

De Man, That Dangerous Supplement

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Abstract

To ask whether Paul de Man still matters is perhaps to have already answered the question. De Man's work, as J. Hillis Miller writes in a telling irony, "is a violent allergen that provokes fits of coughing, sneezing, and burning eyes, perhaps even worse symptoms, unless it can be neutralized or expelled." There is something inherently resistant in de Man then that goes beyond his wartime journalism. Dust having settled, one must have good reasons today to whip it up and risk another reactive fit. Yet it is precisely this resistance in de Man that will pivot the movement of this thesis, as it sneezes and coughs along the way. Relayed through the allergen of terms like deconstruction, unreadability, rhetoric, it will come to remark a trace of something inappropriable, inhuman in texts, which persistently stalks our attempts to be rid of it. It articulates a crisis in the empire of cognition and a disruption of epistemo-aesthetic ideologies that inform our thinking of the political. The thesis plots a narrative that interrogates the relation between the rhetorical, the inhuman and the political, which in de Man comes to activate a new exigency of reading, constantly overtasking received epistemic regimes that integrate dissention to open a passage for the new ones to emerge. What is consistently traced is the measured emptying out of ontology and psychologism from language and its opening to unmasterable linguistic agencies. This general freeing of latency in structural closures that de Man's reading always teases out not only unsettles their epistemic reliability but also calls for a permanent assault on the authoritative grounding of their legitimacy. What shocks in de Man's work, provoking systemic fits, is a kind of permanent revolution to which his writing is committed.

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Profound aversion to reposing once and for all

in any one total view of the world.

*Fascination of the opposing point of view: refusal to be deprived of the stimulus
of the enigmatic.*

—— Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Preface

Because reading is always reading otherwise, no two repetitions of the book are the same. Preface, writes Gayatri Spivak, comes to “commemorate that difference in identity by inserting itself between two readings – in our case, my reading (given of course that my language and I are shifting and unstable), my rereading, my rearranging of the text – and your reading.”¹ The preface, then, would be the site of a certain unreadability of the “book,” a placeholder for its scattered repetitions and its disinscription by reading. Indeed, “[t]he preface, by daring to repeat the book and reconstitute it in another register, merely enacts what is already the case: the book’s repetitions are always other than the book. There is, in fact, no ‘book’ other than these ever-different repetitions: the ‘book’ in other words, is always already a ‘text,’ constituted by the play of identity and difference” (xii). Writing prefatory remarks to the text is subject to the same general law of reading. It does not bind the “book” but perforates it yet again. Itself a text, preface would have to be pre-prefaced in turn by the general laws of its own expository reading. There can be no end to prefacing. And, indeed, the text prefaced is nothing other but a preface to another text that comes to displace it in misreading. It is a question of a certain resistance of reading that syncopates the “book” by shedding it in textual displacements. One never knows whether one writes a preface to the book or a book to the preface.

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface.” Preface to *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1997), p. xii.

Prefacing is an “essential,” yet “ludicrous operation,” Jacques Derrida writes. Not “only because such an operation would confine itself to discursive effects of an intention-to-mean, but because, in pointing out a single thematic nucleus or a single guiding thesis, it would cancel out the textual displacement that is at work ‘here.’”² That is at work everywhere where there is reading, and, in particular, reading of Paul de Man. For reading, in de Man, is what always double backs on its own statement and disaffirms it in a permanent shedding of thematic closures. It initiates, one could say, an unrelieved pledge to the other to whom reading is owed. To preface thematic pivot points or a topological relief that would account for the curvatures of de Man’s writing would be precisely an attempt to domesticate the alterity of his texts that testify to a challenge and a profound resource of a certain resistance that prevents all reading from reifying into positive, exploitative truths. Indeed, as Derrida writes, “if such a thing were justifiable, we would have to assert right now that one of the theses... inscribed within dissemination is precisely the impossibility of reducing a text as such to its effects of meaning, content, thesis, or theme. Not the impossibility, perhaps... but the resistance – we shall call it the *restance* [that is, some other, *atopos*, always left unappropriated] – of a sort of writing that can neither adapt nor adopt such a reduction” (“Outwork,” 7-8). What the text will have shown is the impossibility of prefacing its eventfulness and uncertainty that is also a resource of reading. “Hence,” Derrida continues, “this is not a preface, at least not if by preface we mean a table, a code, an annotated summery of prominent signifieds, or an index of key words or of proper names” (8). This preface is then more of a

² Jacques Derrida, “Outwork,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 7.

retractive rent present in every reading that in providing “key terms” also, and by the same token, opens itself to a fund of repressed energies and discontinued possibilities that belong to de Man’s text and disrupt all possibilities of its totalisation, keeping the “book” unwritten along its margins. It proceeds with no finality in view and, indeed, in most general terms possible. What it sets forth is a trajectory of a certain reading resistance in de Man that will come to empty the referential fiat of language and mount an assault on cognitive orders, keeping open the possibility of disruption as the very eventfulness of reading and a chance for politics. There is something impossible, indeed inhuman, in reading, an exigency that with a force of compulsion overtakes all possibility.

But what one essentially does here is a conferring of masks or faces (*prosopon poiien*) on a writing that has none in order to make it readable, to make it speak. Prosopopeia, however, as de Man has shown, defaces to the exact extent that it restores. It recalls the substitutivity and exteriority of the face that accounts for the possibility of reading. One always makes the text say more or less than it does and risks being struck dumb on what matters. But this is the essential risk of reading.

The introductory chapter will consider and address the critical reception of de Man’s writing, its immediate implications for our reading of literature, and what appears to have caused a certain topological concern within deconstruction, its crisis. This crisis is motivated not only by specific institutional and disciplinary needs, a guardrail against the entire register of irresponsibility and political apathy de Man’s writing seems to solicit, but by an underlying opposition between literature and philosophy and its systematic disarticulation in

de Man, as a certain pressure or exigency of reading to account for the irreducible rhetoricity of philosophical concepts. What is put in question towards the end, however, is the possibility of anything like a topological margin that would presuppose a rigorous demarcation of meaning of deconstruction. There is nothing to signal the epoch of its meaning.

This opens to the next chapter where the possibility of deconstruction, that in de Man seems to have lost its initiative and its ethico-political exigency, is made to hinge precisely on a certain impossibility of its margins. *There is*, perhaps, deconstruction only there where it is not, cannot be owned, attested to in its presence, nor secured against the invaginations that constitute it. De Man, that dangerous supplement, a marginal presence, is shown to be an irreducible presence of a margin inside deconstruction. In terms of its philosophical *topoi* that would come to carve out the property of deconstruction from the travesty of its rhetorical and literary perversions, deconstruction only affirms the very possibility of incursion of the literary. If there are borders between literature and philosophy, deconstruction is the borderline constituting their difference. Neither proper nor improper, it constitutes, and essentially limits, the very possibility of property. De Man can no longer be consigned to the margins in terms of this opposition because deconstruction is both traced by and is a tracing of the margin constitutive of all concepts. Philosophy, in the end, will be shown to harbour the conditions of its own impossibility.

The third chapter traces de Man's early work against the background noise of the questions of subjectivity, interiority and the structural limits of understanding that all come to place his writing in a specific horizon of

intellectual concerns brought to bear on his texts. It will not be a question here of geneticism of de Man's thought or genealogic mapping of influences but rather an exposure of certain nodal points, upheavals of condensed intellectual concerns that were to shape his critical output. A notion of irreducibly temporal poetics and finitude will carve out a threshold of transcendence that is impassable but against which alone poetry comes to inscribe its defiance. Subjectivity is forever torn and poetry is the place, the very signature of this tearing, rather than its recollection. It will fault reflexivity it initiates by writing it without end. It is a historical depository of unfinished truths and an unsurpassable memory, always larger than the capacity of consciousness to remember. Certain concerns, such as the radical uprooting of reference, that were still to come – and, indeed, haunt de Man – are already evident here and yet unacknowledged, displaced in the haze of pathos as the very tissue of time.

De Man's turn to rhetoric is considered in the following chapter where the pathos of his early writing, always a trace of the impossibility of self-reflection and the irreducible finitude that faults it, is open to a certain *jouissance* of reading. Reading no longer mourns the subject but unravels it without end in a textual shedding or misreading that is an absolute affirmation of reading but also an opening to the political as a space where the subject – if there is the political – is lost without grandeur. Concerns of temporality and subjectivity traced in his early work are here specific tropological concerns that will be given in terms of allegory as a disinscriptive syncope of temporality present in every text.

Reflections on rhetoric lead de Man to a certain perfunctory reflex of reading, an interference of the machine in the text that disconnects its cognitive wiring and

the ability to close itself off. The machine would be the disruptive possibility of the text that outmatches its potential to be read. It is not only irreducible to desire but precisely what traumatizes all desires insofar as it keeps open the possibilities of virtual presents and undesired futures that any *event* true to its name carries. The rhetorical turn in de Man, considered as politically disabling because of its obsessive referential attrition, is rather, and for precisely the same reason, what opens the agonistics of the political, leading to *too much* politics, to politics de trop.

In the last chapter, "Politics de trop," the machinal exteriority, repetition and hypomnesic degradation constitute the empty place of the political. Politics is only in the interminable unfulfillment and drift of its ground. It is in the unmasterability of reference that it will have found its conditions of possibility. The rhetorical structure of the political points to the radical impossibility of its closure. By reactivating the originary technics of the system and its radical contingency that the ideologico-referential programs push into latency, rhetoric saves the political from the terror of positivism. Rhetorical reading becomes a mnemonic device that liberates memory traces in the collective psyche and opens it to disruptive energies that constitute its very politicized. It unblocks the passage of the to-come of justice as an always other possibility, one whose infinite demand is overbearing, a constant pressure on the possible to contain more than it does. Rhetorical reading and the machine intervene in the reference regimes precisely by recalling the allegorical structuring of their authority. It is always virtual presents that haunt the very structuring of anything like polity as its undecidability that de Man's reading reactivates in a bid that saves the possibility

of imagining alternatives to the world. The exigency of reading is to keep this possibility forever open.

Chapter One

Introduction: Disfiguring de Man

... all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis. To speak of a crisis of criticism is then, to some degree, redundant.

— Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*

There is something allergenic about Paul de Man, as J. Hillis Miller writes, and it doesn't let off. "It gets under your skin, or into your nose, and 'there is a certain reaction which is bound to occur.' You sneeze or break out in a rash."³ But the fit de Man's writing provokes is one of cognition. And it seems to empty it, to hijack our right "to know" as well as our right "to do." As de Man, indeed, says: "after Nietzsche (and, indeed, after any 'text'), we can no longer hope ever 'to know' in peace" nor "can we expect 'to do' anything" in peace.⁴ The allergen seems to rescind epistemic and performative criteria that would make deciding "in peace" possible. It is what through a kind of syncope and disturbance of cognition inclines all decision to verge on the pathology of paranoia. No wonder "the rash" breaks out across the academic corpus and the resistance gets mobilised against further incursions. To unravel reactions "bound to occur," is

³ J. Hillis Miller, "Paul de Man as Allergen," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. 184.

⁴ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), p. 126. Hereafter cited as *Allegories*.

also, in a sense, to thematize precisely the anxiety of critical discourse, the expanse of its denial. The stronger the resistance to de Man, to the irreducible implications of his writing, the stronger the authority of what is resisted. This anxiety will thus form a silent deposition of this chapter that, in exposing the resistance, unavoidably exposes certain ethico-ontological presuppositions of critical discourse that de Man puts in question.

The curve of de Man's writing cannot be thought outside its collusion with deconstruction, a critical "force" that emerged in the 1960s to let loose a hesitation in the modalities governing the intellectual thought of the day. A contagion cutting in and across, wrapping itself round the edges of every discourse, from literary to popular, to expose their limits to a certain night – thinking, if it happens, as we know, happens only on the edges of light. This thinking remains even today precisely what reserves an unconditional right to question all conditions, all certainties and arbitrary constraints.⁵ And it is precisely at this point where de Man's thought intersects this radically affirmative limit-work of deconstruction that an allergenic fit sets in.⁶ For what is put in motion is the disciplinary "project" of the Yale School deconstruction, including prominent, influential theorists as J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman

⁵ Deconstruction is, one could say, only at work at/as this limit, this limit-work: "For deconstruction, if something of the sort exists, would remain above all, in my view, an unconditional rationalism that never renounces... the possibility of suspending in an argued, deliberated, rational fashion, all conditions, hypotheses, conventions, and presuppositions, and of criticising unconditionally all conditionalities, including those that still found the critical idea, namely, those of the *krinein*, of the *krisis*, of the binary or dialectical decision or judgment." Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2005), p. 142.

⁶ It was at the international conference on the status of literary theory in 1966, held at John Hopkins University, that de Man was introduced to "deconstruction," a term presented and unleashed upon the institutional protocols for reading by Jacques Derrida, specifying a new form of "criticism" whose implications were in close affinity with de Man's critical concerns about the reliability of language and the radical impossibility of closure or total reading.

and, to an extent, Harold Bloom, with Paul de Man at the vanguard as one of the principal figures in (mis)appropriating Derrida's thought and claiming it for literary criticism. Under the sober judgment of contemporary thought, the Yale School brand has been denounced for having bastardised what is an event of deconstruction, its untimeliness, and for having debordered its limits⁷ and commodified its initiative, turning it into a discursive disciplinary enterprise for producing readings. What deconstruction, according to Derrida, decidedly is not, "neither a methodological reform that should reassure the organization in place nor a flourish of irresponsible and irresponsible-making deconstruction, whose most certain effect would be to leave everything as it is and to consolidate the most immobile forces within the university,"⁸ is readily attributed to de Man.

The iterability of enterprise is inimical to the initiative of deconstruction because it is precisely the institutional regimes and epistemo-political programs governing our practices that deconstruction calls into question.⁹ It is what reactivates difference that unblocks foreclusive regulative structures.

Deconstruction is not "a specialised set of discursive procedures, still less the rules of a new hermeneutic method that works on texts and utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution" but, Derrida continues, "at the very least, a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and

⁷ As if an event had policed borders; the event is precisely what is unrepresentable, and hence without limits, what in its very eventfulness exceeds limits, takes them by surprise, what comes as the always exceptional, untimely, excepting itself from the instituted limits, always anew and irreplaceably. But more of this later.

⁸ Qtd. in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 156. Hereafter cited as *On Deconstruction*.

⁹ In "On Colleges and Philosophy," Derrida writes: "I will insist that there is no such thing as a deconstructive *enterprise* – the idea of a project is incompatible with deconstruction. Deconstruction is a situation." Jacques Derrida, "On Colleges and Philosophy: Jacques Derrida with Geoffrey Bennington," in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p. 222.

institutional structures that make possible and govern our practices, our competences, our performances” (qtd. in *On Deconstruction*, 156). In de Man, however, it seems to lose its radically affirmative exigency of questioning unconditionally the powers that be.

Deconstruction, as Jeffrey T. Nealon writes, was challenged in literary departments by “calls for rehistoricizing and recontextualizing the study of literature.”¹⁰ Literary text was to be reinstated as a register of social, political and historical stresses but also saved from the ravages of “self-cancelling textualism” (22), almost an axiomatic of deconstructive pressure upon texts. The critics of deconstruction have either seen it as a dead-end formalism, which, in denying meaning altogether by its nihilistic method of aporetic reading, provides the same totalising logic of New Criticism it had set out to displace, or as a reactionary abdication of responsibility, starving the text of its political accountability. Uniform disclosure of textual undecidability, an impasse or aporetic opening that no text can escape, “places the reader in an impossible situation that cannot end in triumph,” Culler writes, “but only in an outcome already deemed inappropriate: an unwarranted choice or a failure to choose” (*On Deconstruction*, 81). As such, deconstruction seems to pronounce judgment on the aporetic structure of all judgments, their essential precipitousness, but, in its exposure, somehow remains outside them: “It is a suprahistorical criticism that pretends to speak from a position free of ideology – that is, from an absolute

¹⁰ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 22. By and large in the US and particularly after the disclosure in *The New York Times* (1987) of de Man’s early contributions to *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land*, both administered by the collaborators during the German occupation. Hereafter cited as *Double Reading*.

point of view.”¹¹ It exceeds the constituted powers that it questions and ultimately re-anchors, rather than disrupts, the existing hierarchies that govern the field. Terry Eagleton never tires of testifying to the political impassivity and the noncommittal pragmatics of deconstruction – although it is not at all certain that the political can be exhausted by the pragmatic, as we shall see later.

Deconstruction, he writes,

now reaches out and colonises... history, rewriting it in its own image, viewing famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifle as yet more undecidable ‘text’. Since prudent men and women are not prone to take action in situations whose significance is not reasonably clear, this viewpoint is not without its implications for one’s style of social and political life... It frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issues, since what you say of such things will be no more than a passing product of the signifier and so in no sense to be taken as ‘true’ or ‘serious’... Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition.¹²

It is as if deconstruction had colonised all the discourses of social practice and emptied them of meaning, signifying content or consequence, to the benefit of the exterior signs. The world is drained of pathos and what is left is an arbitrary act of reading which defines it, and the act itself is yet another triumph of textual undecidability.

However, the allergen of deconstruction that provokes such systemic fits is not usually associated with deconstruction proper. For there is a *property* of

¹¹ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1986), p. 139. Hereafter cited as *The Tain*.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 125-27. Hereafter cited as *Literary Theory*.

deconstruction, an all-rights-reserved constructed by the discourse itself, as we shall see. It implies split allegiances, an immanent conspiracy as it were, even a *coup d'état*, within its borders. The criticism deconstruction has suffered never fails to distinguish between a deconstruction as an intervention, marked by resistance, a counter-mark, and an abortive, “irresponsible-making” deconstruction of the Yale School. John M. Ellis, when writing *Against Deconstruction*, is attentive enough to inscribe in a footnote that “the character of deconstruction in its French origin is quite different from that of its American adoption. In France, deconstruction is part of a revolt against an extremely narrow rationalist tradition in criticism and, more broadly, in cultural life... while the American counterpart represents only a new way to cling to an old set of attitudes.”¹³

This distinction may seem imperative in view of the fact that the critical insights reached by de Man and Derrida respectively, more often than not, have been misplaced as deconstruction was “commodified for an American market, simplified and watered down for use in how-to books, which gave (and continue to give) an entire generation of literature students a suspiciously de Manian overview of what was supposedly Derrida’s work” (Nealon, *Double Reading*, 28). Christopher Norris, for instance, positions a deconstructive momentum in the notion of textual undecidability, arrival “at a limit-point or deadlocked *aporia* of meaning which offers no hold for Marxist-historical understanding,”¹⁴ and which is grounded in the irreducible metaphoricity of language that forecloses

¹³ John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 1989), p. 154.

¹⁴ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 79. Hereafter cited as *DTP*.

any possibility of other than tropological truth. “The textual ‘ideology’ uncovered by Derrida’s readings is a kind of aboriginal swerve into metaphor and figurative detour which language embraces through an error of thought unaccountable in Marxist terms” (*DTP*, 79). It becomes a politically disabling, errant rhetorical effect. This, indeed, is a distinctive de Manian gesture revealing the metaphoricity of conceptual structures upon which the text relies, and “a suspiciously de Manian overview” of deconstructive reading is sustained. However, an opening of a text onto the intolerable experience of the undecidable – that without which there would be no decision – the fact that all texts, as de Man writes, “compel us to choose while destroying the foundations of any choice... [and finally] tell the allegory of a judicial decision that can be neither judicious nor just” (*Allegories*, 245), is also, according to the critics, what leaves the system of oppositions intact. Whereas Derrida tries to trace the totalising logic which leads to an impasse in order to intervene, displace and rethink the grounds of the system experiencing its own closure, for de Man, Nealon writes, “the determination (as indetermination) that no text can escape” is a teleological closure of a deconstructive critical project, that which “deconstructive readings seek to reveal” (*Double Reading*, 35, 36).

Unreadability, for de Man, or the fact that the same text can lead to radically irreconcilable readings (a text, he writes “can literally be called ‘unreadable’ in that it leads to a set of assertions that radically exclude each other.” *Allegories*, 245) is irreducibly grounded in metaphor – that is, in language whose economy always bears witness to its own failure, to the fact that “convergence of the referential and the figural signification can never be

established, the reference can never be a meaning” (*Allegories*, 208). For Derrida, textual undecidability is structural rather than rhetorical; it is what frees up the latent energies of the text, the unthought conditions of its possibility, opening its reference to alternate futures. Discursive contradictions are a profound textual resource, the most affirmative opening to the possibility of an event or a decision taken by the other. Deconstruction affirms that there is always something left unthought, what cannot be brought to account, the impossible that holds all possibility to ransom. However, we shall see later that commitment to (the) other (of) reading, what also preserves the alterity of the text, is not foreign to de Man’s writing but constitutes the very energy and pull of its responsibility. In “Outwork,” Derrida writes that “deconstruction involves an indispensable phase of *reversal*.” But to

remain content with reversal is of course to operate within the immanence of the system to be destroyed... to sit back, in order to go *further*, in order to be more radical or more daring, and take an attitude of neutralising indifference with respect to the classical oppositions would be to give free rein to the existing forces that effectively and historically dominate the field. It would be, for not having seized the means to *intervene*, to confirm the established equilibrium. (6)

Deconstruction that denies meaning, that is a nihilistic death sentence of every reference, that grants primacy to the aporetic, to dead-ends to which literature is destined by the foreknowledge that all texts are allegories of their own unreadability, as de Man contends, is the allergen of any positivist rationality. The dominant reading of Derrida, “the reading upon which the sceptical and political critiques of deconstruction are based,” is, for Nealon, the

tropological or rhetorical reading, which radically “fails to account for the complexities of Derrida’s work” (*Double Reading*, 26). The tropological deconstructive practice becomes a spawning device for its own disintegrative premise, a set of discursive procedures and a new negative hermeneutic that reveals the forestructure of all literature as a witness to its own unreadability. It exposes the structural limit of language as the negative interchange that constitutes the text and suspends any determined meaning or the very possibility of *krinein*. Since this possibility names the very possibility of criticism,¹⁵ it is, at the same time, what solicits – in Derrida’s sense of shaking the totality – the entire discipline. If reading, as de Man says, “is a praxis that thematizes its own thesis about the impossibility of thematization” (*Allegories*, 209), then it thematizes precisely what always remains unthematized, which opens the text towards irreparable losses and cuts across and reverses the very possibility of decision, of mastery of meaning upon which all criticism rests. For de Man, as for Derrida, what threatens the very discipline of criticism is what makes anything like reading possible.¹⁶ What is exposed in reading is always the ruin of criticism, criticism (is) (in) crisis. But this is affirmative, and precisely insofar as it disaffirms the possibility of reading, precisely insofar as it tends to a certain

¹⁵ Gasché: “The critical enterprise is, as its name reveals, a philosophical enterprise. It is linked to the possibility of the *krinein* – that is, to the possibility of decision – of a mastery of the meaning or signified of the literary text” (*The Tain*, 262).

¹⁶ Reading in de Man is a counterintuitive praxis. It is what incompletes the violence of aesthetic closure and the totalising project of criticism. It breaks open the possibility of reimagining virtual presents; in other words, *it desediments thinking by proposing it to an always-there of its otherwise*. Reading is what, for de Man, no totality of thought can encompass. It measures only an excess of totality. It is radically disruptive insofar as it puts the instituted protocols for reading in question. One only ever reads against the horizon of the impossibility of reading. Cf. chapter below, “Reading Con: Rhetoric, Allegory and the Machine,” for further reference on what can only be a radical exigency of reading otherwise. Cf. also note 243 below, for what Gasché identifies as a “nonphenomenal reading” in de Man, a certain *para*-reading, a pressure and assault on cognition.

syncopation in every text that limits all self-reflexivity, that prevents the text, in other words, to close in upon itself.

However, for the critics of deconstruction, determinacy as indeterminacy is both constitutive of the text initially and is the text's *telos* finally. Not only is it a laying waste of literature but a wasteland of the political, nothing short of a culture machine dispensing radical relativism that vacates all power positions and makes the politicised space a site of loss without the possibility of reterritorialisation. And, having been subject to didactic demands for transmissible and controlled meaning, it has become an "easily reproducible disciplinary project," a methodology that, in its iterability and general claim, reassures its institutional commodification as a critical practice *par excellence*. Still, "it is important to distinguish among deconstructions," Nealon writes, in order to shore up, "to recall the specificity that is at the heart of Derrida's itinerary." For, "when deconstruction becomes a method, its specificity is lost; the singularity of deconstruction and its concern with alterity becomes smoothed out into an all-encompassing, easily reproducible disciplinary project, a project to which Derrida's texts pose an essential question" (*Double Reading*, 48).

De Man is thus played out against "the singularity of deconstruction and its concern with alterity." A certain "orthodoxy" of deconstruction cannot let itself be seduced by its misappropriations, by the play of its "specificity." One must "distinguish among deconstructions," "it is important" to separate, and all separation is a souvenir of *crisis* (from *krinein*, "to separate, decide, judge").¹⁷

¹⁷ For Derrida, crisis would be "the moment when simple decision is no longer possible, where the choice between opposing paths is suspended." Jacques Derrida, "Mallarmé," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 113. The moment, in

“We can speak of a crisis,” de Man writes, “when a ‘separation’ takes place, by self-reflection, between what... is in conformity with the original intent and what has irrevocably fallen away from this source.”¹⁸ In terms of deconstruction and its legitimacy, crisis is taxonomic, it becomes necessary in order to shore up what “is in conformity with the original intent,” a kind of phenomenological bracketing that will restore ownness, meaning and property of deconstruction. It is a crisis that consolidates by tearing apart. And it does so by “self-reflection.” Deconstruction, however, is precisely what is not self-reflexive. It is itself always *re-marked*,¹⁹ inscribed back as a mark in the structure of referrals it no longer and, in fact, never has governed. Being itself reactivated as a mark, its self-relation can only be one of self-deferral that can never quite finish accounting for its own movement. Deconstruction can never gather itself in reflexivity. It is even only this “falling away” from the source. However, crisis will have, “by self-reflection,” pronounced judgement and secured the distinction between deconstruction proper, “what is in conformity with the original intent,” and “what has irrevocably fallen away from this source.” It is what will mark and

other words, when judgement trembles, breaks down, apprehensive, before the abyss of ground. The moment where decision is none other than a leap of faith. An indecision then before which we kneel defeated, paralysed, not knowing. But a moment in every decision. *It is hesitation that summons responsibility from the depths of indecision.*

¹⁸ Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 8.

¹⁹ Deconstruction does not escape – neither in Derrida nor in de Man, as we shall see later – this structure of *re-marking*. It is not itself a master term *hors-texte* but is put back in, and thus essentially incompletable by, the system of traces, the very insignia of the other, that it designates. This is what Derrida writes of a “general text:” “*There is such a general text everywhere that (that is, everywhere) this discourse and its order (essence, sense, truth, meaning, consciousness, ideality, etc.) are overflowed, that is, everywhere that their authority is put back into the position of a mark in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern... The writing of this text, moreover, has the exterior limit only of a certain re-mark.*” Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), pp. 59-60. Deconstruction is not exempt from the “general text” that it names, but is itself *re-marked*, and thus never in full possession of itself. It is thus not, as its critics contend, transcendent in any sense – although it is perhaps a mark at/of the threshold. In other words, deconstruction does not exceed the history of its misappropriations by which, in fact, it is carried and articulated.

maintain the borders between what warrants the identity of deconstruction and what does not. For one cannot play on both sides of the border without collusion, without the border giving way to erasure.

