'in-between' and Freud's uncanny. Gayatri Spivak argues that the role of the teacher should be scrutinized, in order to focus on, for example, women's expression in a Bengali film, rather than on a traditional (white, patriarchal) literary text. She engages Foucault as well as Marx in her self-critical exposure of the difficulties of the commentator wishing to assume her marginal position without rendering it unproblematically dominant. Both Bhabha and Spivak, then, elaborate the difficulties of articulating a notion of cultural identity. They reject that identity whenever it is defined merely as the 'other' (the negative image) of a position of coercive power, and their models take on a resonance which disturbs our own readings and positions, whatever our progressive intentions.

Indeed, it is precisely this spirit of critical and self-critical enquiry which has inspired this volume of original essays, precluding any monolithic conclusion as to the current state of literary and cultural theory and its future prospects. None the less the very variety and energy of the authors' different responses is already a kind of answer. We find that the sophisticated voices of the new feminist consciousness and the post-colonial third-world intelligentsia are not to be contained by traditional ideologies, even those speaking in their favour. They will use the terminology of Marx and Freud, but they will constantly question the ideological schemata which these systems also presuppose. However, they do not contradict the new political conscience of deconstruction or the heightened social awareness of post-Freudian psychoanalysis. And formalism is able to criticize its linguistic

foundations, while still providing a model of critical reading, compatible, moreover, with the aims of critical hermeneutics and reception theory. Marxism and the Frankfurt School have distanced themselves from any simple theory of the relation between culture and society, but the models of appropriation and negative dialectics which they inspired still furnish important theoretical instruments. New developments in historical and social theory reopen the whole question of cultural and aesthetic value, ebulliently in the new historicism, more problematically, perhaps, in the case of modernist fiction and ethnic cinema. The destabilization of the critical metalanguages of modernism has, clearly, not been fatal.

In her opening chapter, Barbara Johnson quotes Paul de Man on the uncertain relations of language and art to the world:

it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values are *incompatible*. What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question.

The contributors to this book show how important, and exhilarating, it is for them to call into question the bases of their own interpretative activity. Certainly, no one critical language can now claim hegemony. Metaphysics and politics will not disappear. The lesson for the critic is to remain vigilant, and *foreground* their interference with interpretation, instead of wishing it away. Formalism must compose with reader-response strategies, psychoanalysis must open up its symbolic systems to feminist models. Marxism must come to terms with a dissolution of nineteenth-century genres as well as class-models. Each position is insecure: the place of the sacred Jewish texts in Greenblatt's museum is no less fragile than the authority of Spivak's Bengali film critic. Bürger cannot prevent life overrunning art in Beuys' piles of felt and traces of fat, nor can Kristeva isolate the polymorphous liberation of the Joycean text from the surrogate maternal identity which she offers to disturbed female desire. But their openness is not to be confused with total relativity. The circulation of textual, social and mental energies driving contemporary criticism to transgress boundaries is objectively unsettling; it is still emotionally and intellectually allied to the vast enterprise of demystification and liberation that mark our modern age.

It has been suggested by Gianni Vattimo, in a synthesis of earlier reactions by Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger, that we are now faced with 'the death or decline of art', where avant-garde critics as well as avant-garde artists are forced to enact the options of 'utopia' (a naive belief in the suffusion of the whole of life with aesthetic power), 'silence' (using a vestigial, self-destructive art negatively, to resist any social recuperation of culture), or 'kitsch' (a manipulative mass culture). We believe that the present volume shows that avant-garde criticism is able to resist these extremities, and that,

without succumbing to an unjustified 'pathos of the future', it shows its ability to maintain a vigorous critical and self-critical project, precisely by taking these apparent limitations as its thematic challenge.

Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan
Cambridge 1990

Part I

BARBARA JOHNSON

The Surprise of Otherness: A Note on the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man

If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative.
Barbara Johnson, 'Nothing Fails Like Success' in *A World of Difference*

As the dedications in two of my books will attest, Paul de Man was extremely important to me both intellectually and personally. He was both an unforgettably challenging and generous teacher and a reliable and interesting friend. When Jonathan Culler first informed me of the existence of over 150 articles written by de Man during 1940 to 1942 for a Belgian newspaper, the regular editorial staff of which had been replaced by collaborators, and the editorial line of which was distinctly anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi, my first impulse was a desire to rename my dogs (Nietzsche and Wagner). That is, my reaction was symptomatic of a logic of purification, expulsion, the vomiting of the name. It was as though the milk of de Man's writing, which I had already drunk, had turned to poison. Yet the logic of contamination and purification is the very logic of Nazism. Surely this 'good breast/bad breast' split was too simplistic a way of dealing with what amounted to an urgent imperative to historicize? De Man's later writings had to be re-read in the light of their own history.

If the quantity and intensity of the articles already published on the subject of de Man's wartime writings are any indication, there is clearly something at stake in this bibliographical discovery. Beyond the fact that Nazism is always news and that people love a fall, what is it that transforms this archival revelation into an *event*? I will begin a rather roundabout approach to these questions by quoting from one of de Man's last discussions of the nature of historical occurrences:

When I speak of irreversibility and insist on irreversibility, it is because in all those texts and those juxtapositions of texts, we have been aware of something which one could call a progression though it shouldn't be, a movement from cognition, from acts of knowledge, from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an occurrence, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs. And there, the sort of material occurrence . . . that . . . leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such, that notion of occurrence is not opposed in any sense to the notion of writing.¹

It is a fitting illustration of Paul de Man's theory of history as the disruption of a cognitive progression by the intrusion of something like writing that his wartime writings should have been unearthed not by a critic but by an admirer, Ortwin de Graef, a Belgian graduate student. Although de Man had in fact referred to his *Le Soir* articles in the course of his later life (in particular, in a letter to the Chairman of Harvard's Society of Fellows), they had remained, like the purloined letter, exposed but invisible, open but unread, until the relentless progress of archival devotion delivered them from sufferance. However those articles might have contributed at the time of their first publication to the shape of events in occupied Belgium, they have now entered history a second time with the full disruptive force of an event. It is an event that is structured *like* what de Man describes in the above quotation as an 'occurrence' – an irreversible disruption of cognition – but it is a disruption that is happening *to* his own acts of cognition. It is as though de Man had tried to theorize the disruption of his own acts of theorizing, had tried to include the theory's own outside within it. But that theory's outside was precisely, we now know, always already within. And he could not, of course, control the very loss of control he outlined as inevitable and defined as irony. 'Irony comes into being precisely when self-consciousness loses its control over itself', he told Robert Moynihan. 'For me, at least, the way I think of it now, irony is not a figure of self-consciousness. It's a break, an interruption, a disruption. It is a moment of loss of control, and not just for the author but for the reader as well.'² The arrival of this purloined letter, then, is an event not only for de Man but for his readers, however uncannily his theory might have predicted its inevitability. His death makes it necessary to face the letter without him, but in any case he could not have served as guide to its interpretation. All the wisdom he had on the subject, he had already delivered. Indeed, this is one of the things that has become newly readable in his late work. As Christopher Norris, Cynthia Chase, and doubtless many others are in the process of arguing, the critic to whom de Man now appears to have been most polemically and mercilessly opposed was his own former self. But who *was* that masked de Man?

National Literatures, Genre Theory, and Racial Hygiene

Thus, in the framework of three lectures, Professor Domini has given us a complete overview of Italian poetry, which seems to be realizing most felicitously the hope expressed by Mussolini when he declared that 'It is especially at the present time that poetry is necessary to the life of a people.'

Paul de Man, *Le Soir*

Paul de Man was born in Antwerp on 6 December 1919, to a rather well-to-do family that was both patriotically Flemish and cultivated cosmopolitan.³ One of his strongest early influences seems to have been his uncle, Hendrik de Man, a prominent socialist theorist, president of the Belgian Labour Party, and a minister in several governments. Hendrik de Man was the only important member of the Belgian government who agreed with the timing and mode of King Leopold's decision to capitulate to the Germans in May 1940. In a Manifesto to the members of the Belgian Labour Party, published in July 1940, Hendrik wrote:

Be among the first rank of those who struggle against poverty and demoralization, for the resumption and work and the return to normal life.

But do not believe that it is necessary to resist the occupying power; accept the fact of his victory and try rather to draw lessons therefrom so as to make of this the starting point for new social progress.

