

# THE WILD CARD OF READING

On Paul de Man



RODOLPHE GASCHÉ

# *The Wild Card of Reading* On Paul de Man

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Rodolphe Gasché

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## Abbreviations

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- AI *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. and with an Introduction by A. Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
- AR *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)
- BI *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Introduction by W. Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)
- D Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. and Introduction by B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)
- RR *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)
- RT *The Resistance to Theory*, Foreword by W. Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

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## *Introduction*

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Confessing the inability to understand a subject matter or critical approach that, in principle, concerns one's own field of competence is not exactly an academic virtue. Yet only few, if any, of those who have tried to read the writings of Paul de Man have been spared the experience, at least at first, of near total incomprehension. His prose is dense, opaque to the point of obscurity; the sequence of the arguments is unfathomable; and the relevance of the points made, if one is able to discern them at all, is far from being clear. However, given de Man's prestige in North American academia, few have felt they could actually admit their failure to gain a toehold in de Man's work. And many, to maintain an appearance of authority, have felt obliged to cast judgment on it. However, and not surprisingly, these judgments were rarely made on theoretical grounds, for theoretically questioning the well-foundedness of de Man's position would have required arguments based on some minimal familiarity with de Man's writings. Rather, de Man has been called "morally wrong," "nihilistic," even "outlandish." The 1987 discovery of de Man's wartime writings then provided an unexpected confirmation of what the critics had always already suspected and sanctioned, after the fact, for their intellectually more than dishonest kind of exercise. But whatever this discovery may have proved to those who failed in their first effort to come to grips with de Man's difficult writings, the task to read him remains. In their opaqueness and defying difficulty, de Man's texts precisely call to be read, to be checked for exactly what they advance or perform.<sup>1</sup> However, no mere skimming, no first reading, nor even a second reading, will suffice here.

The difficulty of reading de Man's work stems in part from his singular way of using terminologies that originate in the history of philosophy or literary criticism. These technical terms are often employed without regard for their established definitions and procedural rules, or they



become terminologically attached in what Frederic Jameson has called “strategic transcoding” to a whole range of other, utterly unrelated, objects or materials.<sup>2</sup> One is left with a sense of confusion and the suspicion that de Man’s language is a private language, exclusively intelligible to its author alone. A second profound difficulty stems from the movement of de Man’s arguments, once they have been identified. For, instead of recognized argumentative strategies—be they propositional or not—the reader, more often than not, is faced with elliptical, oddly unelaborated assertions, often in the total absence of even a semblance of development. More often than not, de Man’s text seems to string together a number of declarations. The scant reference, if any, to conventional argumentative modes (in even the broadest sense) further disorients the reader and reinforces the suspicion of inconsistency. One is tempted to conclude that de Man’s texts are merely the hasty exposition not of clear and distinct insights but of (possibly weighty) intuitions. Finally, an attempt to situate de Man’s writings with respect to the problematics and methodologies of the philosophical or critical schools he mentions leads equally to confusion, for one quickly realizes that if these schools and their representatives are mentioned at all, it is merely to put their problematical horizons and methodologies radically into question. One gains little by linking de Man’s thought to any particular school or thinker (including Derrida). Even his references to *rhetoric* are of little help in making his work readable for de Man’s use of the term deviates considerably from that of the tradition. Indeed, the singular way in which de Man understands *rhetoric*, or, for that matter, *language*, is precisely one of the issues to be elucidated in reading his work. Small wonder, then, if we suspect de Man of wanting to situate his work outside any tradition, of being intent on establishing his own school of thought, a kind of discourse, moreover, that would be the sole representative of its genre.

I first met de Man in Berlin in the early seventies when, at the behest of Peter Szondi, he directed a seminar at the *Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* on the literary, linguistic, and political aspects of Rousseau’s writings. While I immediately came to respect him for his tremendous erudition, as well as for his intellectual and personal generosity—I like to think that the amiable relationship we had from the beginning was due partially to our mutual ties to the Flemish region of Belgium—I began to study his work only much later and out of a sense of perplexity stemming from the fact that many of my friends and colleagues persistently showed great admiration for this body of work