Deconstruction, however, never remains in absolute proximity to itself. To police it is to police the very voiding of the borders within which its status is guaranteed. Because deconstruction always plays on both sides of the border. It is never truly, only, where it is but always, and at the same time, on the other side. And this is precisely why deconstruction is not an easily defined and “reproducible disciplinary project.” Where it is, the border will have been outflanked. It will always shun its own limits, bend to its own margins, weaving its threads round them, making them spin, crossing over and pulling back, reserving itself in the hollow of difference. What one dreams of watching over is what was never there *as such* to begin with. For, there is no *as such* of deconstruction, nor is there any “specificity” of its dis-course. What one thinks one saves, in other words, is precisely what one fears. It is an attempt to master, to think what flirts with the other that is always other of thought.²⁰

²⁰ Madness, Derrida says, “a certain ‘madness’ *must* keep a lookout over every step, and finally watch over thinking...” Jacques Derrida, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al., ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 363. Deconstruction, in terms of its radical pledge to the other, would be the madness and tireless maddening of thought. But this is a chance for thought, the constitutive and necessary condition of anything like its future. Only by risking madness and night, the loss of meaning, does thought remain open to the horizon of its possibilities. Also in “Cogito and the History of Madness:” “To define philosophy as the attempt-to-say-the-hyperbole is to confess – and philosophy is perhaps this gigantic confession – that by virtue of the historical enunciation through which philosophy tranquilizes itself and excludes madness, philosophy also betrays itself (or betrays itself as thought), enters into a crisis and a forgetting of itself that are an essential and necessary period of its movement. I philosophize only in *terror*, in the *confessed* terror of going mad. The confession is simultaneously, at its *present* moment, oblivion and unveiling, protection and exposure: economy. But this crisis in which reason is madder than madness – for reason is nonmeaning and oblivion... this crisis has always begun and is interminable.” Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 75-76.

In *Literary Theory*, Eagleton writes of a certain “travesty of Derrida’s own work:”

If the American deconstructionists considered that their textual enterprise was faithful to the spirit of Jacques Derrida, one of those who did not was Jacques Derrida... Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force. He is not seeking, absurdly, to deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, historical continuities; he is seeking rather to see such things as the effects of a wider and deeper history – of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices. (128)

The complicity of de Man’s thought with political apathy and the disempowerment of the political subject implied by his critics is closely aligned with his historiographical scepticism. For de Man, historical discourse is all too often grounded in the mimetic nature of language. It takes reference for granted and represents historical causality as empirical phenomena. However, these phenomena are the effects of the figurative patterns and tropes of historical discourse. History is the nominal writing that chronicles the past in order to account for and justify historical events. Its narrative unity, however, which informs them with coherence, is generated by the discourse itself rather than a continuity found in the phenomenal world. There is, in other words, an essential disturbance in the historical archive that remains unaccounted for, but one that opens history to reading we will never have finished. It is a specific form of language, a “Cratylic language” that dissimulates the rhetorical status of its own

discourse, “the writer’s quest for a perfect coincidence of the phonic properties of a word with its signifying function.”²¹ De Man identifies here an ideologically duplicitous movement that makes us confound signs with phenomena and assign the past an order of progression that is an effect of tropo-economic systems of language rather than the property constitutive of the world. Historical objectivity, however, assumes the relation between names and phenomena to be naturally motivated. History is made accessible by a metaphoric erasure of linguistic agency, by “a convergence of the phenomenal aspects of language, as sound, with its signifying function as referent” (*RT*, 9). The world enters a historical jurisdiction in which signs correspond to causes and offers itself to monosemic, totalitarian registers of reading, which somehow circumvent rhetoricity and the inherent obliqueness of its articulation. For de Man, historical writing, in terms of the narrative unity and referentialism it posits, is by no means a privileged form of writing. It is subject, like any other narrative, to a decapitated intentionality of its discourse, the impossibility of the sign to fully coincide with its reference. However, a distinctive propensity of historical writing, by nature the very movement of phenomenological concealment, is to dissimulate this duplicity and its own exposure to ideological interest.

In “The Critic as Host,” Miller writes: “If ‘deconstructionist principles’ are taken seriously, he [M. H. Abrams] says, ‘any history which relies on written texts becomes an impossibility.’ So be it... A certain notion of history or of literary history, like a certain notion of determinable reading, might indeed be an

²¹ Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), p. 9. Hereafter cited as *RT*.

impossibility, and if so, it might be better to know that.”²² History does become an impossibility precisely, as de Man insists, in virtue of its enslavement to written texts: “[T]he bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions.”²³ There can be no distinction between history and the writing of history. History becomes an impossibility, however, only insofar as it remains caught in a certain metaphysics of its language, its ethico-ontological value as the unmediated expression of the being of the referent. Nihilism attributed to de Man (“Nihilism – that word has inevitably come up as a label for ‘deconstruction,’ secretly or overtly present as the name for what is feared from the new mode of criticism and from its ability to devalue all values, making traditional modes of interpretation ‘impossible.’” “Critic as Host,” 185), then becomes rather a critical demand that necessitates reactivation of critical heritage to overtask the categories governing interpretative modes of understanding history and keep open the passage for the new ones to emerge.²⁴ It becomes, as Miller writes, “an

²² J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 177-78.

²³ Paul de Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 165.

²⁴ For Giorgio Agamben, nihilism is the facing up to an insurmountable challenge that modern thought solicits by the very rigour of its critique, “the Copernican revolution” of our time to which all contemporary thought must answer. And it is a challenge de Man’s entire oeuvre testifies to. Agamben: “If God was the name of language, ‘God is dead’ can only mean that there is no longer a name for language. The fulfilled revelation of language is a word completely abandoned by God. And human beings are thrown into language without having a voice or a divine word to guarantee them a possibility of escape from the infinite play of meaningful propositions. Thus we finally find ourselves alone with our words; for the first time we are truly alone with language, abandoned without any final foundation. This is the Copernican revolution that the thought of our time inherits from nihilism: we are the first human beings who have become completely conscious of language. For the first time, what preceding generations called God, Being, spirit, unconscious appear to us as what they are: names for language. This is why for us, any philosophy, any religion, or any knowledge that has not become conscious of this turn belongs irrevocably to the past... We now look without veils upon language, which, having breathed out all divinity and all unsayability, is now wholly revealed, *absolutely in the*

inalienable alien presence” and “the latent ghost encrypted within any expression of a logocentric system” (“Critic as Host,” 185, 186), an unrelieved exigency, in other words, of critical vigilance. Consensus required for such a practice that dismantles and remounts conventional, narrativist interpretative models will be denied precisely in view of the fact that it was extended to the received set of principles deconstruction places in question.

De Man’s rejection of historical models of understanding literature comes from a radical suspicion of the forms of writing that implicitly motivate the foundational notion of presence in language. However, for Marxist-historicist critical thought, history provides a horizon for the ceaseless emancipation of the collective subject, the critical awareness of which is the condition of the possibility of change. Deconstruction, according to Eagleton’s verdict, “sees social reality less as oppressively determinate than as yet more shimmering webs of undecidability stretching to the horizon” (*Literary Theory*, 126). Eagleton furthers his charge to suggest that the Yale deconstructive practice is a formal textual practice, suspending the very terrain that constitutes the material conditions of discursivity, the “real sphere of struggle.” It becomes a linguistic monism destined by its methodology to “churn out,” time and again, the same excess of meaning that destabilises any given reading rather than question the traditional structures of thought and the institutional practice that sustains it:

Anglo-American deconstruction largely ignores this real sphere of struggle, and continues to churn out its closed critical texts. Such texts are closed precisely because they are empty: there is little to be done

beginning.” Giorgio Agamben, “The Idea of Language,” in *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1999), pp. 45-46, emphasis added.

with them beyond admiring the relentlessness with which all 'positive' particles of textual meaning have been dissolved away. Such dissolution is an imperative in the academic game of deconstruction... (127)

The charge takes its departure in de Man's conception of history as a writing constantly covering up its own ungroundedness and the primacy extended to rhetoric. *Hors-texte* is that which history cannot escape plotting. As such, it cannot escape the tropological nature of its discourse. In "Criticism and Crisis," de Man writes: "Historical 'changes' are not like changes in nature, and the vocabulary of change and movement as it applies to historical process is a mere metaphor, not devoid of meaning, but without an objective correlative that can unambiguously be pointed to in empirical reality..." (6). This is where historical narrativisation betrays its own duplicity. It proceeds to unravel the meaning of historical changes independently of the modes of its enunciation. In other words, it claims to reflect what it actually produces. It skirts round the edge of metaphor and rests its legitimacy on a forgetting of its silhouette. All writing is summoned by difference not by identity, by the indefinite reserve of presence, "the diversion and the reserve of what does not appear."²⁵ The authority of historical writing, however, is warranted precisely by an unwarranted suppression and anonymity of this difference. Exposing the archives of history as *archives*, as textual stresses "without an objective correlative that can unambiguously be pointed to in empirical reality," de Man is surreptitiously disarticulating the relation between the moment of acting, the empowered agency of the subject, and a historical consciousness of the past that motivates it, the

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1997), p. 69.

very relation upon which any historical understanding accountable in Marxist terms rests. In the rhetorical recesses of de Man's writing, what is seemingly at risk, the transcendental reading itself, is thus what implicitly disrupts the traditional model of politically informed criticism, which is reliant precisely on the intersecting moment of critical historical awareness and empowered agency for change. The irrepressible exigency towards referential grounding of what scatters every possible ground is called into question and this, for de Man, is a nonnegotiable demand of reading, but, in that it is, it is also what calls for endless negotiation. It is what reactivates the repressed annals of history that reissue a call for a historical reading that is always to be done. History, in de Man, as we shall see later, is always "brushed against the grain," to use Benjamin's idiom.²⁶

This disidentificatory practice could be seen as a rearticulation of radical contestation that is constitutive of political space. What in de Man thus seems to withdraw before existence in its sacrifice of what grounds the criteria of responsibility is all the more responsible in that it relegitimizes the exigency of questioning of that which grounds the criteria of responsibility. De Man writes:

²⁶ The task of rewriting history from the underbelly of its triumphs, so to speak. Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 248. This is not to identify de Man's task here with "historical materialism" – although "materialism," as we shall see in the last chapter, a certain paleonymic regrouping of the term outside the tradition, a stolen materialism, one could say, is not at all unrelated to de Man's writing (cf. below, note 272, for instance) – but rather to suggest an opening of history to reading, that is to say, to the shadow of its unwritten records that destabilise its present but make possible alternate and irreducible futures to which the traces of the other, history carries by erasing, are pledged. The demand "to brush history against the grain" is that history, in its writing, be carried by a sworn allegiance to its unwritten accounts.

What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness [the notion that reference is a function of language] is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. (*RT*, 11)

Ideology, for de Man, is an abuse of language. A tropic movement of analogism that dissimulates the arbitrary proximity between sign and meaning and grounds language in a fiction of legislative beginnings. It phenomenalizes the trope making two essentially heterogeneous orders cohere, providing thus a stable epistemological system of substitutions that gives the signifier referential anchor and semantic depth. It institutes and determines meaning by suppression of difference. To deconstruct a textual claim is thus to lay bare the referential aberration of language, to expose ideology at work. In other words, it is to reveal the rhetorical and, therefore, contingent structuring of power. "One can see," then, de Man writes,

why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating correspondence between sign and meaning, since they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness. On the other hand, theories of language that put into question the subservience, resemblance, or potential identity between

sign and meaning are always subversive, even if they remain strictly confined to linguistic phenomena.²⁷

It is thus the semantic voiding or rather the arbitrariness of conceptual content in relation to the signifier that, as de Man contends, “gives the language considerable freedom from referential restraint, but it makes it epistemologically highly suspect and volatile, since its use can no longer be said to be determined by considerations of truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and pain” (*RT*, 10). If reference is a mere effect of the systematic play of differences, the structure of the trace that relays and inclines one signifier to the other, than there is no *hors-texte*. If behind signification – what would ground it – is only more signification then we truly are alone with language and any epistemological, ethical or aesthetic categories ideology uses to reproduce the stability of the hegemonic order are put in question insofar as the force of their authority cannot be derived from anything outside the structure and the movement of signification that constitute it. De Man thus exposes the *graphic* nature of the referent, its writtenness, and the essential instability of its determination.²⁸ This is far from political quietism; on the contrary, it is precisely what enables “political critique.” Norris writes:

²⁷ Paul de Man, “Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism” (1972), in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E. S. Burt et al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 170.

²⁸ “Contemporary literary theory,” de Man writes, “comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts... The phenomenality of the signifier, as sound, is unquestionably involved in the correspondence between the name and the thing named, but the link, the relationship between word and thing, is not phenomenal but conventional” (*RT*, 8, 10). The exposure of the “conventionality” of this relationship is nothing but the exposure of the contingency of the social that also enables its revision. The irreducible gap between “word and thing” is both what enables the foundationalist fictions of ideology while at the same time being the very means of their undoing.

For de Man, then, the ethics of reading is closely bound up with a political critique of the powers vested in aesthetic ideology...

Deconstruction would then be a vigilant practice of textual critique alert to those moments where the drive for aesthetic transcendence creates the kind of timeless, mystified ideal of 'tradition' (or 'unified sensibility')...²⁹

Aesthetic or symbolic totalisation – the confusion of “reference with phenomenalism” (*RT*, 11) – that writing interrupts, opens and turns aside without re-turn,³⁰ is precisely the ideologico-aesthetic transcendence of heterogeneous orders. By naturalising the sign, ideology provides a mythologised narrative of beginnings that tethers language to the origins supposedly outside it. De Man’s writing, insofar as it exposes a disjunction in the relation between “the symbol and what is being symbolised,”³¹ interrupts or desubstantiates the myth and does so by unmasking its fictionality. If ideology, in Althusser’s idiom, “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,”³² then the representational aspect is realised through the mimetic function attributed to the sign in order to instantiate a particular state of affairs as naturally motivated. The illusion of ideologico-aesthetic totalisation is mimetological, the effacement

²⁹ Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 118-19.

³⁰ The movement of writing scatters origins in its very attempt to weave its figures. The recuperative or totalising power of language – that is to say, its ideology in de Man’s terms – to appropriate or reconstitute the living present in a complete figure, symbol or metaphor that work by resemblance, is threatened by writing that exposes precisely the impossibility or interruption of its completion; writing disseminates it without return – that is, metonymically. Writing is thus the effraction of every circle and is what every ideology will try to suppress insofar as it inevitably frays at the edges of its economy.

³¹ One could say simply “relation” here because what separates is what puts *in* relation. Relation already presupposes difference. This relation, de Man goes on, is “a disjunction on the level of tropes between the trope as such and the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions.” Paul de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), p. 89.

³² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 162.

of the sign that becomes a mark in Derrida's sense, no longer a supplementary mark inscribed or re-marked in the series of marks but precisely governing the series, which is to say, outside the system of inscription. The ideological sign is no longer a sign but precisely the closure of signification. By constantly reactivating difference, de Man's writings unmask this very mode of ideological phenomenalization by breaking open the vertigo of re-marking, a *mise en abyme* of reference in an infinite drift of ground that never saturates the field. And it is precisely this infinite errance and the lack of any foreseeable program that makes responsibility inescapable. That there is an effraction of rapport between the linguistic sign and its referent, an empty space that fissures the referent insofar as it articulates it – in other words, a disjunction between the name and the thing – is precisely what gives traction to political strategies in their legitimation of authority. The gap then is both what makes political programs possible but, at the same time, also what voids them of authority insofar as it exposes the constructed nature of their legitimacy. De Man never tires of this exposure. Insofar as ideology is an organised amnesia of its own ungroundedness – most at work when internalised, unrecognizable³³ – de Man's rhetorical critique that exposes the ungrounded nature of our discourse, which is the condition of possibility of anything like politics, rather than being a withdrawal, is what opens up the play

³³ Ideology is most at work precisely when effaced, when *anti-physis*, to use Roland Barthes's vocabulary, what is essentially constructed, operates as *pseudo-physis*, as essence: history-become-nature. What is natural is what is most ideologically valorised. Although the semiological structuralist critique of ideology and its demystifying rigour is, in de Man's view, critically irreversible, it fails to recognise the inadequacy of its own discourse and falls prey to the very mystification whose logic it reaches to expose. It does not account for the irreducible referential aberration it is bound to produce in the very process of its own critique and thus compounds the exact error it demystifies. Cf. de Man on Barthes here in "Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993), pp. 164-181. Cf. also note 285 below for further reference.

of the political. Politics only ever is insofar as it continues to stray, irremediably lost, away from ground. We shall return to this notion of the political that reactivates itself precisely by voiding all political programs.³⁴ “In these all too summary evocations of arguments,” de Man writes, “we begin to perceive some of the answers to the initial question: what is it about literary theory that is so threatening that it provokes such strong resistances and attacks?” The immediate response of *The Resistance to Theory* is that “it upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings...” (11).

Rhetoric, in de Man, and its insistence on the irreducibility of a certain metaphorology of all concepts,³⁵ also seems to deconstitute the philosophical difference of deconstruction, to efface “philosophy” that, Gasché writes, “is spelled out in capital letters throughout Derrida’s work, his seemingly more playful texts included” (*The Tain*, 8). De Man’s work systematically disarticulates a tenuous margin that secures the possibility and constitution of rigorous philosophemes over and against the exorbitances of literature precisely by “forcing it [philosophy] to deliver the metaphorical credentials of its concepts” (308). De Man’s deconstructive readings are thus a systemic assault on

³⁴ Cf. chapter below, “Politics de trop,” where this possibility and (de)constitution of the political space, in terms of its essential emptiness, is further engaged.

³⁵ For de Man, as for Nietzsche, rhetoricity inhabits all epistemic concerns. De Man on tropes: “As soon as one is willing to be made aware of their epistemological implications, concepts are tropes and tropes concepts.” Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1996), p. 43. The tropological nature of language is thus part of the cognitive structures of knowledge. Cognition, for de Man, is nothing other than the process of tropological totalisation and, as such, the structure of cognitive processes is inherently rhetorical. For Gasché, however, any such general metaphorology inevitably fails precisely because metaphor *is* a concept that any general metaphorology must presuppose. One concept in the system, “‘the founding’ trope of the project of a metaphorology” (*The Tain*, 309), thus always remains unaccounted for – “*plus de métaphore*” that keeps the field open, as Derrida has shown. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), pp. 219-20.

the possibility of philosophical inquiry whose limits Derrida interrogates but “not insofar as this discourse may be construed as literary (sensible, fictional, and so on) because of its inevitable recourse to metaphor and poetic devices, but insofar as it is a *general discourse on the universal*.” Derrida, in other words, writes in order to account for the “nonorigin” of philosophical concepts whereas the “literary dimension of the philosophical text,” as Gasché continues, “is by nature incapable of pointing to, let alone accounting for, this constituting nonorigin of philosophy” (*The Tain*, 316). Deconstruction is a *philosophical* index of the impossibility of philosophy and should be returned to the proper history of its exposition. It is a question of “retranslation of Derrida’s writings back into the technical language of philosophy and its accepted set of questions” (8). As if to finally return the question of philosophy to philosophers and history and literature to literary historians. At the hands of de Man, history loses grip of its object, distinctions blur, philosophy gives way to rhetoric, deconstruction to in-difference. Gasché thus, in order to redeem from an uninterrupted erosion, from the depths of in-difference, the wreckage of “philosophical difference,” writes:

de Man’s reading of philosophy is not *about* philosophy. It tries to show little or no concern about philosophy. It is a reading that challenges philosophical difference by not being about it, by not referring to it, by making no difference with respect to it. In contrast to philosophy, de Man’s readings do not attempt to make any difference. In this sense they are “different,” idiosyncratic to a point where, by making no point, they will have perhaps made their point – so singular as to make no

difference but, perhaps, in that total apathy a formidable challenge to philosophical difference.³⁶

De Man is at the margins of deconstruction precisely for having revealed a certain in-difference of its margins to literature and to philosophy, a certain absent pivot round which these margins are gathered, a certain polysemy that will always prevent deconstruction to close in upon its own. This polysemy does not come from an outside, from elsewhere of deconstruction, surrounding its margins, but is precisely its pivot, an emptiness that makes it turn ever so slightly but inexorably from itself and makes it misalign itself with itself, makes it enter fully what it has always been. For deconstruction has not entered crisis, it is, if there ever is any, only ever in crisis. It is thus at the hands of de Man, one could say, that deconstruction comes into its own, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Patiently, however, with a reckoning, threads of disavowal weave around de Man's thought a snare of "faithfulness" to the "spirit of Jacques Derrida" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 128). A bond and a debt, one could say, to the host, a debt that can never be repaid, that is always binding, wraps itself around de Man's writing, shadowing its every word with threats of disapproval. It is a faithfulness that dictates, points fingers and calls for censure. A faithfulness to the law that must be there in order to indicate a deviation, a departure from the law, always denounced as improper, wayward, as a threat to what is proper, to the authority of the host. It is a faithfulness that measures the expanse of denial, that anticipates the faithless, that which is not itself, from the outset, in itself. These threads come at once to disavow and, by that very disavowal, determine

³⁶ Rodolphe Gasché, "In-difference to Philosophy," in *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard UP, 1998), pp. 89-90.

the law, determine what is proper to deconstruction, as if deconstruction had a law or a host apart from the text. Whoever watches over deconstruction proper, and thus restricts its unconditional licence to play at perverting the laws that restrict its play, its insistent decentring of its own terms to reveal an emptiness and impropriety of its concept that is essential and proper to it – precisely those, that is, who safeguard deconstruction against its prostitution – whoever then anticipates and thus annuls its pure eventfulness, the unforeseeability of its play, at the same time, at once, cancels its future. For it is precisely this unforeseeability, the hollowness of its concept and the blank at its centre that constitute its future. Deconstruction harbours a continual possibility from within itself to be carried outside itself.

De Man's writing has thus "fallen away" from "the source" to expose deconstruction in crisis. It has betrayed its host to the point of a parasite become host. Hence the pressing need to safeguard the host, to recuperate the authentic from an imposture, from what threatens to pass itself off as the host itself. Because it fails, Nealon writes, "to account for the complexities of Derrida's work" (*Double Reading*, 26), it is determined as a derivate and an absence. Two consequences: de Man's failure is the failure to assign limits to deconstruction; this failure is inherent in the very "concept" of deconstruction that is always in misalignment with itself. If there is a law of deconstruction, it is a differential law. Différance at the origin cancels all origins. Deconstruction thus proceeds without identity always ahead of itself or behind itself, lacking the it-self of itself. It is therefore proper only when improper, when faithless and inadequate to itself, when crossing its own margins. Deconstruction is a failure of

deconstruction, possible only as impossible.³⁷ Second, de Man's failure is also a chance of deconstruction. Insofar as it is thus foreign to its own concept, in excess or lack of it, or rather insofar as its concept is what eludes conceptuality,³⁸ deconstruction opens itself up to its own prostitution. It is as improper to itself that it is. What appears thus to threaten deconstruction is what constitutes it. Crisis did not befall deconstruction, deconstruction is this very crisis. It becomes an allegory of a failure to constitute deconstruction. De Man is already there. In "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," which precedes Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, de Man already anticipates the mode of crisis, a certain rupture in critical discourse, which deconstruction would later appropriate as its own:

As it refines its interpretations more and more, American criticism does not discover a single meaning, but a plurality of significations that can be radically opposed to each other. Instead of revealing a continuity affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity. Almost in spite of itself, it pushes the interpretative process so far that the analogy between the organic world and the language of poetry finally explodes.

³⁷ In "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," Derrida, in fact, insists upon this failure of deconstruction: "... the most rigorous deconstruction has never claimed to be foreign to literature, nor above all to be *possible*. And I would say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible; also that those who would rush to delight in that admission lose nothing from having to wait. For a deconstructive operation *possibility* would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches." Only as impossible does deconstruction remain close to itself – that is, only by putting the "itself" under erasure. Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters & Wlad Godzich (published as part of *Theory and History of Literature* series, vol. 59, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 36.

³⁸ Différance is neither a concept nor a word, as we know. It is rather the condition of the possibility of conceptuality. Derrida writes: "Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. For the same reason, *différance*, which is not a concept, is not simply a word, that is, what is generally represented as the calm, present, and self-referential unity of concept and phonic material." Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), p. 11.

This unitarian criticism finally becomes a criticism of ambiguity, an ironic reflection on the absence of the unity it had postulated.³⁹

To consign de Man to the improper, the rhetorical other of deconstruction proper, is to assume that the margins of deconstruction can be fixed, can remain unforgetful of their own limits, a demarcation that defines itself over and against the essential incompleteness of its concept that constantly calls for and revalidates its critique and thus constitutes its absolute contemporaneity. One might say that any such attempt itself becomes “an ironic reflection” precisely “on the absence of the unity” of deconstruction it posits. Deconstruction is always beyond its covers, it is an open configuration, a “situation.”

De Man’s critical writing does not adopt a set of deconstructive precepts and mobilise them into a discursive methodology that legislates for a determinate positivistic reading, nor does it generalise the singularity of deconstruction into a transhistorical principle uniformly applicable to any text. It mobilises rather a critical vigilance and re-calls an inherent resistance of any text, it reactivates “a rhetorical and structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth.”⁴⁰ But what preserves the alterity of the text is the text itself: *ça se déconstruit*, as Derrida would say.⁴¹ “The deconstruction,” de Man writes, “is not something that we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place” (*Allegories*, 17). That the text always falls victim to the pressure of its

³⁹ Paul de Man, “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 28. The essay was first written and delivered as a lecture at John Hopkins University in the early 1960s, later to be included in *Blindness and Insight*.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey H. Hartman, Preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. vii.

⁴¹ On *ça se déconstruit* of deconstruction – that also puts reflexively the “it” of it-self under erasure – cf. Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. vol. 2 (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2008), pp. 1-7.

own self-interrogation, however, does not mean that this statement is the *logos* or *grund* of all literature, as Nealon appears to suggest: "... this determining of the whole of literature as simply unreadable makes it possible to thematize deconstruction as a 'new new criticism,' a criticism that reveals the meaning of literature as and in its unreadability" (*Double Reading*, 35) – literature is thus reduced to an all-inclusive signified which it will inevitably resist. In fact, de Man, when writing on Proust in *Allegories of Reading*, as we shall see later, insists that the text always "narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight" (78), which thus defers without end the arrival of any such signified and its teleological thematization attributed to de Man's reading.