The war has led to the debacle of the parliamentary regime and of the capitalist plutocracy in the so-called democracies.

For the working classes and for socialism, this collapse of a decrepit world is, far from a disaster, a deliverance.⁴

As Minister of Finance in the prewar years, Hendrik de Man had been appalled by the power wielded by high finance in the Belgian political process. He was indeed so disgusted by the sleaze factor that he was ready to abandon the democratic process altogether. His mistake in 1940 was to see capitalism as a worse evil than Nazism. Hendrik's enthusiasm for the new 'revolution', however, did not last. In his struggle on behalf of the working classes, he fell increasingly out of favour with the German authorities until he left Belgium in late 1941 for an Alpine retreat in France. The book he published in 1942 was immediately seized by the Nazis. In 1944 he took refuge in Switzerland, where he learned of his conviction for treason, *in absentia*, by a Belgian military court. He died in a car accident in 1953.

The impact of Hendrik's intellectually and politically picaresque career on Paul – both the Paul of 1940 to 1942 and the Paul of 1953 to 1983 – is incalculable. It is tempting to see the young Paul as beguiled into pro-fascist sympathies by his uncle's utopian hopes just as it is tempting to see the older Paul's warnings against the 'unwarranted hopeful solutions'⁵ of idealistic political activists as stemming from his uncle's catastrophic misjudgement. But these suppositions are at once impossible to verify and

fundamentally inadequate in the sense that they reduce a complex political and ideological over-determination to a personal and psychological 'case'. Paul de Man's early writings are part of a much larger intellectual and literary configuration, most of whose sinister consequences would have been hard to predict. Let us look briefly now at those writings.

Between December 1940, and November 1942, Paul de Man wrote 169 book and music reviews for the francophone Brussels' newspaper *Le Soir*, and contributed another ten articles to a Flemish newspaper, *Het Vlaamsche Land*. Most of the essays have little apparent relation to politics beyond a vague assent to the new order. Their aim is rather to develop and practice a kind of literary criticism that is best summed up in a review of René Lalou's *Histoire de la Littérature Française contemporaine*. After criticizing Lalou for spending too much time on the specificity of individual authors, de Man writes:

By thus excessively multiplying his differentiations (*différencier à outrance*), he ends up giving the impression of a jungle of trees and creeping vines. And he will have missed the principal goal of any critical exposé: to give an image of the spirit, a synthesis of the thought, of a century.

For what matters most is not the subtle differences of expression between two authors but their common submission to implacable rules. It is manifest that each period forges, sometimes unconsciously, its own esthetic law. There may perhaps exist some eternal and immutable Beauty but it is nonetheless true that that Beauty is illuminated, in each era, from a different angle. A conscious critic must determine what that angle is and deduce his criteria from it.⁶

De Man's general concern in these reviews is with the orderly development of different literary genres and national traditions. This makes for rather repetitive reading. Indeed, while slogging my way through the pile of eye-straining xeroxes of the young de Man's chronicles, I began to wonder why *Le Soir* itself didn't send out the hook for him. What good is a book review that tells you only about the place a novel holds in the evolution of the genre and never gives you a clue about the plot? Did de Man seriously think his readers were going to run out and buy the latest novel because it had timidly begun the necessary synthesis of French rationalism and German mysticism?

More to the point for our purposes, is the question of the politics of this kind of literary history. The following quotation from one of the articles in *Het Vlaamsche Land* begins to show the sinister side of the notion of 'proper traditions':

When we investigate the post-war literary production in Germany, we are immediately struck by the contrast between two groups, which moreover were also materially separated by the events of 1933. The first of these groups celebrates an art with a strongly cerebral disposition, founded upon some abstract principle and very remote from all naturalness. The in themselves very remarkable theses of expressionism were used in this group as tricks, as

skillful artifices calculated for easy effects. The very legitimate basic rule of artistic transformation, inspired by the personal vision of the creator, served here as a pretext for a forced, caricatured representation of reality. Thus [the artists of this group] came into an open conflict with the proper traditions of German art which had always and before everything else clung to a deep spiritual sincerity. Small wonder, then, that it was mainly non-Germans, and in specific, Jews, that went in this direction.⁷