whose pertinence escaped me and whose interest diminished in the torture of reading what seemed merely incomprehensible. This book, gathering some essays written in the late seventies and early eighties, but whose main, and interrelated, parts were completed in the summer 1995, represents a continued attempt to come to grips with what I would like to call "de Man's critical idiolect."<sup>3</sup> While some may deem this effort to understand inappropriate, perhaps futile, given what they believe to be the thoroughly unintelligible nature of de Man's writings, or just one more instance of what Friedrich Schleiermacher (before he became the founder of hermeneutics) disparagingly called "the rage, or furor, to understand (*die Wut des Verstehens*)" suffered by those who sought to make sense of religion,<sup>4</sup> I will advance the following remarks in its favor. At the very least, the singular event represented by de Man and his writing compels some response. But, more importantly, I suggest that this work merits a responsible, critical engagement, for any other denies de Man the gift of intelligibility and hence precludes the recognition of just what it is that makes his work so peculiar. Therefore, I argue as well that to demand, because of an unsurpassable radicality of de Man's teaching, a merely mimetic, or quasi-religious, faithfulness to it is a no less irresponsible way of responding to its undeniable singularity. Since the singular nature of de Man's work almost "naturally" invites either wholesale rejection or uncritical celebration, the central thrust of my work has been to determine what precisely sets de Man apart from established terminologies, strategies of argumentation, and critical traditions. Neither philosophical, nor linguistic, nor literary critical in a strict sense, de Man's writings incessantly cross the frontiers of these disciplines, mixing themes and methods originating in them in the oddest way. Therefore, a second concern has been to figure out the principle according to which de Man combined seemingly philosophical, linguistic, and literary motives. In the pursuit of these tasks, it became clear to me that both on the level of strategy and the disposition of the moments to form the "argument," de Man left nothing to chance. I soon began to suspect that many eccentricities of the texts and even sometimes revolting philological inaccuracies obeyed a tight logic and could be meticulously accounted for. What seemed arbitrary, artificial, forced, if not simply wrong, began to reveal its place and reason. I have thus come to respect de Man as a thinker and to value his work for its strictness and flawless inner consistency.

Still, I must add, it is a very singular rigor and one that informs an

intellectual project that is no less singular, a project, indeed, as I shall hold, that in its own singular way concerns the singular itself.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, I will have to ask what kind of rigor it is, on what level it occurs, and what its significance is. But were it not for this rigor, one might, perhaps, be able to dispense with the project entirely. Conversely, this project merits being called “singular” precisely because of the rigor that de Man has brought to it. The rigor in question that makes his work so singular, is, first, that of de Man’s syncretic combination of philosophy, linguistics, and literary criticism, in the pursuit of his project. As Friedrich Schlegel has remarked, “Syncretism and eclecticism have to take place by way of laws, whether laws of art or instinct; otherwise they don’t deserve to be called this way.”<sup>6</sup> While eclecticism supposedly disdains the art of combination, syncretism is commonly understood to be an artificial union of ideas of entirely disparate origins and that look compatible only because they are ill understood. But in de Man’s case it can be shown that the syncretic combinations of literary, philosophical, and linguistic, or rhetorical motives, rest on a number of presuppositions that uphold them by necessity.

Finally, de Man’s work is singular in yet another sense, and it is so to the point of bordering on the idiosyncratic. Here I refer, of course, first of all, to the style and ductus of his writing, its terrible density, its cryptic declarations, lack of elaborations, philological inaccuracies, dismissal of other discourses, and so forth. But let me recall that while the term *idiosyncratic* commonly denotes mere eccentricity, it names first and foremost the characteristic habit (or structure) peculiar to one person only, peculiar to the point of being private and thus at the limit, unintelligible. Etymologically speaking, *idiosyncratic* signifies a personal and distinct way of blending or mixing together. It derives, indeed, from *idio*, meaning “one’s own,” and *sugkrasis*, “commixture, blending, tempering.” But, as Émile Benveniste has demonstrated in his investigations of the Indo-European terms that define the free human being (as distinct from the slave) and, in particular, the individual in his or her personal quality (*idiotes*), that is, nonpublic status, the adjective *idios*, while referring to the notion of the private, to that which is particular to one person only, does not denote an absolute particularity, for the particularity of a given individual is the particularity of a social being confined to him or herself. In other words, the possibility of being oneself in all one’s particularity is a function of one’s belonging to a social unit. Only within