Something we have lost the sight of in de Man must reach back to seize our sight, but from the to-come of the history of his writing. In order to open up a space where the history of this future comes to pass, the crisis of deconstruction first must be rethought as a deconstruction of crisis, the impossibility of thinking de Man outside even the most radical gesture that would be the epoch of its meaning. If deconstruction, indeed, is a saying "yes" to an absolute *arrivant*, to an untimeliness of absolute contemporaneity, it is then what will have debordered all its borders *in advance*, even the most rigorous philosophemes that would constitute the epoch of its meaning are open precisely to the same flashes of alterity that carry its future. First then, we must turn to the impossible topology of deconstruction, to a necessary detour and a dangerous swerve of the supplement that carries it away towards where it does not know. The notion of secondariness, of de Man's writing that seems to trick the origin and seduce its

innocence, implies a certain identity, as we have seen, that is also a limit of deconstruction. It is also a limit at the margins of which larger stakes appear at risk: between philosophy and literature. This is the terrifying horizon of philosophy that must be kept apart. The apartness of dissolute figures of literature towards which philosophy drifts as it nears its limits reveals also a certain crisis of its limits. This is the horizon towards which, if only ever so slightly, the turn of the following pages will take us. What will be in question is the (im)possibility of mastering the irremediable plurality of deconstruction. Like de Man, deconstruction is an insurmountable allergen of reflexivity and systematic thought.

Chapter Two

De Man, That Dangerous Supplement

The supplement itself is quite exorbitant, in every sense of the word... But its operation is not simple. It tricks with a gesture of effacement...

— Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

De Man seems to call for deconstruction. He calls for its law and its name (*nomos*) by perverting it, he counterfeits its signatures, signing in its name what it does not name (*anomos*). But is there a law or a proper name of deconstruction? Deconstruction itself, if there is one, is perhaps precisely a name – or rather is always in the name – of that defiance (*nomos anomos*) to the law. De Man names a crisis of legitimacy of deconstruction. And only philosophy can intervene to save its face. This chapter will place in question the very possibility of anything like deconstruction proper and its legitimacy, given in terms of recursively philosophical topology over and against its literary prostitution. There can be no orthodoxy of deconstruction, no protocols of reading can guarantee its legitimacy; it is a discursive field of overlaps rather than discretions mastered by philosophical categories. This “quibble,” so to speak, seems called for in view of the fact that de Man’s thought is often perceived as having (mis)carried deconstruction beyond the legitimacy of its theoretical inquires and accepted set of questions. De Man becomes a supplement that overruns the

topological limits of deconstruction and is better bracketed than left to roam, taking licence and counterfeiting its signatures.⁴² Topology becomes tropology and the matter of philosophy the practice of literature. All specificity of deconstruction seems lost and its face defaced. So one must recover what Gasché calls “the profoundly philosophical thrust of Derridean thought” to save its face, and, indeed, set forth “the strict criteria to which any interpretation of his work must yield, if it is to be about that work and not merely a private fantasy” (*The Tain*, 3, 8). It is, however, the supplementary logic, as we shall see, that threatens any attempt to recast deconstruction in a neat taxonomy that would save it from incursions and invaginations. The opposition that underlies this attempt, between philosophy and literature, will be considered in the latter part as untenable. Deconstruction, if there is one, will have always been open to defacements: this is what constitutes its future and its insurmountable contemporaneity.

In his introduction to *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes: “Literary theory, or poetics, has always consciously worked under the sign of philosophy.”⁴³ It is on this signature that everything depends, that the law and the name of deconstruction – what would separate “the logical and the ludic,” as Attridge puts it (*Acts*, 12), that which is worthy of its name and that which is not

⁴² Bracketing here is also clearly related to de Man’s inadmissible journalism and collaboration whose implications for deconstruction and saving faces can hardly be overstated. However, this will not be the subject of the work at hand, largely because it requires a different referential and theoretical approach than the one set within the scope of this inquiry, which, throughout, deals with de Man’s critical thought alone and not with the impressionable and misguided ideals or opportunism of his youth. For further reference on de Man’s wartime journalism, cf. for instance, Derrida’s response in “Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments,” in *Critical Inquiry*, 15.4 (1989): 812-73. Also David Lehman’s *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991) for a more sensationalist, polemical account of the scandal. Cf. here note 194 below on Lehman’s account.

⁴³ Derek Attridge, “Derrida and the Questioning of Literature.” Introduction to *Acts of Literature* by Jacques Derrida (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 3. *Acts of Literature*, hereafter cited as *Acts*.

– continue to maintain its force. Only “under the sign of philosophy,” can a status of legitimacy be conferred. Its status is only guaranteed then by the signature that divides it. “The opposition that underlies” the crisis of deconstruction, Attridge continues, is one of “‘philosophy’ versus ‘literature,’” law versus unlaw, and “is an opposition that Derrida has patiently chipped away at in his readings of both kinds of text.” But, for Attridge, “the opposition itself [is] a philosophical one, it is an opposition by means of which philosophy produces, and thus constitutes itself against, its other” (*Acts*, 13). One can still only read literature “under the sign of philosophy.” For, “any thought of expelling philosophy from the practices of writing in the name of literary ‘free play’ or ‘textuality’ is doomed: philosophy will always come in by the back door – indeed, it will never have left the house” (13).⁴⁴

To safeguard deconstruction proper is to mobilise the vigilance of philosophical difference against the imposture, the corruptive faith of literature that forever haunts at the borders. Its practice is the very “intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing”⁴⁵ over and against which alone this writing can constitute itself. But can these borders remain ever so clear? The supplement “tricks with a gesture of effacement” (*OG*, 163).

Therein lies the danger, as we shall see. For what if there were already lodged there a wordplay at the heart of philosophical difference, a hetero-affection

⁴⁴ Attridge follows *one* of Gasché’s readings here that mimics Plato, of literature as a pure supplement, with “a status of metaphoric secondariness,” that has never stopped speaking “the voice of philosophy:” “With the exception of certain rare examples, literary writing has subjugated itself to the constraints of the concept and to the ethos of philosophy. Literature, then, speaks the voice of philosophy. It is a mere proxy, stillborn. There has hardly ever been any literature, if literature is supposed to mean something other than philosophy” (*The Tain*, 256).

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Acts of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 39. Hereafter cited as “Strange Institution.”

amidst of its dream of self-foundation, of auto-affection, a gag, a trick, a trope already there, that can only get carried away in an uninterrupted redoubling of originary losses, that can only multiply in a relentless supplementary vertigo? What if de Man was never outside but always a belonging, a spilling-over always and already begun inside?

The imperative to save face has become ever so pressing not only because of de Man's misguided journalism that remains inadmissible, but because of the persistent voiding of philosophical authority "in the name of literary 'free play' or 'textuality,'" in the name of rhetoric, of paranomasis, allegory, anacoluthon, prosopopeia, parabasis, that all radically destabilize the possibility of ever reaching beyond the beginning, let alone reaching anything like a positive truth. It is a pernicious metonymic system, says de Man, that "contains no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world – despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion" (*RT*, 10). But this irresponsibility is also a guardrail against the tyranny of positivism.⁴⁶ This, as Spivak writes in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, "might seem an attractively truant world of relativism. But the fearful pleasure of a truant world is *the sense of an authority being defied*" (lxxii, emphasis added). The "absolute ground of authority," she continues, "Derrida would deny." But

[i]t would be a spurious pleasure for the literary critic to feel that this is a more literary idiom than the austere propositional language we

⁴⁶ We shall return to this tyranny and its displacement by the political – that is, politics itself is this displacement – in the concluding chapters, but important to note already is that referentialism or positivist rationality always implies a return to a mythology of legitimation, to a certain social epistemic that justifies binding decisions. As if knowledge could legitimize the pragmatics of decision; if it does, it sanctions oppression in and by the same token.

habitually associate with philosophy proper. Textuality inhabits both... Once this is grasped, it may be noted that the awareness of the need for deconstruction seems more congenial to the “irresponsible” discourse of what is conventionally called literature. “The natural tendency of *theory* – of what unites philosophy and science of *epistémè* [the accepted description of *how* one knows] – will push rather towards filling in the breach than towards forcing the enclosure. It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating in the areas of literature and poetry.” The method of deconstruction has obvious interest for literary criticism. Problematizing the distinction between philosophy and literature, it would read “even philosophy” as “literature.” (lxxii)

Deconstruction is prepared to read philosophy as literature, indeed, to read philosophy under the sign of literature. It is literature that “will always come in by the back door” (*Acts*, 13). And nowhere more than in the hands of Paul de Man. “Forcing the enclosure,” as Derrida writes, rather than “filling in the breach” (*OG*, 92), is also opening philosophy onto the experience of itself as text, that is, opening it on all sides, even if the violence of the breach may be exorbitant.⁴⁷ Philosophy read as literature is what is inadmissible. If deconstruction is to have any traction it must be wrenched away from its “ludic” counterpart, from “deconstructionist criticism and its miscomprehension of deconstruction in a strict sense” (Gasché, *The Tain*, 3). The parasitic has come to identify with the host to the point of absolute porosity: deconstruction, as Nealon writes, “commodified for an American market, simplified and watered down for

⁴⁷ And for Gasché it is. De Man’s reading of Hegel and Kant in *Aesthetic Ideology*, in particular, are targeted in *The Wild Card of Reading* as exorbitant and unintelligible: “The difficulty in question first arises from a systematic estrangement to which the philosophical texts are subjected in rhetorical reading” (57). Cf. below, “Reading Con: Rhetoric, Allegory and the Machine,” especially pp. 245-252, where Gasché’s indictment of de Man’s arbitrary readings that disarticulate conceptual differences philosophy has laboured long to determine is engaged more closely.

use in how-to-books, which gave (and continue to give) an entire generation of literature students a suspiciously de Manian overview of what was supposedly Derrida's work" (*Double Reading*, 28). The supplement, as in the grammatological narrative of the graphic nature of the *phonè*, has here "usurped the main role," has come to efface, to de-constitute what it represents. "A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity... which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable" (*OG*, 36). Countermeasures must be deployed and deconstruction sanitized. Gasché:

Just as any possible extrapolation of Derrida's philosophy for literary criticism can be fruitful only if even his developments concerning literature and literary criticism are understood within the boundaries of his debate with the philosophy of phenomenology, all the so-called infrastructures can be put to use in literary criticism only on the condition that their status is fully recognized, as well as their purpose, or what, precisely, they are to achieve in Derrida... (*The Tain*, 270)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ "Infrastructures" that Gasché identifies as quasi-transcendental concepts such as *différance*, trace, writing, iterability, text, supplementarity, *mise-en-abyme*, undecidability etc., are precisely those that "[a] certain brand of literary criticism has avidly appropriated... in a thematic manner, losing sight of what these notions were initially meant to achieve" (*The Tain*, 269). Indeed, Gasché accounts with exceptional rigour for the strict sense of the "infrastructures," their "full philosophical impact" that "literary criticism" seeking "self-authorization in the Derridean [text]... would have to confront" (278). But all the "infrastructures" bear witness to a certain referential undecidability no concept or philosopheme can saturate. They are all shadowed by an unsuturable relation to alterity as the structural condition of all conceptuality. Paradoxically, they mark a closure of philosophy, as Gasché writes, "because its heterological presuppositions constitute it as, necessarily, always incomplete" (251). If the infrastructures account for the very possibility of philosophemes, they cannot themselves, in the strict sense, be philosophical, they must be radically other to the order they account for. Just as "literary criticism" seems unable to master the text it writes, philosophy is just as disarmed in its ability to appropriate its own grounds, as Gasché amply shows. Indeed, the very rigour and thrust of Gasché's argument never tires of pushing against the grain of his own thesis, "to determine what philosophical task" the operative concepts in Derrida's work "are meant to perform" (7), for they perform an undoing of this very task.

Deconstruction cannot be given over to “what seems more congenial” to it, “the ‘irresponsible’ discourse of what is conventionally called literature.” If one is to defend deconstruction one can do so only on the grounds of its philosophical rigour.⁴⁹ Indeed, Gasché indicts those who prostitute it, who have “chosen simply to ignore the profoundly philosophical thrust of Derridean thought, and have consequently misconstrued what deconstruction consists of and what it seeks to achieve” (*The Tain*, 3). This is a strategic distancing of deconstruction from the disease of irresponsibility, from de Man. But that there has been a power reversal is not accidental, it is implied in the very possibility of deconstruction. There is no deconstruction that is not already diseased, because deconstruction is the disease of philosophical thought. It is viral from the start, the very cause of infection one tries to rid. The strategy is “too reactive,” as Simon Critchley writes, “where a transcendental-philosophical defence of Derrida is itself a reaction to either a ‘literary’ assimilation of deconstruction (in the work of Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man and the Yale School) or to a Critical Theory-inspired critique of Derrida...”⁵⁰ Furthermore, he continues, “it sets up

⁴⁹ Philosophy, in other words, remains a standard, a flag of legitimacy for what is proper in deconstruction, and a means by which to flush out the frivolity of its other, but also wash away the stains of guilt and finally save its face.

⁵⁰ Simon Critchley, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 31. It is Richard Rorty’s charge against Derrida as a “private ironist” and “a sentimental, hopeful, romantically idealist writer” (13) with no true political traction that is addressed here. Although Rorty, in his contribution, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” distinguishes between “playfulness” he associates with Derrida from “what the know-nothings mean by ‘frivolity’” (14), it is telling, however, how this unfortunate misconception has come to take place. Indeed, it was due to the “flurry of deconstructive activity” in the 1970s and 1980s, Rorty writes, that “seems to me to have added little to our understanding of literature and to have done little for leftist politics. On the contrary, by diverting attention from real politics, it has helped create a self-satisfied and insular academic left which – like the left of the 1960s – prides itself on not being co-opted by the system and thereby renders itself less able to improve the system” (15). Again, it is precisely the trace of de Man in Derrida that seems to have obscured the vision of deconstruction, and that to the extent that one should dissociate Derrida from deconstruction entirely. Rorty: “I see no real connection between what

an unhelpful opposition between the transcendental and the pragmatic, where philosophy becomes identified solely with the former against the latter” (31).

However, that deconstruction in the wrong hands, as Nealon suggests, “clearly privileges rhetoric over logic and likewise argues that the distinction between literature and philosophy is delusive” (*Double Reading*, 47), that, in its frivolity, it dispenses with the methodology and rigours of conceptual critique, is never truly alarming, because, Attridge claims, “philosophy will always come in by the back door – indeed, it will never have left the house” (*Acts*, 13). The supplement never really threatens the *oikos*, only defers it with interest. Philosophy can never lose itself gratuitously. It reappropriates all its attitudes. Indeed, he continues, “the very notion of literature as ungoverned rhetoricity, as a practice safely ‘outside’ philosophy, is a philosophical notion *par excellence*.” (13). But why not: the very notion of philosophy, as a practice “outside” literature is a literary notion *par excellence*. This is the radical reading of philosophy as literature, the exposure of originary irony, dramatic in structure, where philosophy, like Oedipus Rex, remains blind to the state of its own theatricality. It may not be possible to read philosophy as literature but only because literature is not an *oikos*, but what infinitely interrupts it.⁵¹ It is an unsurpassable horizon of philosophy. For what departs in literature, departs

Derrida is up to and the activity which is called ‘deconstruction,’ and I wish that the latter word had never taken hold as a description of Derrida’s work” (15). The collusion or the scandal is absolute. And the “attempt to excommunicate Derrida from the philosophical profession” as a “frivolous and cynical despoiler of common sense and traditional democratic values” (13) is no less grounded in de Man having “usurped the main role.”

⁵¹ In terms of *oikos*, of householding, indeed, poetry, and by extension literature, as the next chapter will come to show, is what, for de Man, radically disrupts any economy that registers temporality or history as a capital venture of subjectivity whereby it comes to collect itself in absolute knowledge or account for its expenditures in the other not as losses but as amortized interest. Literature, for de Man, is an agent of losses that cannot be recouped, as we shall see. What departs, departs without return.

radically and without return: “Literature writes the end of philosophy *by writing without end.*”⁵²

The valorization of philosophy is thus structurally inherent to the crisis of deconstruction. Attridge never questions its authority. In fact, in a footnote, he reasserts it yet again:

Thus a number of the very specific arguments made by Derrida in relation to particular philosophical texts have been generalised *ad absurdum*, and used to legitimate free-wheeling discourses claiming to be deconstructive: all binary oppositions and all indications of presence are illusory or evil, all meaning is indeterminate, there is a place in every text where it undoes itself, language is essentially unreliable or self-reflexive, communication always fails, intention or context or theme are irrelevant, there is no such thing as the referent, etc., etc. A major topic for intellectual historians of our time will be the (mis)appropriation of Derrida’s work in this manner, often by intelligent and well-informed commentators. (*Acts*, 12)

Derrida’s questioning of philosophical difference through the labour of its margins at which literature is (not) only reinstates him as a philosopher, the founder of the house built in 1967. The polarisation of deconstruction is, for Attridge, “the polarisation... of Derrida’s work” (13). It is philosophy being robbed of its own discourse, of its own question “generalised *ad absurdum*” and (mis)appropriated by the *topoi* inadequate to its complexities. It is as if deconstruction proper were a signified that is not a signifier, a transcendental pivot of signifying structures that itself escapes structurality. As if its borders

⁵² Mark C. Taylor, “System... Structure... Difference... Other.” Introduction to *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 34, emphasis added.

admit of no malleability, no hospitality, no intrusion by its other, its apocryphal, “free-wheeling” literary supplement. “A major topic for intellectual historians of our time will be” to keep the corpus from bleeding and to purify it – both in the sense of becoming rid of something harmful, an unwanted surplus, and in the sense of exonerating of sin, of guilt and uncleanness. However, this “topic” is destined to fall short by the very logic of its own making because the harmful or the unwanted is intrinsic to the very process of purification. Purifying means getting one’s hands dirty. This, however, as Attridge inscribes in another margin,

is not to deny the value of the truly original work carried out during this period [the 1970s and ’80s, the period of disciplinary prostitution of deconstruction] especially in the United States, by literary theorists *who read Derrida carefully and responsibly* (and therefore from their specific time and place); the most influential mediating figure was, of course Paul de Man. In a longer study, it would be necessary to take up the complex issue of the relation between Derrida and de Man, vis-à-vis the question of literature and philosophy. (*Acts*, 12, emphasis added)

“The truly original work” remains “truly original” only insofar it remains an apposition to “the house.” It is under this sign, and this sign alone, that de Man remains “influential.” The “true” deconstructive poetics is “original” only inasmuch as it echoes faithfully. It must retain and safeguard that which is integral to its derivative value. For, in the very last instance, it must recapture “carefully” and “responsibly” what in Derrida’s work constitutes its “profoundly philosophical thrust” (Gasché, *The Tain*, 3) – that which, being a poor derivate, it inevitably lacks. There is an internal division of the supplement here. Poor

mimēsis, that “must be contained like madness and (harmful) play.”⁵³ It is “truly original” if it exnominates itself in the movement of its own (re)inscription. A supplement, adding nothing, is nothing. It can take *the* place because it never takes place. Original because erasable, replaceable. It becomes “truly original” the moment it becomes innocuous reproduction. The game of mirrors. Or perhaps, the intimacy whereby the derived steals away, touching its limits, and, in a secret rapture of the hymen that here really holds together by keeping apart, reverting, shifting, inside and outside, unsteady inversion, spills the ink in a seminal theft of innocence. The scattered incestuous moment when the inauthentic, “(mis)appropriation of Derrida’s work” (*Acts*, 12), in all its fallibility, becomes the infallible origin of the work. The moment that continues to give “an entire generation of literature students a suspiciously de Manian overview” of Derrida’s work. What is now represented is only the forgetting and de-presenting of the proper. The proper loses itself in its own “(mis)appropriation.” A forgetting that must be undone (“A major topic for intellectual historians of our time...” *Acts*, 12) in order to recover what has allowed itself to be foreplayed by its after-effect, spun by its spin-off. But there is no unravelling here, no untying the knots of theft, rape and deception, and, first of all, because there is no law of deconstruction, no deconstruction proper that begins outside the movement of its own “(mis)appropriation.” Begun, it begins to fester, lends itself from (at) the beginning to the rhetorical perversity of its

⁵³ In the first part of “The Double Session,” in a footnote, Derrida writes of mimetology: “What is important for our purposes here is this ‘*internal*’ *duplicity* [emphasis added] of the *mimēsthai* that Plato [in *The Republic*] wants to cut in two, in order to separate good *mimēsis* (which reproduces faithfully and truly yet is already threatened by the simple fact of its duplication) from bad, which must be contained like madness and (harmful) play.” Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 186-187.

outside. It *lives* its own outside. Born, it carries the moment of its own miscarriage. The “(mis)appropriation of Derrida’s work” is always already Derrida’s work of (mis)appropriation. The double genitive, is effected, and is an effect, already at the origin. The effect as cause. The effect that splits the cause is at the cause.

It is not a question of vindication here. Of disarming guilt to uncover the lost records of innocence in de Man’s writing. It is rather to let slip the guilt at the heart of innocence. The becoming-inside of outside is always already begun. This is the law of the supplement: “‘Usurpation’ has always already begun. The sense of the right side appears in a mythological effect of return (Derrida, *OG*, 37). At the place of the authentic – or rather its non-place (*atopos*) – de Man has already left a watermark of inauthenticity that erases the possibility of a unique signature.

The supplement is always treacherous, as we know: inasmuch as it is added to the same it is not the same, it takes place, insinuating itself to take *the* place, even if innocuous, it doubles and, in doubling, estranges the simple, moves it further away, defers it, *represents* it and, in representing, de-presents – a threat by forgetting, the erasure of limits within which the supplemented remains close to itself. And it becomes a scandal when homology is disturbed. Violence is done to the proper. The mirror has lost its tain. The dangerous surplus, all that now constitutes a missed encounter and a “(mis)appropriation of Derrida’s work,” must be renounced. In the name and for the name of the proper that founds it. It is in the fold of this internal division that de Man is always placed.

The proper, to constitute itself, would risk nothing less than the loss of itself if the possibility of the improper, its misappropriation, were absolutely excluded. It would break down, empty itself of itself. It would collapse in its own indifference. The proper must allow itself to be haunted by the possibility it excludes, that of the improper. The exclusion here becomes inclusion. There can be no proper without the improper taking place. The proper is thus never properly proper but always already given over to the other that constitutes its (im)propriety. There can be no epilogue here for de Man that does not, at once, consign Derrida to his death. What is exiled was never outside. De Man spills his ink the moment Derrida begins writing. The improper – the supplement, the image, the double that is always improper, dangerous – only reflects the splitting in (of) the proper from itself. What is proper here has always already defected, is already separated from itself, is itself only at the scattering point of its origin – that is, of its loss.

The law of the image, Derrida writes, “is always a relation to a *past present*. The imitated comes before the imitator [*l’imitant*]... The difficulty lies in conceiving that what is imitated could be still to come with respect to what imitates, that the image can precede the model, that the double can come before the simple... (the future as a past present due to return), the preface, the anterior future...” (“Double Session,” 190). The question here then is whether what will come has always already come as anterior to what makes its arrival possible – the question of originary derivation. Of the supplement being at the point of origin, which inevitably erases itself as *being-at-the-point* of origin. Because it is a supplement. If it were to take place *properly*, it would empty itself of its essential

replaceability. It would empty itself of its essential emptiness, no longer replacing another, no longer the point of replacement but the point of non-replacement, of irreplaceability. But insofar as it is called for, what precedes it must be lacking. If it is *at* the point of origin, then origin is non-originary. The supplement cancels out precisely what it supplements – that is, the point of irreplaceability or origin itself. It rests its empty weight there in the place of beginning, in beginning's non-place, and mocks every geneticism in advance. If one tries to take out the excess of ink and brush off the stains of dried spill-over that have penetrated the fabric of the page, one takes the paper with it. Deconstruction cannot be rid of excess because it is this excess. To unravel it is to obliterate it, to make it conform, to “turn the page,” Derrida writes:

To make “deconstruction in America” a theme or the object of an exhaustive definition is precisely, by definition, what defines the enemy of deconstruction – someone who (at the very least out of ambivalence) would like to wear deconstruction out, exhaust it, turn the page... there is no sense in speaking of *a* deconstruction or *simply* deconstruction as if there were only one, as if the word had a (single) meaning outside of the sentences which inscribe it and carry it within themselves.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay et al. (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), p. 17. Hereafter cited as *Memoires*.

Deconstruction is only ever in plural,⁵⁵ not *a* meaning, but rather a trembling of meaning particles as they rub and push against each other without letting off. Any desire for retracement can only give itself after the fact of its impossibility. De Man is not “the enemy” of deconstruction, perhaps he is even too faithful to its shedding of identities,⁵⁶ but its bodyguards “who would like to wear deconstruction out, exhaust it” precisely by defining its horizons, protecting its body, its property and its limits, against night raids and illicit incursions. Deconstruction “is not just one other method by means of which literature can be taught.” But, de Man goes on in the same breath, “there is an element in Derrida that lends itself to that, because we can find in Derrida exemplary ways of reading, an awareness, for example, of rhetorical complexities in a text which are applicable to the didactics, to the pedagogy of literary teaching...”⁵⁷ Once again,

⁵⁵ Indeed, “deconstruction is eminently plural,” writes Gasché. But also, and in the same breath, seems eminently *qualified*, anything but plural: “This plural nature, or openness, of Derrida’s philosophy makes it thoroughly impossible to conceive of his work in terms of orthodoxy... primarily because it resists any possible closure, and thus doctrinal rigidity, for essential reasons.” *Still*, there must be restrictions, a kind of philosophical checkpoint, not everyone, not everything is allowed to pass. Gasché continues: “*Still*, such openness and pluralism do not give licence to a free interpretation of Derrida’s thought, or for its adaptation to any particular need or interest. Nor are all the interpretations of Derrida’s thought that seek legitimacy in such openness equally valid” (*The Tain*, 8, emphasis added). It is a structural, *active* plurality that, in the end, will depose by incompleting any possibility of mastery, of *krinein*, of decidability of Derrida’s work, but, at the same time, a plurality that is somehow no longer truly plural, no longer active, because Gasché calls for, and hopes to “set forth more rigorous criteria for any future discussion of Derrida’s thought” (9). For Gasché, it becomes a plurality of restricted access, a conditional plurality, no longer plural but exclusive, a philosophical precinct guarded by “rigorous criteria” that are “philosophical and not literary in nature” (8). A plurality that, strangely, guards against plurality.

⁵⁶ If deconstruction has a purpose, in the end, it is to unravel identity by showing its contingency, which to say, by unravelling it without end. This affirmation of its structural undecidability, that we shall return to, is neither nihilism nor paralysis that disallows politics but an affirmation of what can only be an *insatiable* passion for justice that is never done with. In de Man, reading itself, as we shall see, becomes a test-diagnostics for this passion that no political program can ever saturate but without which no politics would be possible. To *do* deconstruction is to be attentive to alterity, but one does not make the other come, Derrida would say, one only allows for its passage by forcing enclosures. Deconstruction is the unrelieved pressure on identity. And de Man will be the one never letting go.

⁵⁷ Paul de Man, “An Interview with Paul de Man,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), pp. 116-17. What de Man means by “didactics” or “pedagogy of literary

deconstruction is the very possibility of night raids one solicits philosophy to watch over.