In the notorious essay entitled 'Jews in Contemporary Literature' (the only other one of the 179 articles that mentions Jews), de Man pushes these ideas to their appalling conclusion:

The fact that they [Western intellectuals] have been able to preserve themselves from Jewish influence in as representative a cultural domain as literature is proof of their vitality. One would not be able to hold out much hope for the future of our civilization if it had let itself be invaded, without resistance, by a foreign force. In keeping, despite Semitic interference in all aspects of European life, an intact originality and character, it [our civilization] has shown that its profound nature was healthy. In addition, one can thus see that a solution to the Jewish problem that would aim towards the creation of a Jewish colony far from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, any deplorable consequences.⁸

How can one avoid feeling rage and disgust at a person who could write such a thing? How can I not understand and share the impulse to throw this man away? The fact that 'Jews in Contemporary Literature' was written for a special issue of *Le Soir* on anti-Semitism does not excuse it. The fact that it is the only example of such a sentiment expressed in the 179 articles does not erase it. The fact that de Man seems not to have been anti-Semitic in his personal life between 1940 and 1942 (and certainly showed no trace of it in later years) only points up a too-limited notion of what anti-Semitism is. And the fact that, as Derrida puts it, 'de Man wants especially to propose a thesis on literature that visibly interests him more here than either anti-Semitism or the Jews'⁹ is also no comfort. If there hadn't been people who, without any particular personal anti-Semitism, found the idea of deportation reasonable, there could have been no holocaust. In his eagerness to preserve differences between European national traditions (including Flemish) and to allow for productive cross-fertilization and exchange among them, de Man judges as extraneous and distracting any 'foreign' differences within, which might blur the picture of the organic development of forms. Never has the repression of 'differences within' had such horrible consequences. But is genre theory therefore fascist? Is comparative literature *völkisch*?¹⁰ Things can hardly be so simple.

The Question of Deconstruction

The de-construction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself.

Barbara Johnson, *'The Critical Difference'*

Whatever Paul de Man is doing in these early essays, it is certainly no deconstruction. Indeed, deconstruction is precisely the dismantling of these notions of evolutionary continuity, totalization, organicism, and 'proper' traditions. No one could be more different from *Le Soir's* suave synthesizer than the de Man who wrote:

Allegories of Reading started out as a historical study and ended up as a theory of reading. I began to read Rousseau seriously in preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism and found myself unable to progress beyond local difficulties of interpretation.¹¹

Indeed, the later de Man's work exhibits all the negative characteristics cited by the young Paul: cerebrality, abstraction, a tendency to '*différencier à outrance*. . .'. But if de Man was not doing deconstruction between 1940 and 1942, why have the deconstructors become so defensive?

One answer, of course, is that some critics of deconstruction have taken this occasion to conflate the early and late work of de Man and to proclaim, as reported in *Newsweek*, that 'the movement is finished. As one Ivy League professor gleefully exclaims, "deconstruction turned out to be the thousand-year Reich that lasted 12 years"' (15 February 1988). This 'gleeful' joy in annihilation clearly draws on the energies of the evil which opponents think they are combatting. The recent spate of publicity has produced somewhat contradictory capsule descriptions of deconstruction ('a crucial tenet of deconstruction is that the relation between words and what they mean is sometimes arbitrary and always indeterminate', *Newsweek*; 'Deconstruction views language as a slippery and inherently false medium that always reflects the biases of its users', *The New York Times*, 1 December 1987, p. 81). It is no wonder that deconstructors should want to set the record straight. But what seems to be clearer than ever in the extreme violence and 'glee' of the recent attacks on deconstruction is the extent to which any questioning of the reliability of language, any suggestion that meaning cannot be taken for granted, violates a powerful taboo in our culture. To say that deconstruction is 'hostile to the very principles of Western thought' (*Newsweek*) is like saying that quantum mechanics is hostile to the notion of substances. No one could have been a more enthusiastic upholder of the integrity of Western thought than the Paul de Man of 1940-2. It is not a question of hostility but of analysis.