this unit is it possible to be *idios*, and an *idiotes*.<sup>7</sup> What this should alert us to is that however eccentric de Man's enterprise may seem, its idiosyncrasies may have to be accounted for on the basis of the specific methodological and philological traditions, especially those of the North American academic context in which de Man has done most of his writing, and to which these idiosyncrasies represent as many allergic reactions. Further, even though it would be impossible to classify de Man's work, since this would require a rubric limited to a single example, the body of de Man's work is not so very private as to defy all intelligibility. Its idiosyncrasy in no way foils the exhibition of the inexorably stringent necessities that shape it. It might not be inappropriate in this context to evoke, briefly at least, Theodor W. Adorno's notion of the idiosyncratic. As Silvia Bovenschen has noted, Adorno admittedly professed "an idiosyncrasy against the word 'synthesis.'" In *Negative Dialectic*, he writes that "idiosyncrasy resists proffering the word synthesis." Bovenschen thus wonders whether "any idiosyncrasy is not also an idiosyncrasy against hasty syntheses, as if *each* idiosyncrasy had this idiosyncrasy against forced unifications and reconciliations for its foundation." And she concludes that for the thinker of the nonidentical to express an idiosyncrasy with regard to synthesis is, of course, not surprising.<sup>8</sup> For a thinker such as de Man who, at least from *Allegories of Reading* on, has systematically denounced all figures of totalization, including that which the systematic denunciation itself of totality may effect, "idiosyncrasy" would seem to be an appropriate epithet. One could also expect such a thinker's mode of denunciation, at all moments of its moves, to manifest the allergies to totalization on a formal and discursive level. However, unlike Adorno, de Man is not so much concerned with the nonidentical. His criticism of totality and totalization, I shall try to show, is conducted in the name of what I shall call the "absolutely singular," that is, a singularity so singular as to defy all relationality—a singularity, hence, that would indeed be idiosyncratic in an absolute sense. As we will see, this emphatic notion of the singular represents the foundation of de Man's understanding of language. One point I make in this book is that de Man must be seen as a thinker of the absolutely singular, the singular that at the limit, and unlike Adorno's nonidentical, rebuffs all attempts at intelligibility. In distinction from the *idiotes*, the idiosyncratic in question is no longer a particularity rooted in a relating (to) self, in something that is also a part of an intelligible whole. Not only does this kind of the

idiosyncratic cut all relation to other entities, it refuses to relate to itself as well. In de Man's own words, this idiosyncratic singularity is the radically arbitrary. Nothing can be known of it, according to de Man, not even in negative fashion. But even though this absolute singularity makes up the "center" of de Man's analyses, the analyses themselves, however idiosyncratic, are not for that matter unintelligible themselves. As the readings, hereafter, of certain texts by de Man demonstrate, they progress with implacable and uncompromising stringency, to thwart all temptations at totalization in the name of what eludes all possible cognitive appropriation. The logic of de Man's "deconstructions," whatever its difficulties and eccentricities may be, can be reconstructed. Furthermore, the idea of the "absolutely singular," in the name of which these "deconstructions" are performed, can be philosophically situated and accounted for, even though it is the idea of something that refuses any cognitive comprehension.

Against the claims that de Man's writings, either in style or purported content, are thoroughly incomprehensible, and hence ethically or politically culpable, or the evidence itself, and hence no longer in need of interrogation but tirelessly to be imitated, this book seeks to do justice to de Man's writings by concentrating on the immanent logic put to work in the so singular theoretical or philosophical position it represents. Even though de Man's writings aim at exhibiting the workings of something ultimately withstanding all intelligibility, the difficulties and idiosyncrasies of his texts are not an obstacle to accounting for this singular project. But exhibiting the implacable close reasoning of de Man's readings, and the sternness with which the extreme conception of an absolutely absolute singularity orients these readings, does not necessarily condone his practice of reading or the position he takes. Even though his odd notion of an absolutely irreducible singularity can be construed as taking up the venerable philosophical question of singularity, de Man's answer to this question does not have to be taken for granted. To recognize the consistent conception behind all his readings, and the unyielding precision in its pursuit, is the minimal respect one owes to an intellectual project of such stature as de Man's. It is also to recognize that his is a project one cannot ignore. Precisely because of the oddness of its leading conception, the fact that it stages a canonical question and that, moreover, this staging is executed with redoubtable virtuosity demand that it be addressed. But only by first establishing the strengths and the strong points

of de Man's work—strengths that largely explain the idiosyncrasies of his writings, including what seem to be blatant, all too blatant mistakes—is it possible, and legitimate, to express some reserves.