The exterior, the outside, that which is added, coupled – and, hence, can be easily uncoupled – the surplus of ink, the stains of writing, appear to have taken hold of the inside. There is no washing the paper over repeatedly for the purpose of neutralising any remainders that may have left its trace on the paper without weakening it. To take out the spill here is to take out writing, deconstruction itself. By virtue of its supplementarity, the supplement extends, adds, complements that which is lacking but is itself lacking because it is – in that it is – compensatory, a substitute, always already deficient. It has not taken place, not once, it is not *at* the point, but rather splits the point in (from) itself, as if placing a mirror that both (re)presents it to itself and thus separates it from itself. For, the proper, that is anterior to its image, can only appear after the image, can only operate as *proper after the fact* of its decay. The proper comes to its own only as *nom impropre*. Derrida writes: “Proper meaning *derives from derivation*. The proper meaning or the primal meaning (of the word *source*, for example) is no longer simply the source, but the deported *effect* of a turn of speech, a return or detour. It is secondary in relation to that to which it seems to give birth, measuring a separation and a departure from it. *The source itself is the*

teaching,” as he further explains to Stefano Rosso, is the necessary departure from the “didactic assignment of reading specific texts rather than, as is the case in Derrida, from the pressure of general philosophical issues” (117). And on the following page, “I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them... In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that ‘the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive’ rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text” (118). Derrida’s writing, with what Gasché has identified as its quasi-synthetic terms that are properly philosophical, insofar as they try to provide the conditions of (im)possibility of conceptual structures under critical lens, is also given over, “lends itself” to close reading of texts, attentive to its “rhetorical complexities.” Why would the former exclude the latter? The two cannot be separated from Derrida’s work except by violence. Those willing to defend deconstruction against violation may be those violating it all the way to misprision.

*effect of that (for) whose origin it passes.*⁵⁸ The proper finds itself only by having lost itself *infinitely*. Itself only after its precisely having become other that corrupts it *irreparably*. After having been seduced by the mirror that only parades a false front, that can only unveil its impossibility. And it is precisely this drift of its face, unceasingly reflected, sidetracked in detours – and, hence, deflected, drawn away – precisely, then, this impossibility of face, the faceless silhouette of the proper, that constitutes the desire for its presence. The impossibility of face and, therefore, desire to see it. Or, in other words, desire that carries the seed of a ceaseless distress, of its incompleteness. And one can only get caught in this after-fact, the after-effect of broken mirrors. For what is reflected in the tain of the mirror cannot be desired *before* its distortion, it can only give itself to *recognition after* the scars have marred it beyond recognition. If the origin is an anachronic effect of its impossibility and if it is always “secondary in relation to that to which it seems to give birth,” then, perhaps, it will all have begun with de Man.

The only tour to deconstruction *proper* is by detour of its beginning *improper*. One can seize it only by mastering its effects – one is left to begin with souvenirs alone.⁵⁹ This is where deconstruction becomes something of a fetish.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Qual Quelle: Valéry’s Sources,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), p. 280, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ The proper, after all, “*is nothing other than the apprehension of the improper*.” In “The Passion of Facticity,” Giorgio Agamben’s reading of *Dasein*’s opening in the world, that is its facticity, as “marked by an original impropriety” reveals an insight whose implications are not without significance for our question but rather determine its very limits. The relation between the proper and improper is not constituted by a suppletory falling-away from origin but by an *essential* falling-away *at* the origin; perversion does not befall the proper, the proper begins perverted. Agamben writes: “Heidegger often emphasizes that the dimension of impropriety... is not something derivative into which *Dasein* would fall by accident; on the contrary, impropriety is as originary as propriety... Even in proper Being-toward-death and proper decision, *Dasein* seizes hold of its impropriety alone, mastering an alienation and becoming attentive to a distraction.” To seize hold of the proper is to let go of the proper. It is to “appropriate [its] untruth

The fetish, Agamben writes, “is not an inauthentic object. Instead, it is both the presence of something and the sign of its absence; it is and is not an object. And it is such that it irresistibly attracts desire without ever being able to satisfy it” (“PF,” 196). Deconstruction that can give itself only as other than itself. But it is only because the proper is marked by an originary impropriety, “by a kind of original fetishism” (196), that robs the desire forever of its destined fill, that fetish can assert its power of impotence. Desire for the proper is born out of the originary theft of the proper that is also promised in what robs it of itself (“it is both the presence of something and the sign of its absence”). Fetish evokes by hiding, gives what it denies. Derrida, therefore, is both promised and denied in de Man. But insofar as the proper, the authentic, “*has no content other than inauthentic*” (197), the detours, guises, and perversions are not vulgar misappropriations of deconstruction proper. Rather, they constitute its belonging from the beginning, its *topos-atopos*. Which is why, for Derrida, deconstruction can only be thought as transference: “But is there a proper place,” he asks, “is there a proper story for this thing? I think it consists only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference...” (*Memoires*, 14-15). Transference, indeed, would mark this strange topography of a non-place (*topos-atopos*).

Deconstruction as transference is exilic, for transference is born out of the originary loss of place, and lives by its default in love, by its failure to appear.⁶⁰

authentically.” Giorgio Agamben, “The Passion of Facticity,” in *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 197. Hereafter cited as “PF.”

⁶⁰ Place of maternal love, of originary unsplitness whose loss feeds the desire in its breathless pursuit of substitutes for what is always elsewhere, what always escapes it and what in its irremediable exile gives life to passion and love. Without transference, without the ceaseless recasting of the *impossible* love in its metonymic substitutes, there would be no love. Indeed, in “Observations on Transference-Love,” Freud inquires whether we can “truly say that the state of being in love which becomes manifest in analytic treatment is not a real one... It is true that the

Deconstruction, like transference-love, is always elsewhere but here. And “one cannot and should not,” Derrida cautions, “attempt to survey or totalize the meaning of an ongoing process, especially when its structure is one of transference. To do so would be to assign it limits which are not its own; to weaken it, to date it, to slow it down” (*Memoires*, 17). Deconstruction *itself* cannot be possessed; it is inscribed within the sentences that carry it out of itself, that it no longer masters. Transference-love is never in place, it is never at home.⁶¹ In it something is promised as it moves away, traction as a distraction. It pulls desire closer to its root only by substitution. It gives what it takes away in the same movement. Pleasure, the instant without temporal thickness, is instantly and absolutely deferred. Possession is lived as the moment of dispossession, the same as difference. For something is always lost in transference, something become other. The essential here, in thinking deconstruction as “a thinking through of transference,” is coming to its own of deconstruction by never letting go of its withdrawals. Only by passing through what is foreign to it, by spreading itself wide to its own parenthesis, does deconstruction come home. Its home is already outside itself. Violated from outside by rhetoric inside. There “is no

love consists of new editions of old traits and that it repeats infantile reactions. But this is the essential character of every state of being in love. There is no such state that does not produce infantile prototypes. It is precisely from this infantile determination that it receives its compulsive character, verging as it does on the pathological.” For Freud, transference is love. Sigmund Freud, “Observations on Transference-Love,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 385. But this place of infinite difference that would be the “infantile prototype” or, properly speaking, the impossible, is itself born out of ordinary *unknowing*. The repetition of what we never knew is thus precisely what constitutes transference and what constitutes the compulsive and unrelieved movement of desire destined never to have its fill, which is why it verges “on the pathological.” What constitutes it, in other words, is what forbids its closure. It is due to transference that pleasure is always lived as the irrecoverable loss, as distance rather than proximity.

⁶¹ At home here would mean death, literally. Derrida writes: “For this presence [the point of non-replacement] is at the same time desired and feared... Pleasure *itself*, without symbol or suppletory, that which would accord us (to) pure presence itself, if such a thing were possible, would be only another name for death” (*OG*, 155).

sense in speaking of a deconstruction or *simply* deconstruction as if there were only one" (*Memoires*, 17). As if all the pens that disseminate and spill its ink were one. And if rhetoric has seized its place, if the improper has seduced it, however faintly, then this only implies a certain originary complicity of deconstruction. Deconstruction *itself* begins as a loss of self. As transference, it is the affirmation of a certain openness, a dispersal of places, an affirmation of scattered beginnings and, like transference-love, it is ex-centric to itself. And to give it a centre, to totalize its meaning, "would be to assign it limits which are not its own; to weaken it, to date it, to slow it down" (17). There is no turning the page here without betraying the very movement of the hand, fated somewhere beyond the margins of its own inscription. Spilling over beyond the covers that would close it, deconstruction is carried away towards the outgoing tide of its original loss. Deconstruction no longer masters the sentences that hide it, in which it would linger unsaid as it were. But nothing is sheltered here, because the sentences that (mis)carry deconstruction, that make it lose face, are its only face. And one will never have lost it more than where one tries to save it. What de Man says of rhetorical readings is, after all, true of deconstruction: "They are theory and not theory at the same time, the universal theory of the impossibility of theory. To the extent however that they are theory, that is to say teachable, generalizable and highly responsive to systematization, rhetorical readings, like the other kinds, still avoid and resist the reading they advocate" (*RT*, 19). There is a programmatic self-resistance and a syncopation of alterity that beats in deconstruction and aborts all theoretical enclosures. If, indeed, there is a language of deconstruction, it is this "language of self-resistance" that no

philosophy can overcome, but that keeps it open on one side where the other may venture in. The supplement, the threat of perversion, is also a chance for deconstruction, what guarantees, but without guarantee, the alterity of its future. Literary theory, de Man writes, “is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall” (*RT*, 20).

Of the Original Polemic: Philosophy’s Flowers

It appears that philosophy either has to give up its own constitutive claim to rigor in order to come to terms with the figurality of its language or that it has to free itself from figuration altogether. And if the latter is considered impossible, philosophy could at least learn to control figuration by keeping it, so to speak, in its place...

— Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*

Metaphor is less in the philosophical text... than the philosophical text is within metaphor.

— Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*

If philosophy could only learn to keep its figures in place. But is this possible? Deconstruction, as we have seen, flirts too much with figures. Like literature, it cultivates flowers, plays with semblances, flouts certainties. It becomes a kind of philosophical noise, a sophistry that turns hard won wisdom inside out. It is disruptive because it makes certainty lose ground. In deconstruction, philosophy experiences the exile of its own terminology, a permanent uprooting of its language.⁶² And nowhere is this uprooting, that is also a certain unblocking of the referential power of language, more at work than in de Man.⁶³ Deconstruction is a constant anxiety of philosophical language. An obstinate exposure of its ungroundedness. For philosophy, in the end, itself cultivates flowers that intoxicate it without end.

If one can show the unmasterability of figures in the text of philosophy, one will have shown something like literature folded inside. Stilled, but not effaced, preventing philosophy to close in upon itself, to recall itself absolutely. And insofar as the opposition between literature and philosophy seems to inform the typology of deconstruction, its concern with faces as we have seen, this

⁶² In "Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality," Agamben alerts us to this crisis: "Philosophical terms remain names, but their referential character can no longer be understood simply according to the traditional scheme of signification; it now implies a different and decisive experience of language." Deconstruction, he continues on the following page, "suspends the terminological character of philosophical vocabulary; rendered inde-terminate, terms seem to float interminably in the ocean of sense. This is not, of course, an operation accomplished by deconstruction out of capriciousness or unnatural violence; on the contrary, precisely this calling into question of philosophical terminology constitutes deconstruction's insuperable contemporaneity." Giorgio Agamben, "Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality," in *Potentialities* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1999), pp. 208, 209. Hereafter cited as "Pardes."

⁶³ De Man's writing foregrounds precisely this crisis of terminology. Philosophy here seems most at risk of losing its specificity, and de Man goes all the way: "All philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent on figuration, to be literary... what seems to bring literature and philosophy together is... a shared lack of identity or specificity." Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1996), p. 50. Hereafter cited as "EM."

would also be nothing less – but nothing more – than exposure of deconstruction to defacement from the beginning, the impossibility of determining a limit, a property, an all-rights-reserved of deconstruction.⁶⁴

We will approach this limit obliquely, through the notion of translation and the unsaid, through the task of impossible translation, Benjamin's task⁶⁵ and its later reading by de Man. For is not the task of the translator, of carrying over (from *trans*- "across, over" and *latus*, "borne, carried"), also the question of rhetoric, of *metaphora*, of the figure in general? The question of translation is first of all the question of vicariousness, of taking the place of another, of carrying over that at once inscribes distance and proximity.

The philosopher's task has always been one of translation, but one that leaves no remainder, that finally translates by letting everything be said. As it passes through translation, something is always forced outside the crypt of its irreplaceability and translation seems to replace what will have remained in silence. It replaces the silent irreplaceability. In its words, something is preserved as it is ruined. We are here already at the limit, criss-crossing round a certain absence, a gap that compromises all translations while making them possible. It is an absence round which literature is gathered and that breaks open, at the limits of philosophy, a ravenous silence feeding on a dying present that the trope makes only too apparent.

Philosophy is tormented by this silence; it is the persecuted truth it compulsively repeats, attempts to translate, gather fully in a total word, but can

⁶⁴ In other words, insofar as the opposition literature/philosophy grounds the opposition de Man/Derrida, disarticulating the former would inevitably solicit a collapse of the latter.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999). Hereafter cited as "The Task."

do so only by being attentive to its escape in figures that fault the gathering.

Something essential will have slipped through the clutches of its seizure.⁶⁶ And

this something Benjamin calls “the true language:”

If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations. (“The Task,” 77)

The task of the translator is the task of the philosopher. Philosophy has never given up this task. It is this task.⁶⁷ Translating what, for Benjamin, is “the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for.” Philosophy has always dreamed of “pure language,” of saying being whose meaning it has forgotten, the untranslatable itself.

For Benjamin, there remains something unsaid in every expression, what never *properly* appears, and yet still appears, but as a destitution. It is because appearance, to invoke Heidegger, “as the appearance ‘of something’, does *not* mean showing-itself; it means rather the announcing-itself by [von] something

⁶⁶ And, what is more, in its slipping, will have opened up time that seems to interrupt the task without end. Time that always and infinitely recurs as an incursion that interrupts philosophy’s gathering in self-knowledge. For Benjamin, time will be hopelessly melancholic as it tries to grasp the anteriority it hopelessly and infinitely interrupts. Renunciation not only belongs to time, it is the very fabric of time. More on melancholy and the pathology of time will be said later when we discuss the nature of allegory in de Man and Benjamin. Cf. below, section on “Allegory’s Contresens: ‘To brush history against the grain.’”

⁶⁷ The task of translation, as we approach it, only recasts the question of being whose meaning, says Heidegger, we have forgotten. “This question has today been forgotten,” opens *Being and Time*, but it is one, he continues, that “provided a stimulus for the researches of Plato and Aristotle... [and] was to persist through many alterations and ‘retouchings’ down to the ‘logic’ of Hegel.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 21. Cf. also note 82 below for Heidegger on the “task,” the very “matter” of philosophy.

which does not show itself, but which announces itself through something which does show itself. Appearing is a *not-showing-itself*.” And all “indications, presentations, symptoms, and symbols have this basic formal structure of appearing, even though they differ among themselves” (*Being and Time*, 52).⁶⁸

The ambiguous structure of appearance thus forces the entire discourse (*logos*) on being (*to on*) into secrecy. It destines it, one might say, to rhetoric. It is what is always said, in what appears, as unsaid. What remains a secret kept in its very disclosure. What reveals itself by withholding itself. There is no better place for a secret to hide than in what “appears” to make it known. Insofar as language signifies, insofar as it is diseased by signs and symbols, the very symptoms of disclosure, it will continue to revoke what can be announced in it alone. It will continue to betray that of which it always speaks. Something will always remain abandoned:

In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is that very nucleus of pure language. Though concealed and fragmentary, it is an active force in life as the symbolised thing *itself*,

⁶⁸ When writing on the concept of phenomenon, three figures of appearance appear: “the expression ‘appearance’ itself can have a double signification: first, *appearing*, in the sense of announcing-itself as not-showing itself [this is the figure that dominates our reading of Benjamin]; and next, that which does the announcing [*das Meldende selbst*] – that which in its showing-itself indicates something which does not show itself [this is the originary irony that all language is destined to repeat in its failure to transcend it. Insofar as language always speaks in order *not* to say, one no longer has to speak ironically; one always already does]. And finally one can use ‘appearing’ as a term for the genuine sense of ‘phenomenon’ as showing-itself. If one designates these three different things as ‘appearance’, bewilderment is unavoidable” (*Being and Time*, 53).

whereas it inhabits linguistic creations only in symbolised form” (“The Task,” 80).

The philosopher’s task then is not to reveal or speak of but to translate “the symbolised,” that which is “an active force of life” but remains withheld in a passivity “that cannot be communicated,” in pure language that finally speaks it. Language that has escaped itself and has thus become its own presupposition. Language that says being. But, for de Man, that is precisely the experience of poetry, the experience of its impossible task: “For the poet the anguishing question – and it is indeed the subject of the poem [Hölderlin’s unfinished hymn, “Wie wenn am Feiertage das Feld zu sehn”] – is: how can one not only speak of Being, but say Being itself. Poetry is the experience of this question.”⁶⁹ It is from this “specific tension,” de Man writes, that “the poetic act is born” (“Heidegger’s Exegeses,” 255). Pure language then, “whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for” (“The Task,” 77), is to be sought in the poetic – in literature. Something in philosophy, that of which philosophy always speaks, exceeds philosophy. It can only be spoken as the unspoken that speech scatters. The said, that is, or the word, carries within itself what it cannot say but what at the same time is present in it as unsayability, as a withdrawal and difference in what is said. It is what always passes itself into what is said as unsayability. It takes place as the underside of all language, as that over and against which alone language can gather itself. What exceeds all language then belongs to language. And it is a belonging that pure language would saturate. A

⁶⁹ Paul de Man, “Heidegger’s Exegeses of Hölderlin,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 256. Hereafter cited as “Heidegger’s Exegeses.” “Just as on a feast day, to see his field” is de Man’s translation of Hölderlin’s untitled poem.

wound in the midst of every word that pure word would suture. Language is thus tethered to what it cannot say. The unsayability that can be said only where the word is lacking can thus paradoxically announce itself in language alone. Only language can say the unsayable. It is because of this essential tethering that Heidegger, in “What Are Poets For?,” can say:

Being, as itself, *spans its own province*, which is marked off (*temnein, tempus*) by Being’s being present in the word. Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying, nor is it merely something that has the character of sign or cipher. It is because language is the house of Being, that *we reach what is by constantly going through this house.*⁷⁰

The unsayable “spans its own province.” It traverses its own house every time we speak, but in secret. Sheltered by detours and figures of its revelation. For revelation here does not reveal anything, it rather makes a figure that conceals it. And it is only by abandoning ourselves to detours, to figures, to what infinitely sidetracks us, that we come closer to it. What sidetracks us is what brings us closer. What leaves us at a distance is precisely what carries the intimacy of the unsaid. And only by turning away ever more do we draw near the deep of being. We “reach what is by constantly going through this house.” The house of unreserved intimacy and alliances but also of infinite recesses and separations *through which we shall never have finished advancing*. Language is the house of ghosts, of silhouettes that figures cast obliquely. Language thus reveals only the emptiness that it shelters. The barrenness of its secret. But a

⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 129, emphasis added.

barrenness that destines language to figures, to history, and its perennial restlessness. It reveals thus only itself – language one will never have spoken enough. Language is a permanent interruption of all self-reflexivity, it essentially limits philosophy's appropriation of difference.

Pure language, however, no longer wanders. It says what it longs to say, and in saying what lacerates it, it says its own limit. This is why in philosophy that longs for this limit, secrecy is no longer possible, for there is nothing left to keep, nothing left to remember. It is a language that, after infinite turns (*tropoi*), re-turns to itself. That exhausts history, or the gathering of figures in the infinite to-come of history, and runs out of ink. Now, it finally speaks, but does so only when it has nothing to say: “In this pure language – which *no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word*, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished” (“The Task,” 80, emphasis added). And this is both the fulfillment and end of language. Pure language that fulfills itself by finally emptying itself of all its figures. It expresses the most only when it is finally expressionless. It says what it means only when it no longer means, when “all information, all sense, and all intention” break gently, give way to silence. The figure or the trope that signifies at the same time the fall and the birth of language, the very broaching of time, carries within itself the seed of its own infinite fulfillment in pure language, that must be a language that projects itself beyond and before itself and appropriates the unsayable while losing itself in it. It is no longer descriptive, but finally *is* what it says: “Only if the sense of a linguistic creation may be equated with the information it conveys

does some ultimate, decisive element remain beyond all communication – quite close and yet infinitely remote, concealed or distinguishable...” (“The Task,” 79-80). In other words, communication does not exhaust language; what exhausts it is rather its underside, that which exceeds any recognizable idiom, what communication understands only as what escapes it because it comes to pass in its anteriority that language cannot speak except by refusing to speak, except by announcing the ruin of all communication.

What every language means then is what meaning destroys. It is meaning that weighs, “heavy” and “alien,” on the fulfilled figure of language. Benjamin: “While that ultimate essence, pure language, in the various tongues is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning” (80). Meaning is the malady of all language. The more lucid it is, the more it seems to obscure. “To relieve it of all this,” Benjamin continues, “to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only opacity of translation” (80). To translate would be to let the shadows of clarity linger and dance in pauses where language falters, where it is timid and withdrawn before the immensity of its task, before it scatters being. This is a “tremendous” task, and philosopher’s only task. To “regain pure language” that tolls the pauses at which communication bends and breaks down. That rings the noise that seals itself around the word which sinks unrecognizable in its clamour of silence.

One appropriates what Benjamin calls the “active force in life” (80), only by sinking into the night of death. It is a tremendous task that must outrun history. For only when it no longer communicates, by emptying the expression of

its words, can philosophy reveal the “expressionless and creative Word” (80). “For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something...” (79). The “expressionless” word is the immortal word that rings in the falling echoes of language as it carries itself ever faster, losing its breath, exhausting the infinite alignment of metonyms, but turning at every turn only to find another. And that, until death. For, as we have seen, to finally say what it means, language would have to cease (to mean). It is thus only as figurative, insofar as it continues to stray, irreducibly lost to itself, that language can mean. Language only means insofar as meaning escapes it. Which is why it is constitutively ironic.

Language returning home is equal to itself. Fulfilled, it is language without figures, language of absolute anonymity, “*reine Sprache*” or pure language and, hence, *no longer language*. In the face of the impossible task, when writing on “The Task of the Translator,” de Man tells us precisely that the “movement of the original is a wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled. Least of all is there something like a *reine Sprache*, a pure language, which does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages...”⁷¹ Language equal to itself, finally having outdone itself, played itself out, having used itself up, language that, in its scattering, has gathered “the active force of life,” is a dead language. The point at which language becomes breath is the point at which language stops breathing. Pure

⁷¹ Paul de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), p. 92. Hereafter cited as “Conclusions.”

language does not exist. Except “as a permanent disjunction that inhabits all languages.” It is equal to itself only as unequal. For only as unequal to itself – language is born of this unequalness – does language trace for us the shadow or the *figura* of its origins. It is precisely the exile of language, that “is not really an exile, for there is no homeland,” as the only dwelling of language, that gathers the *effect* of absent time that seems to precede language. What Maurice Blanchot calls the “terrifyingly ancient past,”⁷² the unrepresentable time of being whose death language announces. But it is the rhetorical effect of absent time that language, in “the permanent disjunction,” spills in advance. For the unsaid is nothing other than the figures of its sayability. That is why, says de Man, “pure language is perhaps more present in the translation than in the original, but in the mode of trope” (“Conclusions,” 92). Benjamin is thus reiterating the impossibility of identity, its irreducibly differential structure or, in de Man’s terminology, “the inability of the trope to be adequate to meaning” (92). The signified is abandoned the moment it is proffered. The trope carries it out and outside itself before it is itself inside. The figure or trope is not an exile of history, a hole of time dug out in pure language that fills up over and beyond time,⁷³ *the figure is the very watershed of being*. The moment of becoming-

⁷² The effect is “the slip or the fragile fall that abolishes time in time, effaces the difference between the near and the far, the marks of reference, the so-called temporal measures (all that makes contemporary) and shrouds everything in non-time, from which nothing could come back, less because there is no return than because nothing falls there, except the illusion of falling there.” It is a time that cannot be timed, “when books, long since having disappeared, would evoke only a terrifyingly ancient past, as if without speech, without any speech but this murmuring voice of a terrifyingly ancient past.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: SUNY UP, 1992), pp. 14, 20-21. This murmur of the dreadfully ancient is what rivets all writing.

⁷³ For Benjamin, “it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history.” This is the ineffaceable pathos of language in Benjamin, of time as the fall of language. It inscribes the web of eschatology no time can cut through. It is also what de Man tries to rid in his later

language is the moment of missing contents of pure language already broached in figuration.

Flowers and lies are thus smuggled in at the very beginning of language, and the moment one speaks, one will have been seduced. Yet, only as deceived, and that absolutely, conned without reserve in a confidence trick of language, taken in and betrayed by its twilight, abandoned between day and night, intimately close and yet losing grip, without assurance, going under, can we ascend the withdrawing path of deserted truth. Always an escapee, a deserter on the run or playing hard to catch, bouncing off the interminable strips of metonyms, without ever touching ground, always ahead, unforeseeable, impossible. For the tropic turn is quick and ceaseless in its unceasing: “For not only are tropes, as their name implies, always on the move – more like quicksilver than like flowers or butterflies, which one can at least hope to pin down and insert in a neat taxonomy – but they can disappear altogether, or at least appear to disappear” (de Man, “EM,” 39).

De Man on “The Task:” “So, we have... a disjunction, says Benjamin, between the symbol and what is being symbolised, a disjunction on the level of tropes between the trope as such and the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions” (“Conclusions,” 89). It is the tropic turn that forecloses the possibility of totalisation or the totalising final turn as the infinite task of philosophy. Once the trope overtakes beginning – and that is *at* the very beginning – there is no stopping it, as it relays itself infinitely. The archaeological moment, which is the proper teleological moment, pure presence

writings, as we shall see. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 180.

and, therefore, death, is an *archival* moment. There is no outside to the system of tropes. And, hence, no end to metonymic turns of substitution and fragmentation (“They follow each other up metonymically and will never constitute a totality.”

91). By the same token, if pure language is fragmented in its plurality of languages that are “recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are parts of a vessel” (“The Task,” 79), then the vessel will keep breaking continuously, and irreparably, without any possibility of re-collection that governs the infinite task. Fragments are not only *not* synecdochal here, reconstituting a whole, but are “initial,” as de Man indicates:

What we have here is an initial fragmentation; any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*... and every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment – so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly – and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one. (“Conclusions,” 91)

The recuperative power of language is at the same time a disease of language. The figure signifies, at once, both an avowed desire to appropriate or reconstitute its missing contents and thus efface itself in absolute anonymity of knowledge – the ideal figure is no longer a figure but becomes its own anteriority empty of figures, just as the perfectibility of translation consists precisely in its effacement – and what destines that desire to its incompleteness, as it scatters its object in a *non-circular* grid of substitutions. It is, at once, a symbolic repossession *and* a metonymic dispossession. “We have a metonymic, a successive pattern,” de Man writes,

in which things [fragments of a vessel – de Man here still keeping within Benjamin’s amphoric metaphor] follow, rather than a metaphorical unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance. They do not match each other, they follow each other; they are already metonyms and not metaphors; as such they are certainly less working toward a convincing tropological totalization.”