The journalists and polemicists are not wrong in locating the specificity of de Man's theory in his focus on language. Their mistake, however, lies

in reassigning the certainties they say he takes away. If language is no longer guaranteed to be reliable or truthful, then it must 'always' be unreliable, false, or biased. If not necessary, then arbitrary; if not meaningful, then indeterminate; if not true, then false. But de Man's analyses did not perform such certainty-reassignments. Rather, they question the very structure and functioning of such either/or logic. To question certainty is not the same as to affirm uncertainty:

In a genuine semiology as well as in other linguistically oriented theories, the referential function of language is not being denied – far from it; what is in question is its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition. Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality', but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world.¹²

It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values and linguistic values are incompatible. What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question.¹³

What complicates the picture even further is the fact that, while we might be able to tell the difference between linguistic and purely phenomenal or aesthetic structures ('no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word "day"'), the distinction is not at all clear in the case of ideology or politics, because 'what we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism'. From this de Man goes on to assert:

It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness ['literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available'] is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence.¹⁴

In the years just prior to his death, de Man seems indeed to have been moving toward establishing a more explicit link between his own theoretical stance and a critique of the ideological foundations of Nazism. Christopher Norris has pointed to that link by entitling his study of de Man *Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*. As Walter Benjamin was one of the first to point out, fascism can be understood as an *aestheticization* of politics. In several late essays, de Man locates a crucial articulation in the construction of a protofascist 'aesthetic ideology' in Schiller's misreading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Schiller's misreading of the aesthetic in Kant involves a denial of (its own) violence. Schiller's vision of 'the ideal of a beautiful society' as 'a well executed English dance' has exerted a seductive appeal upon subsequent political visions. In an essay entitled 'Aesthetic Formalization',¹⁵ de Man juxtaposes to this notion from Schiller a short text by Kleist, *Über das Marionettentheater*, in which the grace of such a dance is shown to be produced by substituting the mechanical (a puppet or a prosthesis) for the human

body. Schiller's 'aesthetic state' is thus an ideal that can only be produced by mutilation and mechanization. The dance-like harmony of a state can only arise through the repression of differences within. In one of the last lectures de Man delivered before his death, he makes the political ramifications of this aesthetic state even clearer:

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

'Art is an expression of feelings. The artist is distinguished from the non-artist by the fact that he has the power to give expression to what he feels. In some form or another: the one in images, a second in clay, a third in words, a fourth in marble – or even in historical forms. The statesman is an artist too. The leader and the led ("Führer und Masse") presents no more of a problem than, say, painter and colour. Politics are the plastic art of the state, just as painting is the plastic art of colour. This is why politics without the people, or even against the people, is sheer nonsense. To shape a People out of the masses, and a State out of the People, this has always been the deepest intention of politics in the true sense.' [Michael. *Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* (1929).]

It is not entirely irrelevant, not entirely indifferent, that the author of this passage is from a novel of Joseph Goebbels. Mary Wilkinson, who quotes the passage, is certainly right in pointing out that it is a grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state. But the principle of this misreading does not essentially differ from the misreading which Schiller inflicted on his own predecessor, namely Kant.¹⁶

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

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

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

If it were easy to remain grounded in the morally good, the history of the twentieth century would look quite different. While deconstruction cannot be reduced to an outcome of one individual's biography, it may well be that it has arisen as an attempt to come to terms with the holocaust as a radical disruption produced as a logical extension of Western thinking. If idealism can turn out to be terroristic, if the defence of Western civilization can become the annihilation of otherness, and if the desire for a beautiful and orderly society should require the tidying action of cattle cars and gas chambers, it is not enough to decide that we now recognize evil in order to locate ourselves comfortably in the good. In Nazi Germany, the seduction of an image of the good was precisely the road to evil.

It is thus not out of 'hostility' to the moral values of Western civilization that deconstruction has arisen, but out of a desire to understand how those values are potentially already different from *themselves*. By rereading the texts of writers and philosophers that have made a difference to Western history, it might be possible to become aware of the repressions, the elisions, the contradictions and the linguistic slippages that have functioned unnoticed and that undercut the certainties those texts have been read as upholding. If certainty had never produced anything but just and life-affirming results, there would be no need to analyse it. It is because of the self-contradictions and ambiguities already present within the text and the history of even the clearest and most admirable statements that careful reading is essential. Such a reading does not aim to eliminate or dismiss texts or values, but rather to see them in a more complex, more *constructed*, less idealized light. And this applies as much to the work and life of Paul de Man as it does to any of the texts he deconstructed.