The chapters of this book seek to clarify a variety of issues that arise from a confrontation with de Man's work—for example, what he understands by language; the distinction between metaphor and allegory; to what extent his notion of the performative is tributary to Speech Act Theory; how we are to take his notion of materiality and its distinction from phenomenality; and what he means by *deconstruction*. But all these issues—several of which I take up more than one time in an effort to rethink them and thus tighten my grasp of them—are thematized in an effort to elucidate de Man's conception of reading and to elaborate a reading's immanent logic.

At one point, in *The Resistance to Theory*, de Man, after having described literary theory's nonphilosophical origin and its constitutive, but subversive, "pragmatic moment," likens it to "something of a wild card in the serious game of the theoretical disciplines" (*RT*, 8). Let's bear in mind that literary theory, or theory for short, in that essay, but elsewhere as well, is the theory of the rhetorical, or tropological, dimension of language, a dimension that can be adequately coped with only in and through reading. The theory of reading, or simply (rhetorical) reading, is the wild card in question. Yet what is a wild card? In a card game the wild card is the card able to represent any card designated by the holder, or the highest-ranking card. The joker—the descendent of the fool, and one of the twenty-two unnumbered wild cards in the atouts or trumps in the tarot deck—can be a wild card in card games. However, under certain circumstances, the joker is merely an odd card, carrying no value whatsoever, and hence not wild. Let me also note that when more than one card is wild, as in wild-card games, or Joker Wild, the amount of skill required to play diminishes in proportion to the extra jokers added to the standard deck since chance, and not strategy, becomes the determining factor in these games. Because it carries a value to be determined by the player, a wild card is also a device or expedient for getting the better of or tricking another. If only one wild card is played, the tricking occurs within certain rules; yet, if more than one card is wild, only chance prevails.<sup>9</sup> What, then, are the implications of calling literary theory, or reading, for short, a "wild card"? As the context in which the comparison is made suggests, literary theory, or reading, undermines the serious

game of the theoretical disciplines, of philosophy first and foremost. As de Man suggests, reading, at the hands of the player who holds its card, can unexpectedly outwit the theoretical disciplines' game. With it in hand, one can override the rules that govern these disciplines. Reading can substitute itself for all these disciplines and, as the highest card, definitely win on all occasions. What this card subverts is nothing less than the seriousness of the game of the disciplines, that is to say, their cognitive, ethical, or theological import. Whoever reads plays the master trump, wins them all. No truth claim holds up to such a card. To play the wild card of reading is to remain irrefutable.

Any attempt to specifically assess what de Man means by reading cannot also forgo a confrontation with "reading" in the writings of Jacques Derrida. It is certainly not insignificant to remark that in the context of one of the few essays that Derrida has devoted to the question of reading—"Plato's Pharmacy," which I discuss at some length in Chapter 5—Derrida also evokes the wild card. However, the wild card is mentioned here with respect to Theuth, the god of writing. Following an exposition of the god of writing's major characteristics and of the relations of this figure to its other, Derrida writes: "He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*; a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play (*une carte neutre, donnant du jeu au jeu*) (D, 93). Let me briefly card apart the differences between de Man's wild card and Derrida's. The difference is not only that one refers to reading and the other to writing. If Theuth is compared to a wild card, it is because he is seen by Derrida to open up the differential space, and the play of differences. Theuth, Derrida contends, is "a god of the absolute passage between opposites"; in other words, he both radically opens and, at the same time, makes the differences communicate among one another. More precisely, he represents the matrix of undecidability—what Derrida shall term the *pharmakon*—within which metaphysics decides about its constitutive oppositions. As my analysis of Derrida's text will demonstrate, writing for Derrida does not foil Platonism and its conceptual polarities. If Theuth is a wild card, it is only insofar as he puts play into the play of metaphysics, in other words, insofar as he represents the nonfixable, and undecideable, medium without which no opposition is thinkable. Now, as will be shown in my account of "Plato's Pharmacy," reading, for Derrida, focuses in on Theuth, on writing, the *pharmakon*—on the wild card, in short—not in

order to demonstrate that all theoretical disciplines, including philosophy, fail in establishing truth, but to show to what extent the very possibility of their truth is opened by the wild card of writing and its undecidable play. To read, then, for Derrida, is not to debunk truth but to weave another thread into the Platonic text in which truth is established, a thread by means of which he seeks to come to an understanding with Plato. De Man's wild card of reading, on the other hand, gives no understanding at all and makes Derrida look like a real epistemophilist.