(“Conclusions,” 90-91)

The figure thus constitutes the symbolic reappropriation of presence (insofar) as it divides it, robs it of itself. It is this privation of presence, its infinite scattering, or dissemination *in advance*, in a metonymic movement of desire, that becomes the condition of the possibility of presence at the limits of language. Possibility that is, at the same time, impossibility, for “the vessel keeps breaking constantly” (“Conclusions,” 91). The fragments will never reconstitute it. For not only is there nothing primary to reconstitute, “no vessel in the first place, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one” (91), but the very thing used to glue them together forecloses the possibility of reconstitution. What is promised in the figure – the possibility of *eskhatos* or the final turn,⁷⁴ of first-last turn of pure language – is thus withdrawn *as* it is promised, collapsed and emptied by the figure that makes it possible. What is made possible by the figure is what the figure makes impossible. There “never would be a need for imitation [that is, *metaphora*] if the presence had not been a

⁷⁴ As indicated before, Benjamin’s thought remains riddled with this possibility. It is also a possibility that is too messianic for deconstruction, that binds Benjamin to an irreparable nostalgia and reversal of pathos, of the Fall manifested in the plurality of languages and need for translation. The Fall, for Benjamin, is a linguistic fall that announces finitude as the impossibility of knowing – what for Benjamin is pure naming – which one can only mourn in *awaiting* against the horizon of pure language. Cf. below, note 207, for Derrida’s response to the messianic in *Acts of Religion*.

priori pre-empted (*entamée*),”⁷⁵ says de Man. And the figure that comes to supplement the lack, the moment it is called for, liberates the sign that, once broached, can only multiply in what becomes an ever more obscuring movement of forgetting and diversion. It is then “the movement of [this] drift/derivation [*dérive*],” Derrida writes, “the emancipation of the sign [that] constitutes in return the desire of presence” (*OG*, 69). Presence is nothing prior to its emptying out. Nothing before difference that constitutes and de-constitutes it, that makes it possible while refusing it, writing and erasing it, without end.

The unrelieved tropic drift, the drift that burns being, by which the present is torn away from itself and carried impoverished by the gusts of its metonymic figures, supplements and substitutions, will never saturate itself, burn itself out of breath, as it were (“This relationship of mutual and incessant supplementarity or substitution is the order of language.” Derrida, *OG*, 235). And, insofar it is thus ceaseless in its incompleteness, growing evermore restless in its errancy, without genetic assurances that would give it a gathering pull,⁷⁶ it will never transcend itself and escape the condition of its irreducible temporality. It is impossible for language to seal itself round the point of irreplaceability, where substitution ends and the supplement no longer supplements but gathers the supplemented that carries itself fully into it and preserves itself there, the point that would reverse the drift of time (*dérive*) and collapse words inwardly.

⁷⁵ Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 126.

⁷⁶ Genealogy remains here, as always, arrested in the semiotic system of reference without ever transcending it. It refers to “the genetic root-system” that never leaves the order of the sign. Derrida writes: “... the genetic root-system refers from sign to sign. No ground of nonsignification – understood as insignificance [that is, in-significance] or an intuition of a present truth – stretches out to give it foundation under the play and the coming into being of signs” (*OG*, 48).

Meaning would cease by finally revealing itself fully. But this signified, the very meaning of being signified, remains displaced as that which takes flight and that upon which its shadow can tread, scattering it, dividing it, but softly, without *ever* touching it. De Man continues:

Therefore the distinction between symbol and symbolized, the nonadequation of symbol to a shattered symbolized, the nonsymbolic character of this adequation, is a version of the others, and indicates the unreliability of rhetoric as a system of tropes which would be productive of meaning. Meaning is always displaced with regard to the meaning it ideally intended – *that meaning is never reached*. (“Conclusions,” 91, emphasis added)

Différance. That which makes the same divide itself in order to produce itself. It can only be itself become other. The same is differential. It infinitely reserves itself, slipping under every word that shadows its glow as much as it reveals its obscurity. It is in distraction which withdraws that it infinitely attracts itself. It must thus, in its indivisibility, partition and share itself in order to be itself. Différance also as spacing that rivets the same to the other, to what it is not, for it is itself only by being other than itself. It is thus also referred to and refers itself, from the beginning, the moment it announces itself, to the other. Announcing itself thus without announcement. *The same announces the other alone*. It is traversed and traced over by the other from the moment it proffers itself. The same is the impossibility of sameness. It is only in différance. There can be no identity except by the relation of otherness that devastates it. Identity is by virtue of its devastation alone. And because of this essential “nonadequation,” its figures, the figures that shatter the identity they repeat, that interrupt what

they make possible, remain essentially “unreliable.” For repetition here is never equal to the same, to what it repeats, it rather divides the same as it makes it possible in its repetition. It all begins with an impossible beginning, with a repetition, with a deferral and division of the same.⁷⁷ The symbolised itself is thus produced in erasure of itself. It writes itself in the blank of its own unreadability, letting slip itself through the repetitions of its separation. And the figures, in saying *again* for the first time, every time, only repeat this separation, only ever speak its reserve. “This signification [the movement (*dérive*) of figures that splits and carries off] is formed only within the hollow of *différance*: of discontinuity and of discreteness, of the diversion and the reserve of what does not appear” (Derrida, *OG*, 69).

The truth of language is thus untranslatable. Not only because of the recoil of the unsaid, as it steals away discrete, as it runs through the fingers of desire, elusive, unavowable, but because its translation is prohibited by what makes it possible. And the unsaid will remain exiled (“a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland...”) (“Conclusions,” 92) because it borrows from the order foreign to itself, in order to translate itself. The necessity of detour.

⁷⁷ It all begins with an essential failure to begin. In “*Différance*,” Derrida writes: “there is nowhere to *begin* to trace the sheaf or the graphics of *différance*. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. The problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value of *arkhē*” (6). The value, one could say, de Man has never stopped putting into question. Furthermore, and because of this, axis is always implicated in the *arkhē* (origin, mastery) precisely insofar as it is lacking. The legitimacy of the law in its ultimate absence of ground is thus always illegitimate and the force of law and/or its enforceability (there cannot be one without the other) rests on a “sleight of hand” that is always ideological. Cf. Derrida’s “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 228-99. It is precisely this axis, as we shall see later, always “sleightly” aligned, that is to say, ideological and, therefore, political, that de Man’s reading unmasks.

However, digressions, tropic forays and improper ventures do not abandon the proper. The abandon of the proper, for philosophy, its unrest, is what binds the proper. This, Derrida writes, “is the philosophical metaphor as a detour within (or in sight of) reappropriation, parousia, the self-presence of the idea in its own light. The metaphorical trajectory from the Platonic *eidōs* to the Hegelian Idea.”⁷⁸ An expropriation, a theft and the erasure of presence that is thus never a waste without profit or amortisation, that never ruins unreservedly because metaphor somehow sketches its own unwrittenness, all the time (re)collecting the very thing it scatters, assembling in what is always more dissemblance and closing the circle. The circular economy of the same is never in danger. Metaphor interrupts and divides it, but the division of the same is the *manner* of being of the same destined, at the end of history and limits of language, to recover its losses that were always investments, and thus complete itself by sinking into plenty of itself. “Metaphor, therefore, is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning, an economy of the proper without irreparable damage, a certainly inevitable detour, but also a history with its sights set on, and within the horizon of, the circular reappropriation of literal, proper meaning” (“WM,” 270). However, it still risks the proper. The proper opens

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), p. 253. Hereafter cited as “WM.” Derrida will come to identify metaphor with *Aufhebung*, each metaphor “deciphered simultaneously as a particular figure and as a paradigm of the very process of metaphorization: *idealization* and *reappropriation*” (“WM,” 253). And several pages later: “Metaphor then is included by metaphysics as that which must be carried off to a horizon or a proper ground, and which must finish by rediscovering the origin of its truth... This *end* of metaphor is not interpreted as a death or dislocation, but as an interiorizing anamnesis (*Erinnerung*), a recollection of meaning, a *relève* of living metaphoricity into a living state of properness. This is the irrepressible philosophical desire to summarize-interiorize-dialecticize-master-*relever* the metaphorical division between the origin and itself...” (268, 269). But also one whose totality metaphor comes to interrupt, as an opening that can never be sutured. Literature would be the name of this very opening, freedom and effraction of all circles. Not *anamnesis* but a hypomnesic machine that multiplies figures at a speed of light and overloads all memory circuits.

itself to the speculative risk, however slight, of infinite loss. Metaphor is thus dangerous, Derrida continues,

dangerous and foreign as concerns *intuition* (vision or contact), *concept* (the grasping or proper presence of the signified), and *consciousness* (proximity or self-presence); but it is in complicity with what it endangers, is necessary to it in the extent to which de-tour is a re-turn guided by the function of resemblance (*mimēsis* or *homoiōsis*), under the law of the same. (270)

Insofar as it is necessary to the unfolding of truth, the turn is always a re-turn. Turning thus towards itself in withdrawal from itself. Occultation of truth and its forgetting, that is its very historicity, is constitutive of the movement of its unveiling. Language is forgetful of truth. And metaphor carries the forgetfulness that thus remembers. It is an impoverished presence. The truth having fled, having withdrawn in dispersion of its figures – its modes of being, its mannerisms – the figures that are also its precinct, is thus still present as remembrance, that is, in the form of withdrawal and delay that metaphor tries to recoup while infinitely separating it in a continuous movement of forgetting.⁷⁹

Language thus mourns the absence upon which it is predicated. But this

⁷⁹ Simultaneously, however, metaphor puts at risk, “opens the wandering of the semantic,” folds and turns aside, what it should let unfold. “By virtue of its power of metaphoric displacement, signification will be in a kind of state of availability,” Derrida writes, opening itself thus to an adventure of unforeseen permutations. It risks breaking the circle, “disrupting the semantic plenitude to which it should belong” (“WM,” 241). It is therefore, he continues, both “the chance and risk of *mimēsis*” that “can always miss the true” (241). And only insofar as the truth (“a complete adequacy” in de Man’s terminology, a circular ratio in the economy of the same) risks itself, is inadequate to itself does meaning emerge. Meaning is thus possible only when truth can be missed: “*Lexis* [i.e., word, descriptive noun, statement, that is, in extension, discourse] is itself, if we might put it thus, only at the stage when meaning has appeared, *but when truth might still be missed...*” (241, emphasis added). Language is thus *essentially* unreliable. And this unreliability is the radical possibility of meaning. To speak to tell the truth is to no longer speak. The truth of language, in its “linguistic creations,” to recall Benjamin, “is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning” (“The Task,” 80). And where there is meaning, the truth is already elsewhere.

mourning or pathos of history, which is the beginning of history – it is the loss of truth to itself that initiates the birth pangs of history; meaning and history are of the same date – although present as the messianic delayed in Benjamin, de Man tells us, it is not “so much in what he says:”

It is not the pathos of a history, it is not the pathos of what in Hölderlin is called the “dürftiger Zeit” [time of dearth] between the disappearance of the gods and the possible return of the gods. It is not this kind of sacrificial, dialectical, and elegiac gesture, by means of which one looks back on the past as a period that is lost, which then gives you the hope of another future that may occur. *The reasons for this pathos, for this Wehen, for this suffering, are specifically linguistic.* (“Conclusions,” 86, emphasis added)

It is the fact that words are all alone, rooted in the dizzying slipping away of ground, and every time they reach for ground they sink ever deeper. They say the ground and each time the ground pulls away from underneath. And as the ground gives way, the ground becomes unground, each time. As ungrounded, words, in reaching for ground, that threatens them – words only are insofar as they are in unrest and away from ground – are thus destined to repeat the unground which abandons them to solitude. It is the fact that words are all alone, and only thus in solitude can they breathe, although every breath is spent to betray solitude and be thus breathless. It is in the solitude and longing of words in complete abandon that pathos is borne. *The pathos of history is a longing of words to even the obliquity of being in saying being.* In staging ground, language only disseminates unground, silhouetting infinitely its flight and mass departure. Unable to finally fold itself flat, language plunges in a fractal space of repetition

that multiplies zeroes in a movement towards its own emptying out that is also the place of fullness. Words are thus the folding moment of infinite unfolding, carrying only semblances that proliferate without end, in a setting the abyss, a *mise en abyme*.⁸⁰ De Man continues:

The reasons for this pathos, for this Wehen, for this suffering, are specifically linguistic. They are stated by Benjamin with considerable linguistic structural precision; so much so that if you come to a word like “abyss” in the passage about Hölderlin, where it is said that Hölderlin tumbles in the abyss of language, you should understand the word “abyss” in the non-pathetic, technical sense in which we speak of a *mise en abyme* structure, the kind of structure by means of which it is clear that the text becomes itself an example of what it exemplifies... The text is untranslatable... it is an example of what it states, it is a *mise en abyme* in a technical sense, a story within the story of what is its own statement. (“Conclusions,” 86)

The abyss here is not the plenitude of emptiness that shadows language against which sinking words would finally break. The abyss is not outside language, the open towards which language is riveted, pouring itself out to win out over itself in what is the impossible saying, pure naming. It is not the saying of the outside which would be death of language or rather death of what no longer is language. The abyss is not outside what speaks of it, it is language itself. Splitting itself unceasingly, it stratifies its incompleteness in “a *mise en abyme* structure.” The ground withdraws beneath the word that supplements it every time it says ground. Language thus in staging presence opens itself up to a

⁸⁰ The structure, as we know, borrowed from heraldry by André Gide where an image of an escutcheon is placed within a larger one. Used to designate a structure of infinite self-reflective stratification whereby the embedded smaller shield represents the larger. The plunging into the abyss of a sign *ad infinitum*.

vertiginous abyss of presence that it repeats every time it translates. It is itself the cause of the separation it mourns. At every turn, the referent turns away and language multiplies the remove. In multiplying the remove, language zeroes itself out. It says nothing outside itself, outside its own “story,” but rather becomes “an example of what it states... a story within the story of its own statement.” An *abyme* is set to work and the untranslatable is plunged into the abyss of translation. In staging presence, language thus becomes the abyss of presence, an empty place where everything and yet nothing takes place. Language summons being only to evacuate it in its figures. Presence made possible by language is by language made impossible. It is forbidden by precisely what permits it to come to pass. And it comes to pass only in the act of this prohibition. An *abyme* is the structure of supplementary presence, the supplement of presence that comes to its support, but is at the same time the figurative fold of presence, the interval and spacing of *différance*, that infinitely stratifies the play of its ruin (The “abyss of metaphor will never cease to stratify itself, simultaneously widening and consolidating itself: the [artificial] light and [displaced] habitat of classical rhetoric.” Derrida, “WM,” 253). The vessel, de Man has told us, will keep breaking continuously. It will stratify itself before gathering itself in what is a continuous tropic drift or derivation that always calls for another turn bringing forward the movement of regression. It will thus never gather itself. The point of collecting itself will always require an extra metaphor that scatters it. The collecting itself of the ground will thus never have used up the figures that collapse the ground. But there is nothing to collect, “no vessel in the first place,” says de Man, “or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents

and purposes there has never been one” (“Conclusions,” 91). The figurative fold of ground that ungrounds is the beginning of all ground. If it thus all begins with a turn aside, if there is only detour, if everything bends to it, then there are no more detours. There is nothing any longer to police its *errance*, nothing to secure the margins of an exile.⁸¹ If indeed the origin of truth is rhetorical, as a certain madness of Nietzsche states, then truth is always already at loss; it finds itself seduced by what it disavows. De Man:

The critical deconstruction that leads to the discovery of the literary, rhetorical nature of the philosophical claim to truth is genuine enough and cannot be refuted: literature turns out to be the main topic of philosophy and the model for the kind of truth to which it aspires. But when literature seduces us with freedom of its figural combinations, so much airier and lighter than the laboured constructs of concepts, it is not the less deceitful because it asserts its own deceitful properties... Philosophy turns out to be an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature. This endless reflection is itself a rhetorical mode, since it is unable ever to escape from the rhetorical deceit it denounces. (*Allegories*, 115)

⁸¹ In Nietzsche, the true has long lost its policing powers and mandate over its other because it has never been anything but a construct, an expedient of reason and a safety measure pressing uncertainty into service, as he writes in *The Will to Power*. After all, for Nietzsche, the root of the “in-itself” is in language, not outside it. Truth, as we know, is a figure whose figurative status has worn off and is now forgotten. In “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense:” “What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses, coins which have their obverse [that is, their image] effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal” (263). What man forgets is “that the original metaphors of perception are metaphors, and takes them for the things in themselves.” And only by forgetting alone, he continues, “that primitive world of metaphors, only by the congelation and coagulation of an original mass of similes and precepts... does he live with some repose, safety, and consequence” (264). For “between two utterly different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no accuracy, no expression, but at the utmost an aesthetical relation, I mean a suggestive metamorphosis, a stammering translation into quite a distinct, foreign language...” (265). Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense,” Excerpt in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 262-266. Hereafter cited as “On Truth and Lying.”

If the task of the translator is truly the philosopher's task,⁸² then it is a task destined to digressions, to detours and turns philosophy seeks to surpass. Literature, indeed, then becomes both "the main topic of philosophy and the model for the kind of truth to which it aspires." But it is also what undelivers it from its task by binding it to a truth that radically states the impossibility of its ever being done. What is beside, what philosophy has always looked to overlook, becomes "the main topic of philosophy." For, tropes, as we know by now, "are not understood aesthetically, as ornament," de Man writes,

nor are they understood semantically as a figurative meaning that derives from literal, proper denomination. Rather, the reverse is the case. The trope is not a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. *The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterises language as such.* (*Allegories*, 105, emphasis added)

By the way of by-way is thus the only way. What is aberrant is constitutive. What is turned aside by philosophy as aberrant, as that which obscures the path is constitutive of philosophy's path. Insofar as philosophy is bound by the word that escapes it, that, unavowable, chronicles the missing

⁸² The task Heidegger thinks has been "the matter" of philosophy since Plato. Be it speculative, "the movement in which the matter as such comes to itself, comes to its own presence" (Hegel) or intuitive, that brings "the matter of philosophy to its ultimately originary givenness, that means: to its own presence" (Husserl), what it "should be is presumed to be decided from the outset. The matter of philosophy as metaphysics is the Being of beings, their presence in the form of substantiality and subjectivity." Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," Excerpt in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986), pp. 249, 247. Speculative or intuitive, philosophy will have passed through language and its figures, the disruptive evidence of time, and there sidetracked without limit. Its matter will never be brought, will remain unbrought, to either "absolute knowledge" of speculative thought or "ultimate evidence" (249) of phenomenological reduction. Literature will have written them both off by writing them without end.

language, philosophy can draw near only by becoming attentive to what ceaselessly distracts it, to “the rhetorical model of the trope or, if one prefers to call it that, literature” (*Allegories*, 15). Philosophy’s faith is in the slippery hands of tropes and these “are not just travellers, they tend to be smugglers and probably smugglers of stolen goods at that. What makes matters even worse,” de Man continues, “is that there is no way of finding out whether they do so with criminal intent or not” (“EM,” 39). Smugglers of bad faith that cross the borders at night when the watchful eyes are most at their guard. Clandestine commerce of black market that upsets the revenue. A conspiracy that is always at work and most so when one rests assured that there is none.

The history of philosophy, its “endless reflection,” as de Man indicates, “is itself a rhetorical mode, since it is unable ever to escape from the rhetorical deceit it denounces (*Allegories*, 115). What philosophy turns aside has seduced it, turned its inside aside and outside itself. It now enters the wandering and errance of its own terminology, exposing without limit the literary nature of its own discourse. But this is far from reassuring. De Man:

Finally, our argument suggests that the relationship and the distinction between literature and philosophy cannot be made in terms of a distinction between aesthetic and epistemological categories. All philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent on figuration, to be literary and, as the depositary of this very problem, all literature is to some extent philosophical. The apparent symmetry of these statements is not as reassuring as it sounds since what seems to bring literature and philosophy together is... a shared lack of identity or specificity. (“EM,” 50)

Literature has never had an “identity” or “specificity,” a body anchored in a fixed belonging. It is by nature exilic and dispossessed, and in nature lacking. It brackets all determinations, formalistic or philosophical. This is precisely what Derrida means: “Literature voids itself in its limitlessness. If this handbook of literature meant to *say* something, which we now have some reason to doubt, it would proclaim first of all that there is no – or hardly any, ever so little – literature; that in any event there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature” (“Double Session,” 223).⁸³ Literature will have lost nothing by a “lack of identity or specificity” because it is this very lack that never runs ashore. Philosophy, however, enters a crisis.⁸⁴ It finds itself trapped by an empty snare of its own secret. And by the same token, what has borne the signature of deconstruction proper, has given way to the frivolity of its other that, in fact, has never been the other of deconstruction. By

⁸³ Literature is only at the fragility of its borders. It is migratory, nomadic. Among seven passions of literature Derrida lists in “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” the seventh would be the suffering “of an indeterminate or undecidable limit where something, some X – for example, literature – must bear or tolerate everything, *suffer everything precisely because it is not itself*, because it has no essence but only functions... There is no essence or substance of literature: literature is not. It does not exist. It does not remain at home, *abidingly* [à demeure] in the identity of a nature or even a historical being identical with itself... The historicity of its experience – for there is one – rests on the very thing no ontology could essentialize.” Jacques Derrida, “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” in *The Instant of My Death* by Maurice Blanchot, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 28. Hereafter cited as “Demeure.” If literature can contain anything, “say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything; it can even feign a trap, the way modern armies know how to set false traps; these traps pass themselves off as real traps and trick the machines designed to detect simulations under even the most sophisticated camouflage” (29), then literature has never been itself, or “hardly any, ever so little” of itself. That literature then is “to some extent philosophical,” as de Man says, barely does anything, for literature, that never is, can “simulate everything,” but that philosophy, by the same token, would be literary, this is what is intolerable and for precisely the same reasons. “The apparent symmetry,” therefore, “is not as reassuring as it sounds.”

⁸⁴ An epistemic crisis because it no longer masters its own terminology. Its own terms now, to recall Agamben, “seem to float interminably in the ocean of sense.” Not that they are no longer valid, “there is certainly a philosophical terminology; but the status of this terminology has wholly changed, or more exactly, *has revealed the abyss on which it always rested*” (“*Pardes*,” 209, emphasis added).

opening the margins of rhetoricity, deconstruction also opens the expanse of its own denial.

Literature, voiding itself, crosses borders and invades territories. That which is kept apart and away, always operates in what sets it apart, what separates it. It is a passivity that is all but passive.⁸⁵ A spectral flower of too many colours, too many valences that will never completely dry out, that always comes round again, and the more philosophy resists learning to cultivate its deceitful glow, the more vigorous the growth of its own deceit. Literature will always win out over reason, for, accustomed to nothing, it has nothing to lose, no-thing properly its own. To defeat and condemn it would only see it triumphant. What has become clear, however, is that figures, the very matter of literature, will always be folded between the sheets of philosophy like dried flowers that prevent the closing of its books. And any criteria, in terms of this division, that would regulate the *property* of deconstruction become impossible. Any attempt to recast or determine what Gasché calls “the profoundly philosophical thrust” of deconstruction, “to expose its essential traits,” against its misappropriations, indeed “to suggest some of the criteria that a possible deconstructionist literary criticism would have to observe” (*The Tain*, 7),⁸⁶ is to

⁸⁵ Indeed, for Blanchot, literature, having given up on mastery and power – it does not pretend to *know* anything (“passiveness of the incessant, feverish, even-uneven movement of error which has no purpose, no end, no starting principle”) – is itself un-power, the falling out of mastery of speech that no discourse can seize hold of. It is thus what comes closest in its movement towards that radical passivity of “the immemorial past” that has never been present, that “is measureless: for it exceeds being; it is being when being is worn down past the nub – the passivity of a past which has never been...” For Blanchot, the passivity of this irreducible exteriority can be evoked “only in a language that reverses itself,” in certain silences of literature and poetry, as we shall see in the following chapter. Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: Nebraska UP, 1995), pp. 14, 16, 17.

⁸⁶ And Gasché will underscore, of course, that “these criteria, at center stage in this book, are, as I shall show, philosophical and not literary in nature” (8).

destroy the very historicity of deconstruction and its to-come – in the sense Derrida gives to it – that also arrives to us from Paul de Man.

We shall now leave, even if prematurely, the lack of what goes on under the name of deconstruction – which, however, is precisely what constitutes its always untimely contemporaneity – in order to see the tireless work of de Man's thought that incompletes all memories of his work. We shall begin with his early critical writings where truth that comes, comes also as a memory of the other, or as a disaffirmation of being, but comes, even if "all that it promises is aridity, bareness, and depravation. Perhaps this is because, at least in its beginnings, such is the climate of our truth."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Paul de Man, "Process and Poetry" (1956), in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsay Waters (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 75.

Chapter Three

Towards a Temporal Poetics: *Riss des Grundes*

When pure thought speaks of the immediate unity of reflection-in-itself and reflection-in-other, and says that this immediate unity is abrogated, something must of course intervene so as to divide the two phases of this immediate unity. What can this something be? It is time. But time cannot find a place within pure thought.

— Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific*

Postscript

To speak of truth is to say precisely nothing in which it takes refuge. But it is also to say everything, to allow everything to abrogate itself. Final destitution of thought is also where it attains to itself in absolute plenitude. This specific vacillation, whereby withdrawal in time becomes the fulfillment of time, finds its complete articulation in Hegel. However, time will also become, as Kierkegaard writes, “an extremely long dragging out of things, a ludicrous delay.”⁸⁸ It is Hegel, in the end, that incompletes Hegel, as we shall see.

As late as 1982, de Man writes: “Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that.” The very “name

⁸⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” Excerpt in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 187.

‘Hegel,’” he continues, “stands here for an all-encompassing vessel in which so many currents have gathered and been preserved that one is likely to find there almost any idea one knows to have been gathered from elsewhere or hopes to have invented oneself. Few thinkers have so many disciples who never read a word of their master’s writings.”⁸⁹ One cannot go beyond Hegel, but there is in Hegel a fascination with difference that had come to sweep across the intellectual landscape of French thought during the 1930s and was going to leave an indelible trace on its subsequent development. De Man’s early critical work, his concern with the conditions of truth and its articulation in poetics, was cross-fertilized by the intellectual currents coming from France that had already begun to brush Hegel against the grain and articulate the impact of temporality, of negation and difference in Hegel, on poetics. Maurice Blanchot, as de Man will later say, has pursued this reading to its limits, showing “how the works of poets gravitate around the ontological question, how they try and fail always again to define human existence by means of poetic language.”⁹⁰ Although it may seem futile to speak of filiations, belongings and genealogic fantasies of influence, this chapter will track de Man’s early writing in its genetic crossovers rather – the illegitimate pregnancy of thought that does not know to whom it belongs.⁹¹

Hegel and Blanchot, rather than being points of departure for this chapter, are

⁸⁹ Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1996), p. 92. The essay had first appeared, however, in *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 761-75. *Aesthetic Ideology*, hereafter *AI*.

⁹⁰ Paul de Man, “Modern Poetics in France and Germany” (1965), in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 156.

⁹¹ Indeed, it is always a question of theft here, of illegitimate appropriations. There are no virgins in writing only prostitutes and thieves. “... I never had an idea of my own,” as de Man admits in an interview with Stefano Rosso, but only in order to concede his dependency on the text, “it was always through a text, through the critical examination of a text.” From “An Interview with Paul de Man,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), p. 118.

only relays, congested grid nodes and porous reference systems that make de Man's critical writing readable without providing the phantasm of narrative continuity. What will become clear, however, is that temporality that faults and interrupts identity, faults it irreparably. What language opens is the impossibility of closure, an excessive hypomnematic archive that consciousness will never finish surpassing. The past that it tries to recollect (*Erinnerung*) is never present other than in mythogenic effects of its retreat leaving behind only memory stains that poetry comes to retrace in mourning. De Man will return to Hegel in *Aesthetic Ideology*, but the stains of pathos will have long been wiped out, as we shall see later. The last section of the chapter will then proceed by a closer reading of de Man's early essay on Mallarmé that does not provide a privileged entry point but grafts precisely the strands of thought we will trace in a voice and concern indicative of his early writing.