Notes

- 1 Paul de Man, 'Kant and Schiller', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, edited by Andrzej Warminski (forthcoming, University of Minnesota Press).
- 2 Robert Moynihan, *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man* (Hamdon, Conn.: Archon Books, 1986), p. 137.
- 3 Factual support for this section comes from the following sources: Ortwin de Graef, 'Paul de Man's Proleptic "Nachlass"', forthcoming; Peter Dodge, *A Documentary Study of Hendrik de Man, Socialist Critic of Marxism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Henri de Man, *Cavalier Seul* (Geneva: Les Editions du Cheval Ailé, 1948).
- 4 Dodge, *Documentary Study*, p. 326.
- 5 Paul de Man, 'Image and Emblem in Yeats', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 238.
- 6 *Le Soir*, 8 April 1941, p. 6 (translation mine).

- 7 Paul de Man, 'A View on Contemporary German Fiction', *Het Vlaamsche Land*, 20 August 1942, p. 2 (trans. from Flemish by Ortwin de Graef).
- 8 *Le Soir*, 4 March 1941, p. 10 (translation mine).
- 9 Jacques Derrida, 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War', *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988), p. 626.
- 10 *Völkisch* thinking, on which Adolf Hitler based many of his ideas, is described by the scholar of Nazism, George L. Mosse, in his book *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), as the conflation of soil, blood (race) and culture: 'According to many Völkisch theorists, the nature of the soul of a Volk is determined by the native landscape. Thus the Jews, being a desert people, are viewed as shallow, arid, "dry" people, devoid of profundity and totally lacking in creativity. Because of the barrenness of the desert landscape, the Jews are a spiritually barren people. They thus contrast markedly with the Germans, who, living in the dark, mist-shrouded forests, are deep, mysterious, profound. Because they are so constantly shrouded in darkness, they strive toward the sun, and are truly *Lichtmenschen* (pp. 4-5). A desert is only a desert, but darkness is also light. One glimpses here the dangers not only of an ahistorical essentialism but also of allowing a contradiction to appear logical and natural.'
- 11 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. ix.
- 12 Paul de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory', in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 11 (emphasis mine).
- 13 Paul de Man, 'The Return to Philology', in *The Resistance to Theory*, p. 25 (emphasis mine).
- 14 De Man, 'Resistance to Theory', p. 11.
- 15 Paul de Man, 'Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
- 16 De Man, 'Kant and Schiller'.

PETER BÜRGER

The Problem of Aesthetic Value

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

Culture as status-symbol: Bourdieu's sociology of culture

In the face of a large number of conflicting artistic programmes and doctrines of aesthetic evaluation¹ Bourdieu takes a radical position: the external perspective. He does not inquire which aesthetic is the right one, but whether it is possible empirically to prove that particular aesthetic attitudes coincide with particular class positions. He does not identify these solely with reference to their position within the process of production (economic capital), but also to social origin (social capital) and the level of scholastic training attained (cultural capital). In his wide-ranging study, *Distinction*, based on the results of previous surveys, he comes to the conclusion that people from the ruling (dominant) classes, the petty bourgeoisie and the ruled (dominated) classes have clearly outlined aesthetic attitudes which, together with the totality of their modes of conduct, form a unified life-style, which he traces back to a class-specific *habitus*, a 'practice-unifying and practice-generating principle'.² According to his thesis, the use of symbolic objects (particularly including their position within hierarchies of value) serves a strategy of opposition between the higher and the lower classes: 'the manner of using symbolic goods . . . constitutes one of the key markers of "class" and is also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction' (p. 66).

That Bourdieu is concerned with more than substantiating a sociological hypothesis concerning the interrelation of aesthetic attitudes, life-styles and class positions is made clear from the subtitle of his study: *Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (in the French edition, *Critique sociale du jugement*). In appropriating the title of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, he is formulating the claim to have pronounced the truth about aesthetic discourses, something that those discourses themselves are incapable of grasping. In fact he has already stressed in his introductory chapter that any attempt to define the essence of the aesthetic is doomed to failure because it excludes the collective and individual genesis of this historical phenomenon (p. 28). And he adds a 'postscript' to the book, in which he characterizes the Kantian deduction