Essentially, what this comparison between the two references to a "wild card" suggests is that while the wild card of writing opens the space of decideability and differential opposition, a space that reading, in a Derridean sense, brings into focus in order to render the Platonic text intelligible to begin with, the wild card of reading, as de Man understands it, exhibits the illusory nature of all comprehension. While the Derridean reading also questions understanding to the extent that it shows understanding to depend for its possibility on the medium of undecideability of writing, or the *pharmakon*, de Man's theory of reading is considerably more radical. Its concern is not with the limits of understanding—limits being also that within which, or from which, something becomes possible—but the possibility of understanding altogether. Reading, indeed, is out to prove that any effort to understand is vain, illusory, self-defeating. But, does such intransigency not come with a stiff price? At what cost can such ultraskeptical radicality be achieved? At what expense is the proclaimed irrefutability of this position to be gained? Does it not meet a delusion of its own? These are some of the questions that cannot be avoided, precisely in the wake of an analysis of the immanent logic of de Man's notion of reading as exemplified by his treatment of philosophical and literary texts. They impose themselves inevitably as a result of a first series of problems that come to the fore at the very moment one inquires into the linguistic and philosophical presuppositions of what de Man terms "reading," and again as one tracks down, step by step, the logic that governs a concrete reading performance. What, indeed, is the plane on which a rhetorical reading proceeds? If language is separated as radically from the phenomenal as de Man contends, the language he speaks about, has, of course, little resemblance to the language of linguistics or philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Might the level of this something called "language" be so abstract as to border on the irrelevant? Bluntly put, if language does not relate to the phenomenal—or even to itself, as we shall see—why be concerned with it all? Finally,



given that for de Man language disrupts understanding in that it interrupts the correspondence between the linguistic and the phenomenal, one cannot but wonder whether the kind of subtle, and often infinitesimal, contradictions, disruptions, and dissymmetries that reading discerns in texts to which de Man ascribes an epistemological intention affects epistemology at all. Does the assumption that the dissymmetries in question effectively subvert all effort at understanding not also reveal an inadequate, extremely exaggerated, expectation of what, indeed, epistemology is to achieve? Hence, if it should be the case that de Man's radicality can be upheld only on condition that what he calls "language" is, in principle, entirely severed from the phenomenal, including language's own phenomenality, and is hence a domain entirely of its own, immanent to itself without, however, relating to itself, the disruptions that it performs in the world and in worldly language would be without consequence. The price tag for an ultraradicality such as de Man's would then possibly imply forgoing any intervention in the world and its language.

But let me not hasten to a conclusion. To provoke questions such as those just formulated speaks to an intellectual enterprise of an undoubtedly very peculiar nature. Wlad Godzich, recalling his first reading experiences of de Man, evokes his impression at the time "of a thought in search of itself, so much at odds with the prevalent self-satisfaction of most traditional criticism and with the incipient dogmatism of the newer one."<sup>11</sup> It has been, and has remained, a thought so uncompromising in its demands and its own inner consistency, that it has systematically endured in setting itself apart, thus achieving a singularity that has no like. If de Man's work is odd, it is so because it is at odds with all critical disciplines past and present. De Man undertook it to carve out for himself a "position" that not only resembled no other but that even dared renouncing the semblance of a position. Undoubtedly, the price paid for establishing a radicality of questioning as is found in de Man's work has been high. But to have played the wild card of reading and, indeed, to successfully have won the game of finding, if not founding, a singularity entirely apart, one so peculiar as to put to risk any bearing on the prevailing discourses of the disciplines, cannot but disturb those discourses. What kind of certainty—that is, of course, the sort of certainty that is answerable and that alone merits the name—can claim not to be worried by such an achievement?