To pursue this moment of exhaustion in which the world and its history would finally be seized is always already to pursue the retreat of the world, the spacing and the blank of time left behind as a trace of its writtenness. And poetry is the experience of this exhaustion in its unfinishedness. Of a certain spectrality, of bodies never fully present, that make themselves known only as disembodied, that appear fully only by having emptied their presence while keeping a ghostly relation to it. To seize literature is only to seize traces, its ghostly footsteps that lead nowhere, that is to say, precisely everywhere without assurance. This is both what keeps reading it always in abeyance, what can only promise misreadings, but it is also what makes literature readable. In its unreadability it allows us to read it. And one never masters one's ghosts, whence the haunting of the

undecidable without which there would be no reading. Poetry would be the place of this haunting where nothing is seized but the ghosts that elude seizure. No thing, only its reserve, its spectrality that keeps a memory or a dead trace of presence – a memory that opens the gap and pathos of mourning and desire for transcendence – no thing, then, can ever be encountered there, nothing unique in this place, only what Mallarmé calls “its vibratory near-disappearance... without the annoyance of a near or concrete reminder.”⁹² It is this experience, in a way at the edge of everything, that permeates de Man’s early writing. And death works under its name. Body disfigured every time. But there is no body. Only traces of its disfigurement that scatter it in echoes of writing. De Man’s essay on Mallarmé testifies to this work. And it is a testimony that is always referenced somewhere in the margins of his writing. The rupture of presence, of justified beginnings, is at the beginning and the end of de Man’s writing. The end that is thus without end. For de Man will never let closure take place. The end never encounters itself at the beginning, never gathers itself finally at the beginning. There is no end to detours of the beginning. There are only aborted beginnings. *Telos*, closure, identity are infinitely dispossessed. And later on, even pathos will subside, there will be no mourning or loss.

We will thus follow this testimony as it pirouettes across the gap it opens, as it evacuates being, and follow the traces that will pull us towards the body that has disappeared, towards the broken trail of its “resonant” retreat. We might catch a glimpse of its omission into which it sinks. Poetry is the scene of a

⁹² Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Foreword” to René Ghil’s *Traité du verbe*. Qtd. in Maurice Blanchot, “The Myth of Mallarmé,” in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 30.

perfect crime. It pursues the suspect to the point of becoming one. It interrogates the crime it itself commits. Poetry is sick. The sickness of its prying voyeuristic eyes: it gets off at seeing everything die under its gaze. But it continues to gaze. It digs under the words, lifts them to see the roots that it severs. It rips apart and cuts what it wants to shelter. It wants to keep what it subjects to the unceasing omission, the annihilation as the only signature of words. The body is consigned to appear only in its dismembered traces.

Is poetry then the body of writing that scatters the body it writes, infinitely, without ever collecting itself, reassembling its pieces in a metaphor of Narcissus, a body finally close to itself, touching its own image in the pond of echoes, caressing itself? “We still *have trouble*,” Derrida writes, “defining the question of literature, dissociating it from the question of truth [which is also, and always, the question of image, of repetition, of Echo], from the essence of language, from essence itself. Literature ‘is’ the place or experience of this ‘trouble’ we also have with the essence of language...” (“Strange Institution,” 48). “Poetic Nothingness,” de Man’s essay on Mallarmé, is precisely where this “trouble” takes place, the trouble and sickness of language. Thinking de Man outside this “trouble” is unthinkable. This scene of a certain trouble in Mallarmé’s supreme game (*jeu suprême*) of speech and writing. But to play here is also to be faithful to a movement that strains towards the place of unknowing. It is to be overtaken by the play, to lose one’s thread in unavoidable detours on the way, in the grid of intersecting digressions, the textual knots of Bataille, Blanchot and Derrida that infinitely complicate this supreme game of dices and surfaces. The game that stakes being at every throw. The game where knowing

equals, what Blanchot calls, “deferred assassination,”⁹³ as it comes face to face with what undoes all knowing. Where the very possibility of speech is under strain from the radical acknowledgment of language as that which will always have fled the scene, leaving the moment of truth infinitely breached.

Hegelian Without Reserve

The historical movement is that of becoming: being consciously created, whether as the work of art or historical deed in general, is unstable in its essence, and it denies itself to be reborn in another being. The two are separated by the abyss of a negation (in organic language: a death), and the passage from one to the other is essentially discontinuous.

— Paul de Man, *Critical Writings 1953-1978*

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

⁹³ Blanchot on the essential negativity of language: “Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet, when I say, ‘This woman,’ real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is right here now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; *my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction*; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying... I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is. Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me.” Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 323. Hereafter cited as “Literature and Death.”

The horizon of absolute knowledge is the effacement of writing in the logos, the retrieval of the trace in parousia, the reappropriation of difference, the accomplishment of what I have elsewhere called the *metaphysics of the proper*... Yet, all that Hegel thought within this horizon, all, that is, except eschatology, may be reread as a meditation on writing. Hegel is *also* the thinker of irreducible difference... the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing. (26)

There is a double reading in Hegel. One of *Geist* that animates history as a horizon of self-possession, of egology and specular recollection of identity in the other. "Only this self-restoring sameness or this reflection in otherness within itself," Hegel writes, "is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual."⁹⁴ In this reading, history will have always been only a passage, an encyclopedic loop of consciousness, in the economy of the same. "Pure self-recognition in absolute otherness..." ("PS," 73). History becomes the drama and pathos of self-consciousness where relation to alterity is always a relation of self-reflexivity. But "the last philosopher of the book," is also "the first thinker of writing." For there is, indeed, another reading, almost *amnesic*, that incompletes the first. That opens the passage in a radical acknowledgement of its breaking off, so as to put the present in relation to itself by putting it beside itself. So as to open history that becomes one of *infinite* mourning, one of being beside itself unreservedly. Becoming itself by being offered in its shatters alone. History that is a spacing out, a measure and a rhythm, that drives the same off the course. For de Man, there is only this

⁹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, "Phenomenology of Spirit," Excerpt in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 70. Hereafter cited as "PS."

history, one of *almost* abandoned events,⁹⁵ there can only be, if there is reading, an infinite dislocation of the encounter between the two readings of Hegel.

Even in his early writing, it is the second reading, the thought of finitude, that is also one of language, that comes to organize itself as the conceptual grid and tension of all thematic aggregations that will come to cross it. It is time, the irreducibly temporal structure of self-consciousness, that frustrates auto-affectivity and interrupts its gathering. For de Man, presence will always be an elsewhere, out of time and out of language. And it can only maintain itself as an elsewhere, as a scattering in language that unravels its being absolutely, that collects by absolutely scattering its self-possession. “De Man’s effort,” Lindsay Waters writes, “has been all along to understand ‘subjectivity, precisely at the point where subjectivity destroys its functioning.’”⁹⁶ His early writing is concerned with the problematic of self-understanding and it is played out in the space that makes the structure of its representation impossible. De Man begins with the necessity to understand the impasse of reflexivity that the thought of finitude implies. Consciousness only ever asserts the slippage of its delay that

⁹⁵ I say *almost*, for it is impossible not to summon the limit of history in the very thought of finitude, not to call for *anamnesis* at the heart of *amnesia*, not to cite the first reading of Hegel whenever one reads the second. Derrida, reading Levinas: “Under these conditions, the only effective position to take in order not to be enveloped by Hegel [for Levinas, of course, just to clarify here, it is a question of the irreducible exteriority of the other as the radical departure from the same] would seem to be, for an instant, the following: to consider false-infinity (that is, in a profound way, original finitude) irreducible... by showing that since consciousness is irreducible [what Husserl does, says Derrida], it can never possibly, by its own essence, become self-consciousness, nor be reassembled absolutely close to itself in the parousia of an absolute knowledge. But can this *be said*, can one think ‘false infinity’ as such (time, in a word), can one pause alongside it... without *already* (an already which permits us to think time!) having let the *true* infinity... be indicated, presented, thought and stated?” It is impossible, in other words, not to encounter Hegel as one tries to escape him. Indeed, “as soon as *he speaks* against Hegel, Levinas can only confirm Hegel, has confirmed him already.” Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 149.

⁹⁶ Lindsay Waters, “Paul de Man: Life and Works.” Introduction to *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* by Paul de Man (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. xxxii. Hereafter cited as “Life and Works.”

devastates its project in advance. What it discloses is not an integrative gathering of difference in a comprehensive totality, but precisely the discontinuity, the disintegrative work of negation – memory incapable of recollection. It essentially opens up the possibility of destruction alone – but destruction that is also the possibility of meaning. It is only in annihilation that consciousness maintains itself. Its life, “the life of Spirit,” says Hegel, “is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it.” (“PS,” 77). It is at this impasse of reflection, at the opening of history of meaning, at the second reading of Hegel, that de Man’s reading begins. Waters writes:

In 1983 de Man projected writing a book on the aesthetic ideology that would have centered on Hegel. The critique of the aesthetic ideology, of aesthetic nationalism, of romantic anticapitalism began here with inwardness and more generally with the notion of negation, the noncoincidence of self (understood in the abstract sense only) and world. (“Life and Works,” xxxix)

Inwardness would cover a persistent interiorizing movement of negativity and failure in which consciousness is caught up. Death, what radically shatters every relation, but also that without which there would be no relation, is precisely what sustains this movement of consciousness in its attempt to know the totality of that from which it is separated: “Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength... But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death... It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds

itself" ("PS," 77). The point of the height of knowledge, of self-proximity or auto-affection, would be the point of the height of death. Consciousness is only at the edge of everything, never truly in possession, but disinherited by the will of history. "In every act of knowledge," de Man writes,

there is a profound flaw that leads to an insoluble dilemma: its object can be known only at the price of the existence of the knowing agent (cognitive consciousness)... 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 stock them all. This power is asserted... 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.⁹⁷

It is the "noncoincidence of self and world" that makes the structure of understanding fold upon itself in "an endless series of failures." It all begins with a rupture of time that in breaking off puts us in relation. Separated – that is to say, in relation, the spacing and the interruption measuring the reserve and the abyss at the ground of every relation – consciousness can only know the object, in its absolute reserve, by sacrificing its ability to know.⁹⁸ "Without this sacrifice," de Man continues, "there can be no really objective knowledge"

⁹⁷ Paul de Man, "Montaigne and Transcendence" (1953), in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), pp. 6, 7. Hereafter cited as "MT."

⁹⁸ This follows the subject's completion in absolute knowledge that finally knows itself by exhausting all knowing, all there is to know, completion, that is, in absolute unknowing. The more there is to know the less there is to know. Bataille writing on Hegel: "The unending chain of things known is for knowledge but the completion of oneself. Satisfaction turns on the fact that a project for knowledge, which existed, has come to fruition, is accomplished, that nothing... remains to be discovered. But this circular thought is dialectical. It brings with it the final contradiction (affecting the entire circle): *circular, absolute knowledge is definitive non-knowledge*" Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 108. Hereafter cited as *IE*.

(“MT,” 6). To know the object, to possess it, is to be destitute in dispossession. Dwelling aside being is dwelling in infinite difference, that is to say, total indifference or death that is finally without power, without reserve. Presence here equals the completion of the subject in what is its absolute absencing. “At its origin,” de Man writes, “the motive for knowledge is ‘pleasant;’ in its consequences, it is the most terrifying impulse imaginable, since it can lead to the very destruction of the thinking being” (“MT,” 6).⁹⁹ The light of absolute knowledge then is the night of unknowing. “The problem has gained in density; knowledge is complicated by two profound dimensions: that of its essential failure and that of the danger of this failure to being.” (6-7). What saves the mind is the knowledge of its failure to know. Failure that both destines subjectivity to non-identity – one could say to language – but also to the work of becoming close to itself in its remoteness. This failure, as de Man indicates, is not the limit

⁹⁹ In a later essay, “Process and Poetry” (1956), collected in the same volume, de Man identifies this movement as one of “poetic eternalism” (65) or “poetry of substance, maintaining the sensuous object at the expense of consciousness” (71). The pull toward eternalism here sees “the temporal destiny of being” (64), its being-there (*Da-Sein*), the very opening of history in the originary transcendence of Being – this transcendence is *originary* because Being is always already Being-in; there is no Being outside or before its Being-in-the-world that is its constitutive state (“*Being-in’ is thus the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state.*” *Being and Time*, 80) – sees it then as a pathetic dispersion that in *becoming* gathers the loss of *being* upon which *becoming* is predicated. De Man writes: “When contemporary thought, in its most legitimate forms, concerns itself with poetry, it is generally by conferring on it a power of eternity that makes it either distinct from or superior to a process of becoming. Those writers who try to move beyond the historical concept of becoming that preoccupied nineteenth century consciousness approach poetry as anticipating, in Heidegger’s terms, ‘that which *remains* in the process of becoming.’ Poetry thus acquires a value analogous to that which childhood held for certain romantics: that of an ideal state from which we have already separated ourselves, but one that acts in memory as a redemptive power. It is a world of irresistible charm, even though its remoteness makes it magical, strange, and totally unknown. However, by overcoming the dread felt in the face of something unknown only because it is in reality the one thing that is truly familiar, we would somehow be able to move back into the light [the light here that is nothing other but the eternal night] and finally ‘to dwell poetically on the earth’” (64). It is both in Blanchot and Heidegger that de Man identifies this “metatemporal poetics” (65). For de Man, however, poetry is historical through and through, as we shall see: “poetry [is] the *logos* of... becoming. As such, far from being what Nietzsche calls an eternalising power, poetry is the constant negation of the eternal” (66-67). It is the very putting in question of its “redemptive power.” Crucial difference here between both de Man and Blanchot and de Man and Heidegger that we shall dwell on later.

of knowing but the very condition of its possibility: “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 very activity, great or small” (“MT,” 7). Knowledge then is founded upon the impossibility to know that “colors its very activity.” It is privative. It consists in the depletion of the object in order to name it, make it known (“clarity... is made possible only by a necessary sacrifice of the sensuous object.” “Process and Poetry,” 70). The name is thus both what finds and what empties the object. It is what “kills” it, in de Man’s terminology, which, indeed, as Norris suggests, is “heavy with existential overtones, a rhetoric more typical of his earliest essays but by no means absent from the writings of his middle period.”¹⁰⁰

In a sense then, there is no object, insofar as it trails in the name as erasure. There is only an elision of the object and its slipping away that knowledge repeats – but an elision without which there would be no transmissible knowledge – rather than its sensuous resurrection in repetition. Repetition, iterability, that is to say, language, thus only ever repeats the interval that registers this slippage. It is the repetition that is transmissible – and

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 6. Hereafter cited as *The Critique*. However, Norris, following Geoffrey Hartman, identifies a certain pathos of reconciliation on another discursive level in de Man’s later work as well: “de Man’s later work grew out of an agonised reflection on his wartime experience, and can best be read as a protracted attempt to make amends...” (190). One can argue, however – and this, indeed, will become unmistakable in the later stages of our reading – that de Man’s later writing on language is language on writing rid of any subjectivity or pathos of renunciation that may account for such an expiatory reading. That language, as he writes, “is not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all” (*RT*, 87), implies that we can no longer recognise ourselves in language and any residue of existential pathos, temporal predicament or loss that may have lingered in de Man’s earlier writing now completely dissolve as language breaks the fetters of its relation to the subject entirely.

transmissible due to the difference or spacing it repeats – not the object. The sensuous must be lost to language if language is it to transmit it. This is the exigency of all knowing, of its very ideality. It demands sacrifice.¹⁰¹ De Man, writing on Mallarmé:

clarity... is made possible only by a *necessary sacrifice* of the sensuous object. Rather than establishing correspondences [this would also be Baudelaire's correspondences, trying to capture the elusive moment that precedes them] that would make the movements of consciousness look like the sensuous phenomena of the natural world, the Mallarméan metaphor transforms the physical world into the operations of the mind... More than anyone else, Mallarmé constantly described this dialectic thanks to which an object is transformed into "its vibrating near disappearance..." a supremely acute inward vision perceives nothing but the spectacle of a disappearance of objects that are already disembodied... Starting from an experience of alienation or separation that is universal, it tries to suspend it by safeguarding the movement of consciousness at the expense of the object, *to save consciousness by killing the object*. ("Process and Poetry," 70-71, emphasis added)

At the very moment of its appropriation, the object is disembodied or, more radically, killed in order to be. Hegel: "The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power" ("PS," 77). It is death, the radical discontinuity of the passage, that assures the passage. Only as vibratory "near-disappearance," as absence, can presence be truly mastered. To possess the object is to master its absence. What was never there before it disappeared, now

¹⁰¹ And sacrifice properly speaking, insofar as sacrifice is never pure but always implicates an economy, a return. What is sacrificed is always put in reserve, temporised; offered yes, but not absolutely, not gratuitously. Sacrificial economy is the economy of Reason.

retreats and remains as that which will never have been treated – and so nothing,
Mallarmé writes,

NOTHING

of the memorable crisis

or might

the event have been accomplished in view of all results null

human

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE

an ordinary elevation pours out absence

BUT THE PLACE¹⁰²

Presence is only ever present in its traces, that is, in the very impossibility of knowing – this is where we know – in the “NOTHING / of the memorable crisis,” in “the spectacle of a disappearance” that solicits thought. It is night, but, at the same time, night as the dawn of meaning alone. Silence, that which is before speech and that into which everything sinks for speech to begin, is that towards which words are riveted. That is why Mallarmé is the “poet of sterility and the blank page.”¹⁰³

Night, the impossibility of knowing, does not destroy subjectivity. Cognition does not break down here; it begins. “It recognizes that its life consists in an endless series of failures of this order, and it finds that it retains the power to stock them all” (“MT,” 7). The moment at which “an ordinary elevation pours

¹⁰² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés (A Throw of the Dice)*, in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley and London: California UP, 1994), p. 142. Unless otherwise stated, all further references to Mallarmé’s poems are to Weinfield’s translation in this edition.

¹⁰³ Paul de Man, “Poetic Nothingness: On a Hermetic Sonnet by Mallarmé,” in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 18.

out absence,” is the break of day, of *logos*, of meaning; the object endures but only to emerge as a quiver, a “near-disappearance,” a name rid of solidity, universal, free, equal.¹⁰⁴ But this freedom comes at a cost, for it is a quiver of reference. All negativity is repossessed by consciousness, maintained and surpassed (*Aufhebung*), “stocked,” as de Man writes, and reinvested as work. That which is not, which no longer is, is summoned into being. Death labours a reserve of meaning, collaborates as its “underside and accomplice” in the movement towards the *for-itself* of consciousness. “In discourse... negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity. Negativity cannot be spoken of, nor has it ever been *except in this fabric of meaning*,” says Derrida.¹⁰⁵ Death, what is truly (at) the limit, never takes off headless, never exceeds the limit within which it signifies. What is a non-path, the point one will never have traversed, the limit experience, the instant that cannot pass, is never done with, that can only begin endlessly, is surpassed “according to the game of speech.”

Mallarmé asks:

What use is the wonder of transposing a phenomenon of nature into its resonant near disappearance, according to the game of speech, unless there emanates from it, without the hindrance of an immediate or concrete prompting, the pure idea? (qtd. in “Poetic Nothingness,” 21)

¹⁰⁴ Equal, Nietzsche would say, insofar as it treats the edges of singularity by equalising them: “Every idea originates through equating the unequal. As certainly as no one leaf is exactly similar to any other, so certain is it that the idea ‘leaf’ has been formed through an arbitrary omission of these individual differences, through forgetting of the differentiating qualities...” (“On Truth and Lying,” 263).

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 327, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as “General Economy.”

All language tends towards where separation breaks but only proves its impotence. Everything begins with death. Beginning itself, life, Blanchot never tires of repeating Hegel, as if repetition that serializes origins could somehow exhaust the moment that completes us but that infinitely exceeds us: “‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’ in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech.” This, he continues, “is the ‘question’ that seeks to pose itself in literature, the ‘question’ that is its essence” (“Literature and Death,” 322). Literature is thus essentially tied to the other and its name, the name that calls for presence that it annihilates in the call which keeps the call open. It is tied to language and to its limit where the question begins. “Literature is bound to language,” Blanchot continues, and language “is reassuring and disquieting at the same time” (322). It is reassuring because, in annihilation, it sets us free, but disquieting because the price of this freedom is a quiver of reference that no longer can be stilled. The name names what is no longer there, what no longer is. It names the absence of what it gives us to think: “The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being” (322). It puts us on the traces of the unthinkable. The name is an index of the unthinkable that trails absent, ghostly, in it. It registers death of being. But death, “the putting at stake of life,” as Derrida writes, “is a moment in the constitution of meaning, in the presentation of essence and truth. It is an obligatory stage in the history of self-consciousness and phenomenality, that is to say, in the presentation of meaning” (“General Economy,” 321). There are thus two registers of language in language:¹⁰⁶ the one that quantifies, serializes, compares and the other that

¹⁰⁶ What Blanchot, as we shall see later, will call two slopes of literature: “If one looks at it in a

suspends the first, as an instance of silence *within* language; it is in language what suspends it. What exceeds language is in language, staying close, ghostly, other. There is seduction between the two registers that call for each other, reach over to the other. But there is also irreducible heterogeneity between the two that makes the call possible. They are inseparable in the bond that divides them, in their very separability.¹⁰⁷ De Man's writing, from the beginning, is a testimony to the uprooting of the bond, without which there would be no call and thus no response, and no responsibility.

One must attend then to a certain rupture that guards all intimacies by keeping them wounded. And thus to a limit at which alone the possibility of closeness is preserved. But also, at the same time, the limit that removes closeness, detaches from roots, divides and spectralises. Where language, the machine, re-productibility by division of the same, begins. And with it also the

certain way, literature has two slopes. One side of literature is turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated... But there is another side to literature. Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown [in other words, for precisely what will always have stolen away on the first slope – whence “the unknown”], free [because immoderate – incalculable, Derrida would say], and silent [because it is the end that precedes language] existence; literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation [that would destroy it], it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside (“Literature and Death,” 330). Blanchot's writing pursues the moment there where language has evacuated itself and having lost all meaning is finally “speech empty of words” (332). Opacity, for Blanchot, is what salutes being (both wishes good health, but also saves, salvages, from *salvus*, “unharmful, safe”). More of the two slopes and de Man's implicit critique that can be gleaned here will be said later.

¹⁰⁷ In *Allegories of Reading*, when writing on Rousseau's distinction between the denominative, that is referential, and conceptual or metaphorical language, de Man will precisely pivot this bond of dis-association between the two orders: “... the substitution of sameness for difference that characterizes, for Rousseau, all conceptual language is built into the very act of naming, the ‘invention’ of the proper noun. It is impossible to say whether denomination is literal or figural: from the moment there is denomination, the conceptual metaphor of entity as difference is implied, and whenever there is metaphor, the literal denomination of a particular entity is inevitable: ‘try to trace for yourself the image of a tree in general, you will never succeed. In spite of yourself, you will have to see it as a small or large, bare or leafy, light or dark...’” (148). Denominative is always already metaphorical. There is no language of pure naming that does not betray its own movement. In other words, *there is no language other than metaphorical but there is other of language suspended in it*. What remains in language are only the remains of a shattered belonging.

work of mourning – that which tethers, keeps close, what it must renounce – of metaphor and memory, as the (re)collection of the pre-machinal.¹⁰⁸ There is thus a double bind here that this limit commands. It is the originary structure of all *aporias*. And one of its figures that ghostly lingers over de Man's writing, inflecting, at least in the beginning, the beginning of its every curve, is Hegel – himself a figure disfigured through the folds of misreadings, to use de Man's terminology, which allow us to read him and read him the only way we can: improperly.¹⁰⁹

The organizing metaphor mirroring the structural limit of the mind is the Hegelian notion of interiorization. Under the sway of Alexandre Kojève,¹¹⁰ a Hegelianism not of totality, as mentioned above, of *Geist* that archives history, the dispersion of its content, as the phenomenology of self-exposition, “pure self-identity in otherness,” as Hegel writes (“PS,” 82), but of separation and tear (*Riss*), a certain distress of thought, broke open a poetics of uprootedness and estrangement. Consciousness stumbles upon the truth of its own contradiction,

¹⁰⁸ The machine that tries to remember is also what dismembers without reserve. Wherever there is machine, there is repetition. And the repetition is compulsive, trying to master the loss by multiplying it. As Blanchot writes in *The Space of Literature*, “what is present is not contemporary; what is present presents nothing, but represents itself and belongs henceforth and always to return. It isn't but comes back again... so that my relation to it is not one of cognition, but of recognition, and this recognition ruins in me the power of knowing, the right to grasp. It makes what is ungraspable inescapable; it never lets me cease reaching what I cannot attain. And that which I cannot take, I must take up again, never let go.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: Nebraska UP, 1982), pp. 30-31, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as *TSL*. But we shall return to the machinal in language, to hypomnesic memory attrition, but also to a certain performativity of reading that “must take up again, never let go.”

¹⁰⁹ For de Man, one can only ever read improperly. Insofar as there is not One reading, there can only be misreadings. On the structure of reading as misreading cf. chap. below, “Reading Con: Rhetoric, Allegory and the Machine.”

¹¹⁰ Kojève delivered a series of lectures on Hegel at the Ecole des Hautes-Etudes in Paris from 1933-1939. These lectures, attended by Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Paul Sartre and others, came to have a lasting influence on the subsequent development of the French poetics, itself caught in the post-war dialectic between the Sartrean literature of commitment (*littérature engagée*) – the reconciliation of politics, of pro-active engagement, with the world – and literature as a studious bourgeois avoidance of genuine commitment – epitomised by the Proustian aesthetics and intellectual psychologism.

upon itself, Jean Hyppolite writes, as “the consciousness of the I that is internally rent... This unhappy consciousness is subjectivity, which aspires to the repose of unity; it is self-consciousness as consciousness of life and of what exceeds life. But it can only oscillate between these two moments” (qtd. in Waters, “Life and Works,” xxxvi). It is the awareness of this estrangement that inheres in being – the excess of being in being – and its critical consequences for reading and writing of literature, its historical stresses, in other words, that the French poetics articulated in the 1940s. Writing in 1955, de Man will say:

This awareness of a deep separation between man’s inner consciousness and the totality of what is not himself had certainly existed before 1800, but it becomes predominant around that time... Man is thrown back upon himself, in total inwardness, since any existence within the framework of accepted reality can no longer satisfy him. We know all this; the characteristics of romanticism are now a part of literary history. But we do not generally realize that we are still living under the impact of exactly the same ontological crisis. Never have truly great minds of romanticism, such as Rousseau, Hölderlin, or Hegel, been more familiar and more directly concerned with our own situation.¹¹¹

“Our situation” then is one at which being is at stake. “Time of dearth” is our time and we can only reflect upon the moment of eschatological withdrawal. Thought cannot find refuge from its own predicament that binds it to belatedness which also puts it in relation to history. There would be nothing to remember without this originary belatedness that will always leave the moment of acting precipitous and blind. This moment, in its blind intoxication, is what suspends

¹¹¹ Paul de Man, “The Inward Generation” (1955), in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 15. Hereafter cited as “IG.”

history, but, at the same time, it is the whole of history, what constitutes its fabric by tearing it apart. Decision that tears apart is structurally unjustifiable. It is the moment of totality that is always premature. If it initiates, performatively interrupts, if it is transformative, it can be justified neither by the logic of what precedes it nor by what it will have opened up. It is always the instant that exceeds history, is without temporal thickness, not an instant that can be counted, outside history, but that *makes* history. This is the revolutionary instant that contracts time: blind, premature, unjustifiable, sovereign, and, hence, inherently violent. At issue here is the impossibility of grounding any decision true to its name – in a sense, thus always illegitimate, without ground or foundation – in a truth that would call for its necessity. Quoting Norris here on this terrifying revolutionary instant – exceptional, but an instant in every decision – commenting on de Man’s essay “Wordsworth and Hölderlin” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, will help pivot the issue:

it [the instant of instituting decision] leaps toward a kind of premature transcendence that would raise political action to the level of revealed truth. And in so doing... ignore the constraints placed upon human knowledge by the limiting conditions of time, mortality, and chance – by the fact that there exists no ultimate, validating truth that could save such actions from their own utterly contingent historical nature. (*The Critique*, 6)

Political impatience here, for de Man, is a vector of discharge for diseased being. In his early writing, politics provides a flight from the originary anxiety by organizing a studious overcoding, which is to say forgetting, of what constitutes authentic awareness of privation – of our inability to identify with the

totality of what is. Indeed, in “The Inward Generation,” de Man writes of a certain “resistance” to poetics of inwardness that has tended to “decry it as pathological or morbid development,” but, he continues, has “more often, suggested concrete systems of organization as *substitutes*. These systems, whether political, literary, or philosophical, are mainly characterized by the studious avoidance, under a variety of pretexts, of the ontological question” (15, emphasis added). “Resistance” itself here may be pathological insofar as it produces supplementary symbolic structures (political and narratological) in order to displace the originary lack that motivates them – the lack that is the disaffection of being at the origin. It is indicative, de Man will say, of “a temptation that exists in all of us: a desire for serenity,” in other words, for narcissus of auto-affection or self-proximity of being. Further down, he continues:

This being the case [the studious forgetting of the ontological], we must realize that this difficulty prevents us from dealing with the entire realm of problems that result from this awareness of separation, and this includes most matters of contemporary history, literature, and, to a large extent, ethics and theology. When systems claim their ability to solve such problems, they are in fact appealing to a temptation that exists in all of us: a desire for serenity that tries to forget and to repress the original anxiety. We must remember that the inwardness of our age has its origin in what Hegel called the *unhappy* consciousness. (“IG,” 15)

But what constitutes being, what is proper to it, is its dislocation, its rift (*Riss*) – that which makes it improper – rather than a repose of unity. This is what makes it historical: the impossibility of auto-affection. But, therefore, also

an insatiable desire for it(self). Desire thus without respite, always discontent: “We must remember that the inwardness of our age has its origin in what Hegel called the *unhappy* consciousness.” For de Man, authentic criticism that is truly historical begins here, “facing the issues in which our being is at stake” (15). It begins with the awareness of our impropriety; it begins with what lacerates.¹¹²

Riss is the instant of interiorization, of will to power, but also of severance that leaves consciousness sunk in solitude. Nothing is ever present for consciousness that can only mourn in that silence upon which the outside, everything, is proffered. We are never in the depth of things, always in their dispossession. This is both the ecstasy of the executioner and his infinite misery. It is what liberates us to the light of day while condemning us to the night of solitude in the midst of day. The cognitive act severs the sinews that would compel conviction. Its object remains fundamentally separated, shrouded in the still gloom of secrecy, which to manifest is to annihilate. Bataille writing on the annulment: “Nature giving birth to man was a dying mother: she gave ‘being’ to the one whose coming into the world was her own death sentence” (*IE*, 78). Consciousness breaks off all contemporaneity. It opens the spectacle of emptiness, of repetitions, erasures, distances and speeds that leaves being uncertain of its belonging. “Being is in the world so *uncertain*,” Bataille writes,

that I can project it where I wish – outside of me. It is a sort of inept man – who did not know how to unravel the essential plot – who limited being to the self. In actual fact, being is exactly *nowhere* and it was a

¹¹² But this, however – and de Man does not see it yet – is precisely what destines us to politics that is nothing other – and nothing less – than improper, forever uncertain of its ground, its site that is one in which *what is to be done* can never be justified. Without this impossibility, there would be neither politics nor (the unfulfilled) being of politics.

game to grasp it as *divine* at the summit of the pyramid of individual beings. [*Being is 'ungraspable'. It is only 'grasped' in error; the error is not just easy – in this case, it is the condition of thought.*] Being is nowhere. (IE, 82)

Being is only ever “grasped in error.” There is thus a certain irreducible error or thoughtlessness that commands thought. It is its very “condition.” To grasp what will have always reserved itself and to grasp only its reserve that gives itself in specters and phantasms is not the error. The error is to forget this difference to which the supplement bears witness. Nowhere is where there is being (“Being is nowhere.”). It is there where we do not enter, where we do not know. We only know its name. It is not One. It is incalculable, “ungraspable.” There can be only two. This being-two, its plurality and dispersion, is where we grasp and account but is what remains, at the same time, inadmissible to reason. Supplementarity that uproots, destines One to dispersal of its shatters and yet introduces it in the midst of its shatters, its phantasm at least, or its fetish. But there is no being apart from its shatters that name it. Name is its being – which is to say, being is its being-plural, its uninterrupted alterity. There is only name. Nothing trails behind. It is without remainder. Insofar as we live, we dwell without being, not even in its shadow but in its absolute absence. But this absence, however, is never absolute precisely because it introduces the pathos of solitude and mourning that poetry comes to trace. The authentic that imposture thus isolates, makes more apparent, by losing sight of it. Pathos will have resurrected being. The relief of presence is sketched by precisely the pressure of its erasure.

In Hegelian terms, negativity, in negation, only ever draws the figure of life. It is the very “path of the natural consciousness which presses forward to true knowledge,” Hegel writes. The itinerary of “the Soul which journeys through the series of its own configurations as though they were the stations appointed for it by its own nature, so that it may purify itself for the life of the Spirit, and achieve finally, through a completed experience of itself, the awareness of what it really is in itself (“PS,” 91). Negativity, even when it implies the possibility of loss, is never absolute effraction. The other is only the existential playground of identity, of its Odyssean departures: “what is in fact the realization of the Notion, counts for it rather as the loss of its own self; for it does lose its truth on this path. The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely as the way of despair” (“PS,” 91). But never of radical uprooting, “unhappiness” is never total but only an *eleatic* reserve, as it were.¹¹³ A hypomnesic reserve where knowledge will have lost itself in order to find itself: “But the *goal* is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself,

¹¹³ Kojève, whose reading of Hegel spotlights the master/slave dialectic of recognition as the cipher of historical progress, comments on the power of the negative: “‘To overcome dialectically’ means to overcome while preserving what is overcome... The dialectically-overcome entity is annulled in its contingent (stripped of sense, ‘senseless’) aspect of natural, given (‘immediate’) entity, but is preserved in its essential (and meaningful, significant) aspect; thus mediated by negation, it is sublimated or raised up to a more ‘comprehensive’ and comprehensible mode of being than that of its immediate reality of pure and simple, positive and static given, which is not the result of creative action (i.e., of action that negates the given).” Alexandre Kojève, “Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,” Excerpt in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 108. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille will recognize Kojève’s reading of Hegel as “the decisive moment in the history of the consciousness of self and, it must be said, to the extent that we have to distinguish between each thing that affects us, no one knows anything of *himself* if he has not understood this movement which determines and limits man’s successive possibilities” (*IE*, 109). The dialectic movement is one of labour: “it is indeed the originally dependent, serving, and slavish Consciousness that in the end realizes and reveals the ideal of autonomous Self-Consciousness and is thus its ‘truth,’” writes Kojève (120).

where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion... and short of it no satisfaction is to be found at any of the stations on the way” (“PS,” 92-93). Knowledge only ever *borrow*s outside itself, supplements itself *on credit* by adventuring or writing itself. But it has never left itself. Bataille, referring to Kojève’s translation of the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, the principal text studied at the time, reinforces this negative that is never gratuitous, that never ruins absolutely:

A passage from the preface to the *Phenomenology of the Mind* forcefully expresses the necessity of such an attitude. No doubt that this admirable text, from the initial contact, is of “capital importance,” not only for understanding Hegel, but in every sense: “Death, as we may call that unreality, is the most terrible thing, and to keep and hold fast what is dead [that is to say, precisely the work of mourning] demands the greatest force of all. Beauty, powerless, helpless, hates understanding, because the latter exacts from it what it cannot perform. But the life of mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder. It is this mighty power, not by being a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of anything it is nothing or it is false, and being then done with it, pass off to something else: on the contrary, mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it. This dwelling beside it is the magic power that converts the negative into being.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in a footnote to “General Economy,” pp. 435-36. Derrida further indicates the intricacy of establishing the origin of the translation Bataille is reproducing here.

De Man's essay "Montaigne and Transcendence," published in Bataille's journal *Critique*,¹¹⁵ in the passage already quoted, mirrors the error that conditions every cognitive act: "In every act of knowledge there is a profound flaw that leads to an insoluble dilemma: its object can be known only at the price of the existence of the knowing agent" ("MT," 6). But also the sacrificial nature of understanding that "wins to its truth only when it finds itself utterly torn asunder:" "But the lucid mind can know its own subjectivity, precisely at the point where subjectivity destroys its functioning" (7). Sacrifice expects a return, a deferred interest that it counts on. It has never left the economy but is its very ruse. What is offered at stake is never at stake, never burns without remainder. It is never absolutely expended. This is where the negative absolute is denied its absoluteness. Prohibited to take off across the threshold onto nothingness of pure loss or pure excess that is no longer accountable, the negative, "thanks to an amazing change of sign," de Man writes, "is asserted... 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" ("MT," 7). And from the negative with the absolute as its ultimate horizon, to invoke Mallarmé, "*out of it cradles the virgin sign*" (*A Throw of the Dice*, 134) and, at the very limit of being, incompletes it:

¹¹⁵ In 1946 Bataille founded an influential journal *Critique* in Paris and emerged as a counter presence to Sartrean *littérature engagée*. As the editor-in-chief, he was the first to publish early writings by Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida and Foucault. De Man came to be associated with *Critique* and its eminent following through his own short-lived, post-war publishing partnership Editions Hermès. His arrival in the US 1948 was prompted by an aspiring attempt to introduce the new intellectual scene of French contemporary writing (he managed to place Bataille's "On Hiroshima" in a special issue of *Politics*) and, as he writes in a letter from 1951 to Harry Levin at Harvard, "to evolve a critical language that would fuse recent European with the American vocabulary" (qtd. in Waters, Notes to "Life and Works," lxx).

IT WAS

born of the stars

THE NUMBER

WERE IT TO EXIST

other than as a scattered dying hallucination

WERE IT TO BEGIN AND WERE IT TO CEASE

springing up as denied and closed off when made manifest

at last

through some thinly diffused emanation

WERE IT TO BE NUMBERED

evidence of a totality however meager (140)

As the spectral presence of “the virgin sign” (*l'étant*) is “born of the stars,” cradled from the night as the abyss of presence (*étant*) – the abyss that consciousness stirs up as presence “denied and closed off when made manifest” – difference is introduced, “an impenetrable screen between object and mind... [and the] mind will be exercised on the level of this very screen and will find in the acknowledgment of its failure its only positive function” (de Man, “MT,” 7). The “screen” is the moment of slippage that diffuses the object. The same that “at last / through some thinly diffused emanation,” takes place in its own dispersal, in being-plural that begins to count. The radicality of its otherness is dissolved in iterability – death here, one could say, disidiomatizes – but presence lives only by this dissolution. Its heart beats only by what stops it.

De Man’s early writing repeats this instant of evacuation that wipes any arrival blank, keeping the place “where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion,” forever lacking. It is the second reading of Hegel, one of “irreducible difference,” one that will have always disabled the first, that the French poetics has tried to articulate since the 1930s.

The specific trajectory of de Man's beginnings intersects it and quickens its execution. In "Modern Poetics in France and Germany," de Man writes of this particular concern:

French literary theory has more and more felt the need for an ontology of the poetic as preliminary to a study on such a highly integrated level as that of style. The writer who has perhaps gone furthest in the formulation of such an ontology is Maurice Blanchot... Blanchot shows how the works of poets gravitate around the ontological question, how they try and fail always again to define human existence by means of poetic language. (156)

For Blanchot, poetic language is where being is at stake; it is the memory of its burning up. "His writings," de Man continues, "are unsystematic and highly subjective, but if the necessity for a fundamental questioning of the poetic act is granted, it is bound to begin as a tentative, difficult exploration, and not as a self-assured doctrine" (156). If literature truly begins, as Blanchot writes, "at the moment when literature becomes a question" ("Literature and Death," 323), the moment of absolute exposure to its own condition of possibility,¹¹⁶ then there can be no guarantees. No "self-assured" path, no itinerary can be given there where being is at risk – nothing would be risked otherwise. It is precisely the double genitive, the pirouetting from right to left of the "fundamental questioning of the poetic act," that tethers – but also ultimately separates, as we shall see –

Blanchot and de Man.

¹¹⁶ Blanchot defines precisely this moment of exposure as literature itself: "When Mallarmé asks himself, 'Does something like Literature exist?', this question is literature itself. It is literature when literature has become concern for its own essence. Such a question cannot be relegated. What is the result of the fact that we have literature? What is implied about being if one states that 'something like Literature exists'?" (*TSL*, 42-43).

On the Second Slope: Blanchot and de Man

Language is possible because it strives for the impossible.

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*

The movement of irrealisation is intrinsic to the movement of the hand plying the surface, writing, repeating, that writes more in order to suture the blanks it continuously opens up. The blanks here hold the work, hold everything that is realized in precisely its emptying out. “The work disappears,” Blanchot says, “but the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing, the movement which allows the work to be realized as it enters the stream of history, to be realized as it disappears” (“Literature and Death,” 307-08). The movement of losses and surpassing where everything recoils in dissipation that is the force of its gathering (*Aufhebung*). Losses are essential because they save the words. Ruins of negation to which the words testify, the night which surrounds them, the very curve of writing that drives being off its course, are never gratuitous. Catastrophe is only a measure of possibility, the very force of creation. And the writer, Blanchot continues, “the individual who writes – a force of creative negation – seems to join with the work in motion through which this force of negation and surpassing asserts itself” (308). The dialectic stroke introduced here shadows and organizes the entire arborescence of Blanchot’s thought (“For me to be able to say, ‘This woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality

away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being.” 322), but, whereas Hegel begins from annihilation that is consummated in apprehension, the very work of autoscopy of subjectivity, Blanchot’s writing is magnetized towards the maddening of annihilation, its doubling that fissures the system. Literature, for Blanchot, sustains the absence. It is its very agent that does not enter the work (*désœuvrement*). Negation is never sublated but kept suspended as a debt that remains unamortized. Negativity is redoubled as it is not only presence that is abolished in the word but the power of its referentiality. Tracing “the play of speech” in Mallarmé: “the word has meaning only if it rids us of the object it names; it must spare us its presence or ‘concrete reminder.’ In authentic language, speech has a function that is not only representative but also destructive. It causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it” (“Myth of Mallarmé,” 30).¹¹⁷ Death, however, is not outdone in literature, but

¹¹⁷ Authentic language that for Blanchot is literature, because literature saves language. This may demand closer consideration. In Mallarmé, there is a double condition of the word: the essential and the crude (Cf. Blanchot’s *TSL*, chap. 2, “Approaching Literature’s Space,” pp. 35-49). The crude word is the slave of understanding, it vanishes in “the idea it communicates, in the action it announces.” It is the neglect of language. The pressure of its utility makes language recede: “In crude or immediate speech, *language as language is silent*,” Blanchot writes (*TSL*, 40, emphasis added). The more language represents, the more it communicates, that is, the more it is de-presented. It gives itself only to withdraw in clarity. The essential word or authentic language, however, is where *words take initiative*. This is where meaning is ruined in order to make words appear for the first time – this is why poetry is necessarily difficult, because it makes us repeat and preserve the words. What authentic language, literature, says is only that language *is*, and that alone. What it unveils is the persistence of the veil. It brings to light precisely what understanding burns. Unforgets that which in understanding is consigned to forgetfulness. It reveals obscurity itself, one could say (if it were not of the essence of obscurity to remain precisely impenetrable), makes it “present” and brings to light what light shuns: darkness itself. If crude language has “the force by which mediation (that which destroys immediacy) seems to have the spontaneity, the freshness, and the innocence of the origin” (*TSL*, 41), the authentic language no longer betrays, *but precisely by being openly deceptive*. It is the very coming to language of language. In it, language is no longer silent, but roars, cries out, contorts, asserts its weight, its thickness. Poetry becomes an unforgetting of itself. Literature then is authentic because it is also, and essentially, the abolition of presence that it sustains in dissimulation *it does not hide*. This is why Blanchot will say that ambiguity is the essence of literature: “Literature is language turning into ambiguity”

rather unreservedly exposed in the discretion of its speech. Death, in Blanchot, is no longer a power, an accomplice of positivity, but precisely an impotence that reverses us radically towards what precedes it: being.¹¹⁸ Death becomes a passage that no longer turns us away from what apprehension ruins but towards ruins before they become the vestiges of historical progress. It turns us towards the impossible encounter with the terrifying wholeness that runs underneath the shatters of words.¹¹⁹ It is death stalled that opens back onto the immoderate that poetry traces by losing its *sense* in it. Poetry as the measure (*rhythmos*) of the

(“Literature and Death,” 341). If “ordinary language limits equivocation” (341), literature decidedly does not: “It is as though in the very heart of literature and language, beyond the visible movements that transform them, a point of instability were reserved...” (343). What is important is that authentic language or literature, for Blanchot, unforgets the destruction that is essential to language by doubling it in the ambiguity of the referent, which makes literature *unworkable*. Cf. also Valéry’s essay, “Remarks on Poetry,” where verse sides with the vanity of dancing that is unproductive (as in Blanchot’s *unwork* or *désœuvre*), for further resonances of the same problematic inherited from Mallarmé. Paul Valéry, “Remarks on Poetry,” in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), pp. 154-58.

¹¹⁸ Although the moments of dialectical rupture perforate Blanchot’s writings along the middle to better tether what de Man calls their unsystematicity, on death as reversal, “death purified of dying” (154), that turns us toward the Open (“*The Open is the poem*. The space where everything returns to deep being...” 142), cf. chap. 4, “The Work and Death’s Space,” in *TSL*, pp. 85-161.

¹¹⁹ In a passage from *Allegories*, discussing Rousseau’s *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, de Man identifies a similar encounter here, but an encounter that is never transparent: “In the very passage in which Julie speaks of an encounter with God [an encounter that would abolish all mediation], the encounter is not described as a transparency but by means of a metaphor, *the curiously unreadable metaphor of reading which one never seems to want to read*” (192, emphasis added). In *Julie*, this is literally the case, as de Man indicates. The metaphor of reading is used for a communication that no longer communicates difference in the same: “it is ‘an unmediated communication, similar [analogy that is, constitutive of metaphor] to the one by which God *reads* our thoughts already in this life, and by which we will, in turn, *read* his thoughts in the afterlife, since we will see him face to face” (192). Reading, however, is precisely always allegorical insofar as it is always reading otherwise. It introduces the fold that preserves the alterity of the text. If poetry then *reads* what precedes it, what escapes the rhetoricity of the text – its formal structure of representation – and this is what Blanchot implicitly desires, according to de Man as we shall see, then it inevitably repeats only difference or non-identity. Presence, if there is one will always have remained unreadable and poetry, like all literature, is only an allegory of this unreadability. Blanchot’s *reading* then does not escape the differential structure that conditions it. As a reading, no matter how blank and transparent – a reading that, he says, “does not produce anything, does not add anything... [but] lets be what is” (*TSL*, 194) – as a *reading*, it is only ever a trace in the general structure of *différance*. In other words, *it is always an other reading that affirms the impossibility of reading other*.

measureless, as that which indexes a foreignness and an elsewhere.¹²⁰ Blanchot writes:

To read the word death *without* negation is to withdraw from it the cutting edge of decision and the power to negate; it is to cut oneself off from possibility and the true... It is to surrender to the indistinct and the undetermined, to the emptiness anterior to events, where the end has all the heaviness of starting over. This experience is the experience of art. Art – as images, as words, and as rhythm – indicates the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless; art points into a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness. Art is originally linked to this fund of impotence where everything falls back when the possible is attenuated. (*TSL*, 242-43)

Poetry commands the ruins upon which language rests – and it does so by ruining itself, by becoming mangled, inarticulate, surrendering “to the indistinct and the undetermined.” Its language borders an outside that is absolutely without measure, indeterminate (“the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless”) and it is a violent advance on the borders, an advance at their disastrous obliteration. Poetry traces the line along the Riemann surface that is non-orientable,¹²¹ that blows the inside/outside open on all sides. It is Hegel turned back on himself. As it slides from the grasp towards its other, “this fund of impotence” that empties it in one blow, poetic language binds a double motion: it asserts what assertion annihilates – this is its work, the

¹²⁰ Indeed, as we shall see, rhythm, meter, thickness and texture of words, everything that in language indicates an intrusion of time, its *rhythmos* or measure of distance and spacing, is precisely what, for Blanchot, hides proximity. The “silent existence,” without rhythm or articulation, the impossible, is most approachable where sense is workless.

¹²¹ “To write: to trace a circle in the interior of which would come to be inscribed the outside of every circle” (79). Cf. Maurice Blanchot, “Interruption (as on a Riemann surface),” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993), pp. 75-80.

tireless digging of the negative – but it is also a motion that interrupts its forward thrust by sinking back into the hollowness that withholds the intimacy of everything but where nothing is done, “where the end has all the heaviness of starting over” (*TSL*, 242). The motion that poetry, or literature, commands is thus essentially ambiguous. It measures the space towards which it is open at the limit that puts in contact precisely what it separates. *Limit of language is the face of poetry*. Its limit, where there is silence, is not a limit but an exposure. Perfection begins here. It begins where there can only be a question – one could say then, an imperfection. For Blanchot, the negative is not a force or a power, but an affirmation of utmost impotence that withdraws “the cutting edge of decision” (*TSL*, 242). It is not the work that negates what in negation finds its utmost possibility but precisely the unworking (*désœuvrement*) that testifies to the perfection where nothing comes to pass. There is no wound in perfection and therefore no call, which is precisely the infinite call of perfection – this infinite call is the condition of our perfectibility. It is where language breaks against the monotony of boundless emptiness. Poetry is set adrift towards this incapacity that is immobilizing but fundamental, where everything is and where nothing is to be done (*relève*). Poetry, for Blanchot, is a retention that tries to circumvent the recesses of its memory; it no longer remembers what it retains but takes possession of it.¹²² It wants to close the interval, a *diastem* that allows us to remember, to exhaust finitude. “In the poem,” Blanchot says,

¹²² Remembrance is always indicative of a temporal disjunction and difference. It cleaves the subject and re-marks a separation. It does not recuperate anything but rather exposes the irrecoverable interval, a dis-membering without which it would not re-member. Insofar as remembrance recalls nothing apart from the interval that both makes it possible and destroys the possibility of a *total recall*, for de Man, it would always be a question of allegorical difference rather than *anamnesic* or symbolic recuperation. “In the world of the symbol,” he writes, “it

language is never real at any of the moments through which it passes, for in the poem language is affirmed in its totality. Yet in this totality, where it constitutes its own essence and where it is essential, it is also supremely unreal. It is the total realization of this unreality, an absolute fiction which says “being” when, having “worn away,” “used up” all existing things, having suspended all possible things, it comes up against an indelible, irreducible residue. What is left? “Those very words, *it is.*” (TSL, 45)

Discussing Mallarmé here, Blanchot organizes the reversed pull of poetic expression that is also its attack on language to rid it of history, to empty it, use up all its figures, to literally dis-figure it, stripping away with it, however, the very spectrality of language in which being is announced (as unannounceable). Being only survives shattered and only through its shatters is it announced in time. History is both the torture of being and its exposure, that is, its origin.¹²³ It

would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ... Their relationship is one of simultaneity... whereas, in the world of allegory, time is the originary, constitutive category... Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin... it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (207). Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 187-229. Re-membrance or re-collection (*that can only begin at the limit of language* – this is where, for Blanchot, poetry begins) that the poetic language tries to establish can indeed only be constituted “in the void of this temporal difference” that *dis-members* it. Temporality then, history, is the destiny of poetry for de Man, rather than, in Blanchot’s words, that “anterior region” where “the world recedes and goals cease; [where] the world falls silent; beings with their preoccupations, their projects, their activity are no longer ultimately what speaks” (TSL, 41). The poetic act itself testifies, on the contrary, precisely to the dismembering of this project. It is, as de Man says in his early essay, “*the quintessential historical act: that through which we become conscious of the divided character of our being...*” Paul de Man, “The Temptation of Permanence” (1955), in *Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 33, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as “Temptation.” Poetry, then, is itself the agent of fracture in the transcendence it seeks.

¹²³ For Heidegger, this is clear. Being is radically historical. *Sein* is its *Da* (“*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence.*” *Being and Time*, 67). It is only in its finitude and *as* original finitude. It is finitude that gives us Being in its dissimulation. It is then Time that opens Being, one could say, not the other way around. The figure, then – *for de Man, always the breaking open of temporality* – would not be its provisional necessity, as it is for Hegel, but precisely the very mode of its phenomenality. Being begins as Being-other, destined only to erring (*irren*) – not just errance but also in the sense of cunning and deception, destined, in other words, to rhetoric.

is in history that being loses itself by finding its face. The face of being, its words, is what mourns its loss, which gives language a quality of onto-theological pathos that grows deeper the more one tries to exorcise it. One uses words to get rid of words. It is in defacement of language then, “when all words cease,” that “one comes up against an indelible, irreducible residue... ‘Those very words, *it is*.’” Blanchot continues: “Those words sustain all others by letting themselves be hidden by all the others, and hidden thus, they are the presence of all words, language’s entire possibility held in reserve. But when all words cease... ‘those very words, *it is*,’ present themselves, ‘lightening moment,’ ‘dazzling burst of light.’” (45). This, for Blanchot, is the light of poetic language. “A dazzling burst of light,” that can only find expression in the midst of night, opacity and defacement, in the sterility of a blank page where the iridescence of the scattered suns on the surface starts retracting towards the source. Where its language becomes a “simultaneous vision” in which the light is no longer refracted through the *diastem* of memory that words carry but where words become precisely the carriers of light in “its total presence” with nothing to intervene, no time to split the instant: “This lightening moment flashes from the work as the leaping brilliance of the work itself – its total presence all at once, its ‘simultaneous vision’ (*TSL*, 245). For later de Man, simultaneity here would have the force of a tropic ruse, a metaphor that literalizes the referent and, effacing its own figurative structure, disfigures itself. Simultaneity would thus not escape but, being a figure, only repeat the delay constitutive of its rhetorical structure. There are no words of immediacy that escape the delay by which they are

given.¹²⁴ “Poetry becomes the putting into language of the failure of the true to found itself,” writes de Man (“Process and Poetry,” 66). It is thus not founding but precisely what repeats the impossibility of foundation. Poetic language, for de Man, enacts the scattering of its own recollection in advance. It widens and incompletes the circle, the more it contracts it. It plies and creases the surface in order to preserve it intact. Magnetized towards the infinite, poetry *inscribes* only the failure of its own movement, in advance. “And since the process of becoming,” de Man continues, “is what constitutes the very experience of this failure, poetry appears as the *logos* of this becoming.” (66-67). Poetry is thus the very articulation of finitude, not its reversed itinerary that Blanchot’s writing faithfully traces.¹²⁵ Rather than carrying itself outside itself towards the inarticulate, the space that would close it but that recedes before the lines that trace it, it articulates only its erasure, zeroing it out in inscription. What was blank and never treated is now blanked further by writing called for by the lack it

¹²⁴ This delay is essential, and essentially ethical, as de Man will say of allegory (cf. below, note 230), insofar as it conditions the discursive production of society, that is also *the contestability* of what is to be done. It is what raises the question of the just. And maintaining this question is what constitutes the political, its very politicized. Words always remain contestable precisely because of this delay that uproots any referential certainty or positivism – what would erase the question – and puts it to the test. It also gives perfectibility a chance, the *to-come* that for Derrida is constitutive of democracy as a militant self-contestation. For there to be ethical demand, there will have always been a delay and a disjunction. We shall return to these all too important questions of allegory, rhetoric and the political that, in fact, shadow all de Man’s writing in the following chapters.

¹²⁵ On *désœuvrement*, Blanchot writes: “Thus it seems that the point to which the work leads us is not only the one where the work is achieved in the apotheosis of its disappearance – where it announces the beginning, declaring being in the freedom that excludes it – but also the point to which the work can never lead us, because this point is always already the one starting from which there never is any work” (*TSL*, 46). It is this second point that, in “Literature and Death,” becomes “the slope of literature” where all “poets come together.” “Why? Because they are interested in the reality of language, because they are not interested in the world, but in what things and beings would be if there were no world; because they devote themselves to literature as to an impersonal power that only wants to be engulfed and submerged. If this is what poetry is like, at least we will know why it must be withdrawn from history...” (333). The work, for Blanchot, has to lose itself in order to enter the intimacy of its reserve. Possibility must be “attenuated, the notions of value and utility effaced, and the world [must] ‘dissolve’” (*TSL*, 47).

supplements. What poetry articulates is not-being or being-two, the impossibility of being first or being one without the other. It is the very figure (temporization) of temporality: “As such, far from being... an eternalizing power, poetry is the constant negation of the eternal. But it is a negation that transforms the eternal aspect of what is immediately given into an intention, and it does so to the precise extent that it recognizes the necessity of *naming* the eternal by means of an entity – language...” (“Process and Poetry,” 67). It is language that splits the eternal that precedes it and makes what precedes an exiled effect of language rather than its origin. The infinite, what precedes time or completes it – *arche* and *telos* being the same in the circular economy – is an after-effect of time that draws out or measures a distance and a deviation of the present in relation to itself. What precedes is itself a seductive figure – a metaphor that allows for the possibility of identity and a repose for the mind – and as such precisely an instance of what it states – *and in that it states* – to have escaped. The infinite has always been a moment *in* time – in other words, the infinite has no place outside finitude (this is “the paradox of human existence [*Dasein*],” de Man writes, “a desire for eternity but which can take shape only in the finitude of the moment...” “Process and Poetry,” 66). What precedes language then, what is its outside, silence, has never been elsewhere but inside. Language never ends in anything but more language. And it introduces the *diastem* that opens the maddening of desire to reduce it by fetishistic supplementation or repetition that is always a repletion and a depletion at the same time because it evacuates what it names.¹²⁶ Negation then, de Man says, “transforms the eternal aspect of what is

¹²⁶ In *Allegories*, de Man comments on the same structure of desire organised precisely around

immediately given into an intention,” a striving.¹²⁷ It is what vectors the poetic act but remains permanently suspended, a horizon that retreats for each repeated word. Irrealisation of presence in its repetition that temporizes, defers it from itself, is intrinsic to the process of becoming. History thus begins precisely with the loss of its own truth that opens it to the negatively magnetized drift towards it and it is the poetic act that registers this opening. Opening that is also a dismemberment of Being, what would be its being-*n* – 1 that calls for an overload of plurality. Poetry then, rather than being a redemptive power, what silently stages the drama of Blanchot’s writing, becomes, for de Man, precisely the agent of dismembering. It is “the quintessential historical act: that through which we become conscious of the divided character of our being, and consequently, of the necessity of fulfilling it, of accomplishing it in time, instead of undergoing it in eternity” (“Temptation,” 33). Permanence, being the striving,

the interval that denies full possession of its object: “... the coincidence of an entity with its own present, requires the vocabulary of an inwardness detached from anything that is other or elsewhere, containing nothing desirable that is not already possessed. *It evokes a fulfillment no longer associated with desire, since desire is organized around the moment that separates possession from its opposite*” (215, emphasis added). In other words, the movement of desire is the movement of ex-appropriation. It is sustained by a dispossession of the object that forbids precisely what it makes possible: fulfillment – that is to say, narrative closure.

¹²⁷ In another early essay, collected, however, in *Blindness and Insight* due to its critical method, de Man, engaged in the polemic with Heidegger, identifies the same *striving* in Hölderlin: “If one could say it [Being], it would be founded because the word has durability and founds the moment in a spatial presence where one could dwell. [But] that is the supreme goal, *the ultimate desire* [emphasis added] of the poet, which is why Hölderlin adopts the tone of prayer: ‘Und was ich sah, das Heilige sei mein Wort [And what I saw, the Holy be my Word].’ He does not say: ‘das Heilige *ist* mein Wort [the Holy *is* my Word].’ The subjunctive is here really an optative; it indicates prayer, it marks desire, and these lines state *the eternal poetic intention* [emphasis added], but immediately state also that it can be no more than intention. It is not because he has seen Being that the poet is, therefore, capable of naming it; his word prays for the parousia [Being self-present], it does not establish it” (“Heidegger’s Exegeses,” 258). De Man’s exposure here, contrary to Heidegger, of the inability of language to state presence is precisely what constitutes the ever receding horizon of poetic vision, its *striving*. This inability that is at the same time a capability, as it supplies (also supplements) the receding vision, is given in explicit Hegelian terms. He continues: “It cannot establish it for as soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of stating Being, it can only state mediation. For man the presence of Being is always in becoming and Being necessarily appears under a non-simple form” (259).

is impermanence, the very restlessness of the poetic act whose reach (meter) is always too short but drawn out all the more in its absolute exposure. Its truth is not “the depth of being’s inertia” (Blanchot, *TSL*, 46), but precisely its drawing out in *rhythmos*. In “The Inward Generation” (1955), de Man writes:

Poetry is concerned with the rediscovery of whatever makes its existence possible, and it tends to look to the past to reassure itself that there have been times in which it could be. What it keeps and shelters, however, is not the immediate, the stable or the primitive. Instead of seeking protection from painful consciousness, it tries to expose itself completely to a total awareness that can only be the result of the most intense mental concentration. It thinks of truth not as stability and rest but as a balance of extreme tensions that, like a drawn bow, achieves immobility when it is bent to the point of breaking. It needs all the consciousness it can find and shuns whatever tries to dim the vision it has left. (“IG,” 17)

Truth that is a “balance of extreme tensions” can go either way. It is thus always a presentiment of error that it anticipates. Far from being stable in its immobility, far from being “a region anterior to the beginning where nothing is made of being, and in which nothing is accomplished” (Blanchot, *TSL*, 46), it achieves the moment of stability precisely when most unstable, when it is outspent, when “bent to the point of breaking.” Poetry binds the truth only by the repetition of its failure. It is a “struggle through and through,” de Man says, “and forever” (“Temptation,” 36).

What de Man identifies in Blanchot then is the redemptive possibility or a certain messianicity of the poetic act¹²⁸ that ultimately contracts it to an affirmation, which for de Man is always a disaffirmation. “This view,” he writes, “remains historical *in appearance*, since it situates poetry with respect to a certain temporal destiny of being. But this temporal movement is always one of error and forgetting, whereas poetry, inasmuch as it is a recollection [a remembering] of original being, remains superior to it” (“Process and Poetry,” 64, emphasis added). History, in other words, as the movement “of error and forgetting,” that is also precisely the movement and exigency of reading, of submitting truth to its *essential* flight that is its unreadability, has no hold on poetry because it adulterates it. Indeed, de Man continues: “Here, the historical destiny of the created object that poetry becomes, and which generations of readers will use for various purposes, has therefore strictly speaking nothing in common with the poetic act itself. In this history, says Maurice Blanchot, ‘neither the work of art, nor the reading is present’” (64). For Blanchot then, reading is the essential reading, a reading that no longer “makes” anything (“The word *make* here does not designate a productive activity.” *TSL*, 194), that no longer reads but listens to what reading delivers us from. A blank reading that

does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is. It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can only say yes, and, in the space

¹²⁸ Writing on/with Kafka, Blanchot says: “One believes in a beyond of words, a beyond of failure, in an impossibility that might be more than an impossibility, and thus restore hope to us.” Maurice Blanchot, “Kafka and Literature,” in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), pp. 23-24.

opened by this yes, lets the work's overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself, lets be its affirmation that it is – and nothing more. (*TSL*, 194)

To read the unsung, what the ink sullies (“I want to *read* what is, however, not written.” *TSL*, 195) is the anonymous reading, an essential translation. Its discovery is complete self-effacement because it no longer narrates the flight of meaning (“does not produce anything, does not add anything”), which is to say that it no longer narrates. This reading itself becomes the silence whose reverberation no listening has ever heard, the stillness of being no gaze has ever possessed, for all of its reflection is present only in the mirror of its echoes. It escapes the ravages of history that every reading not only testifies to but conspires with. *What gives us to read can do so only on the condition of its own unreadability*. This is what makes its history readable, one that is always of error and infinite drift. Only if there is this other that is radically unreadable can there be narrative, which is to say, only if there is *différance* can there be reading, and a reading that is never satisfied, for the reader never reaches the bottom that would justify it – or rather exonerate it for losing its way – but precisely the bottomless that can never warrant its status.¹²⁹ The (im)possibility of the other assures the possibility of narrative that *makes* the face of the other possible (readable) only as what will have remained impossible. Reading then is radically historical; rather than being a reflection of its own transparency, it never loses its

¹²⁹ Unreadability here, a theme we shall return to, that is the condition of the possibility of narrative, is also what prevents narrative closure, what makes every reading an allegory of its own misreading, but also that which preserves the alterity of every reading. What makes reading singular – and what is, at the same time, the demand and exigency of its respect – is its failure of totalisation. It is always a question of allegorization of metaphor that every reading blindly carries out, which, however, does not make them similar but, at most, comparable in their very incomparability.

thickness and its interiority. “This kind of metatemporality,” that de Man identifies in Blanchot, “coincides at bottom with a belief that poetry founds Being immediately, without having to work its way toward it by a risky process of successive mediations and stages of consciousness” (“Process and Poetry,” 64). What we cannot escape is representation. This is where we encounter presence precisely by missing it. This is both liberating and estranging. Consciousness interrupts; it introduces distance that measures everything in between. It gauges the between to bring together what it equally keeps separate. Representation, to which we are destined, does not expose anything; it doubles everything in its belatedness. It signifies the fact that things are both equally near as they remain absolutely distant. The essential interruption that opens history (*Dasein*’s originary thinning-out in *transzendente Zerstreung*)¹³⁰ also opens truth to an infinite migration in the other. Poetry that “founds Being immediately” circumvents this migration. It says Being without breaking it. This is precisely the ruse of “metatemporal poetics” that seeks refuge from finitude and from the negative knowledge of “the persistent indetermination that is historical temporality” (“Process and Poetry,” 65, 67). Such a poetics, de Man continues, “knows that no matter how strong the pull exercised by a historical process that would assimilate poetry to its own movement, it is always possible for poetry to elude this pull since it is not bound to it essentially, and to return to the immediate self-presence that is also an immediate presence to Being” (65). Being gives (*es gibt*). But it does not return to itself from giving itself. If it

¹³⁰ For *transzendente Zerstreung*, that Agamben, reading Heidegger, also calls the “original facticity” of Being, cf. “The Passion of Facticity,” in *Potentialities*: “Here, it is possible to see the full sense in which Heidegger’s ontology is a hermeneutics of facticity. Facticity is not added to *Dasein*; it is inscribed in its very structure of Being” (195). Cf. also note 59 above.

returns to itself, it does so only across the giving-itself which means that it never returns whole. Being comes back to itself cracked. The return comes to pass only across the rupture that scatters it. The rupture is then both a promise and a broken promise, at once. This means that Being returning in its self-presence is no longer possible without something that remains behind. This remainder is what keeps Being cut open. If poetry relates Being to itself, it relates by cutting across and separating it. Poetry presents Being to itself broken. It is the unfulfillment of Being that it promises. Poetry is Being broken. De Man will always remind us of this very rupture that is constitutive of but forgotten in poetry's gathering pull. Poetry then is not the "essential presence" but its infinite upheaval in negative appropriation that constitutes its history. Again Blanchot is named here: "'Why is it,' asks Blanchot, 'that at the point where history contests and subordinates it, art becomes essential presence?'" For de Man, the question makes the answer all too apparent: "Such a question contains its own answer since it is obvious that, if art (or poetry) can be essential presence, that is, grounded and preserved, then history can have no hold on it. Its permanence and power remain secure despite the hollows and chasms it contains" ("Process and Poetry," 65). But it is precisely to "hollows and chasms" that its redemptive promise is lost. What incompletes poetic fulfillment is not accidental, coming from outside, but is constitutive of its movement. Poetry is what frustrates poetry. It is sick of itself and built upon its own disease. It holds a mirror of unrequited love eaten by corrosion of its own abjection. Its face skirts the edges of the infinite towards which it is borne only by the gusts of finitude. It is the continual rhythm that beats the breaking up of the total work it tries to compose. This continual rhythm

is both the breathing of poetry and its sickness. Its movement is its diseased breath. De Man identifies this same threat that constitutes the poetic act by undoing it: "At a particular moment of its development, for example, poetry is threatened by reason of the increasing difficulty of accomplishing the movement it assigns itself" ("Process and Poetry," 65). Poetry serializes the failures of this order. In the end, it gives nothing but the profusion of being that is also the poverty of its essence. Being will have always flown to pieces. But poetry never ceases to interrogate the conditions of its own possibility. Carried precisely by the impossibility to escape the condition of its own impasse, it never ceases to reach for the answer to the question that it is. It is this search, its diseased repetitive beat, that reawakens poetry to the essential distance in relation to its origin, in other words, to its finitude. Its redemptive power, the erasure of all distances, would be the ruin of its speech. Silence is thus redemptive. The immeasurable ruin of words that is poetry's anonymous extension, "where language names in silence and by silence, and makes of the name a silent reality," is a space that "exceeds us and translates things" (Blanchot, *TSL*, 141). The "essential translator," Blanchot continues, "is the poet, and this space is the poem's space, where no longer is anything present, where in the midst of absence everything speaks, everything returns into the spiritual accord which is open and not immobile but the center of the eternal movement" (141). The promise of this space is prophetic. It exorcises ghosts – ghosts are already vestiges of negated presence; what is thus negated in Blanchot is negation itself – to let come the unsung secrets of their plenitude, appearing in their disappearance. Affirmation of the absolutely anonymous made possible by the ultimate negation. It is

prophetic because it never leaves the vision of wholeness, because in partitioning and bursts of being it finds identity, in death the possibility of transcendence. But it is this vision that, for de Man, poetry puts radically in question: "... some of the most authentic and greatest poets have put into question precisely this redemptive possibility. Their testimony is not in itself decisive, but failing to take it into account leaves us open to the aberrant forms of thought that result from an unwarranted simplification of the task of poetic consciousness" ("Process and Poetry," 65). Their testimony is not one of transcendence but one of failure that testifies to the essentially "temporal character of poetry." De Man, a few pages later:

Through the experience of a voluntary death – that of Empedocles [Hölderlin] or that of Igitur [Mallarmé] – these poets were not necessarily attempting to transform negation into determination [that is to say, the fundamental inertia of being, its uneventfulness, rather than historical indeterminateness of becoming], as Maurice Blanchot thinks. On the contrary, they resigned themselves to the transformation of the eternal into the temporal and recognized the necessarily temporal character of poetry" (67).

Only in view of its unhappy consciousness does poetry leave a trace readable. It is the letting-be-seen of the intervals alone that preclude any identities. Identity is only mimed out, left blank by repetition which repeats only difference and distance in relation to it – suspends the symmetry of the equation in temporality ("the correspondence between each object and its ideal content [*l'être*] cannot of course be perfectly stable or symmetrical." De Man, "Poetic Nothingness," 23). Poetry will never defeat its impotence to win out over itself,

to restore to its object the flesh of its past and venture a comment beyond pretence, all in a single stroke of a unified impression. This, for Blanchot, is the gravitational pull of the second “slope” of literature, where all poets gather. What literature still speaks when everything has been said. “If one looks at it in a certain way,” Blanchot writes,

literature has two slopes. One side of literature is turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated. Literature is not content to accept only the fragmentary, successive results of this movement of negation: it wants to grasp the movement itself and it wants to comprehend the results in their totality... But there is another side to literature. Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence; literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside. In this way it sympathizes with darkness... with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way, too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces – through its refusal to say anything – that it comes from night and will return to night. (“Literature and Death,” 330)

Literature begins by temporization of the first slope that opens delay and alienation from origins, from “the reality of things” and, therefore, the mythogeny of “their *unknown*, free and silent existence.” But this is also where it ends for de Man. In difference that foils the movement of closure on the second slope while at the same time making it possible. This movement then is not totalizing but one of mutilation of totality. Literature is the sharing of its

mutilated body. It is born in allegory of the first slope – insofar as allegory is a relation of its severed body in drift and distance from its origin – and it ends in a compulsive repetition of the cutting stroke that it tries to expiate. Without this originary scission there would be no *second* slope, no dyad of spacing. By the same token, however, the second slope can only be possible as retreating, in its absolute recoil. It is made possible then by what makes it impossible, infinitely (dis)lodged in history of its becoming that is also the burst of its exposure in difference – history is not an aut positioning of being, its coming to itself in its being other than itself, “having its otherness within itself” (Hegel, “PS,” 82); the other cleaves its identity and leaves its limits porous and bleeding without end. What begins thus in exile from itself, in expropriation – and this is where literature begins; it is constitutively exilic, foreign to itself, it *is not* – does not return *from* exile – exile does not befall literature; it is its very interior – so what begins in expropriation, Derrida would say, “*ends by leaving reappropriation breached.*”¹³¹ On the first slope literature is set adrift where all conditions of determination are lacking. It begins in nonidentity and without semantic anchor (this is its inability to remain “in the inside of an ‘at home,’” to recall Derrida, to remain “*abidingly* [à demeure] in the identity of a nature or even a historical

¹³¹ Derrida in *Of Grammatology*: “Difference began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*. Until death... This means that difference makes the opposition of presence and absence possible [in Blanchot’s terms here precisely the opposition between the “forbidden presence” on the second and the negation of the first slope. Blanchot says as much: “Literature is divided between these two slopes. The problem is that even though they are *apparently incompatible*, they do not lead toward distinctly different works...” (“Literature and Death,” emphasis added, 332)]. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space [In other words, without the erasure of origin on the first slope, desire for its presence would have no lack to feed on]. *That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction* [emphasis added]. Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible” (143). What makes the second slope possible then is precisely what makes it impossible. *Literature is destined to incompleteness.*

being identical with itself.” “Demeure,” 28). It opens it to ceaseless wandering, that is to say, to ceaseless *error* as the only mode of truth absolutely proper to literature – literature has no (other) reserve – and this radical uncertainty, that obscures decision, where the power to begin wavers and action risks its utter ruin because it cannot find what warrants its power to begin, is what makes it historical. Once the alienation is thus broached – and that is from the very beginning – there can be no “reality of language” (“Literature is a concern for the reality of things... it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form.” “Literature and Death,” 330). There is no such thing as the flesh of language, its underside as it were, that literature disinters on the second slope. Derrida: “Is it not evident that no signifier, whatever its substance and form, has a ‘unique and singular reality?’... From the moment that the sign appears, that is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity of ‘reality,’ ‘unicity,’ ‘singularity’” (*OG*, 91). What is disinterred is only more language. Rather like Baudelaire’s Digging Skeleton,¹³² literature digs assiduously to find its promised sleep elude her. Death digging to find itself betrayed by the rattle of its own bones. Language is the plague of literature, but its own figures are the cause of the infection. It hates words, but hates them *in* words. It tries to abject words with more words, so it catches the infection whose outbreak it tries to prevent. The second slope is nothing but an obsessive ritual literature stages to its own disembodiment. Something of a game, a “hoax,” a *fort-da* literature uses to

¹³² Cf. Charles Baudelaire, “Skeletons Digging,” in *Parisian Scenes in The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), pp. 189-193.

master the absence by staging it, rehearsing it compulsively, as if to possess it.¹³³

In early de Man, the agent of displacement – Blanchot’s first slope – is also consciousness but the play of absences it opens becomes a “value” precisely because of the impossibility of its completion, of ever being done with the game. “The mind must move,” de Man writes,

and every action of consciousness is an effort to escape the monotonous repetition of immediate identity. This does not keep the immediate datum of immediacy from persisting, nor every construction based on this desire to explode it from becoming illusion, snare, hoax, and *game*... But such destruction is neither easy nor painless. Since the knowledge of being’s immediate identity persists, immediacy also becomes *value*. As opposed to consciousness and to poetry, there exists a world of a spontaneous contact with things, within a single sphere of unity. The more conscious we become, the more desirable and precious this world appears – and the more impossible to achieve. (“Poetic Nothingness,” 23)

¹³³ It is in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that Freud relates a child’s attempt to master the anxiety caused by the intermittent absences of his mother. He saw his grandson repeatedly staging a game of throwing a cotton reel over the edge of his cot where it disappeared followed by a distressing “o-o-o-o!” he interpreted as representing the German word “*fort*” [“gone away”] and retrieving it with a gratifying “*da*” [“there,” it is!]. “This, then,” Freud writes, “was the complete game – disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act” (599). The child then is trying to master displeasure by causing it vicariously through the repetitive manipulation of the sign. The sign here or “the game,” however, is what specifies not satisfaction but rather, as Freud will say, its “renunciation.” It names a lack and a dispossession, a rupture in plenitude, in view of which it is called for. There can be no *play* without difference: “The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child’s great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by staging himself the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach” (600). Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 594-626. Possessing the mother (taken also metonymically here: pleasure, nature, immediacy, object, presence) is only ever possible by mastering her absence through substitutes that we compulsively pursue. *But the substitute is born of dispossession and only relates its own belatedness*. It narrates its only ever being in flight without which there would be no narration. And this is precisely where this game intersects our argument.

There is no total word for de Man, a word that would be restored to the plenitude of its origin without exploding it “from becoming illusion, snare, hoax, and *game*.” His essay on Mallarmé, we now turn to, shows precisely the poverty of words, their absolute widowhood. For Blanchot, however, a conversion takes place. And takes place in the opacity and texture of language, in the ruin of meaning which is its light and its absence.¹³⁴ De Man and Blanchot part on the second slope, as it were. As soon as reappropriation is announced, it is renounced, and the gathering of poets on the second slope lets itself be mournfully scattered in advance. It is always a play of omissions, of separations and origins cast aside, extending only the margin of blanks in a compulsive repetition that produces ever more empty supplements. More partial objects whose identity has been purloined and is now all the “more desirable and precious.” For what is present in words is the theft of presence that both calls for and incompletes the process of totalisation. *But no totality is ever possible.*¹³⁵ De Man is clear: “As *opposed* to consciousness and to poetry, there exists a world of a spontaneous contact with things, within a single sphere of unity” (emphasis added). Poetry, then, as “the *logos* of becoming,” is precisely what leaves this

¹³⁴ Blanchot: “In itself this metamorphosis [the second slope] is not unsuccessful. It is certainly true that words are transformed. They no longer *signify* shadow, earth, they no longer represent the absence of shadow and earth which is meaning, which is the shadow’s light, which is the transparency of the earth: opacity is their answer; the flutter of closing wings is their speech; in them, physical weight is present as the stifling density of an accumulation of syllables that has lost all meaning. The metamorphosis has taken place” (“Literature and Death,” 330-31).

¹³⁵ At the risk of reductiveness and violence, if it were possible to condense and arrest the long trajectory of de Man’s work with all its resonances still ahead of us, it would be precisely the distribution, the dissemination of the effects of this sentence, that, already operative in his early work as we are trying to show, will come to split itself in a different modality – or mood – as we shall see, across the entire grid of his writing, which it would silently govern. If it were possible, that is.

world in a state of emergency, evacuated. It narrates its flight, its conflagration, the fraying and coming apart of its gathering on the second slope.¹³⁶

The Widowed Word: Mallarmé and de Man

The serene irony of the eternal Sky

Depresses, with the indolence of flowers,

The impotent poet cursing poetry

Across a sterile waste of leaden Hours.

— Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Azure”

That poetry is an unveiling of privation, “that through which we become conscious of the divided character of our being” (“Temptation,” 33), that its language is barren and impoverished (*dürftig*), without body or weight it scatters – indeed, it finds itself precisely in the space that its vacated, shattered body opens – is what de Man’s essay on Mallarmé, “the poet of sterility and the blank page” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 18), comes to inscribe. Poetry as a disaffirmation

¹³⁶ In “The Temptation of Permanence” (1955), engaging Heidegger’s notion of the poetic act as “gathering contour” (*Grundriss*), as we shall see in the following section, de Man will say: “How can Heidegger say that the work, insofar as it is contour, gathers opposition in its unity, and that in a manner apparently permanent? Is *being* this unique foundation of their unity? But if two *beings* are defined in their being as opposed, the common fact of being could not constitute in itself a unifying principle, since their division extends precisely to the foundation. The tearing apart is thus not *Grundriss* (ground plan), that is, a groove in the foundation with a view to construction, but *Riss des Grundes*, a tearing open of the foundation itself that prevents all true construction” (emphasis added, 35-36). No transcendence here of the fundamental division of being whose destiny (*Geschick*) – that is to say the sending (*Schickung*) of being rather than its presence – history (*Geschichte*) unveils. History, then, as the manifesting of the division of being, its *sending*, not its presence.

of unity, not a gathering, but a tearing of its fulfillment in what can only be time or history. De Man begins by relating Mallarmé's interrogation of the poetic act and its possibility to Hölderlin, where it first "assumes the anguished aspect that has become so familiar to us:

Meanwhile, it often seems to me / it is better to sleep than to flounder
thus / and to be thus friendless. I know not what to do meanwhile / nor
what to say; what use are poets in a time of dearth?

"Since 1802," de Man continues, "when these lines were written [Hölderlin's lines from an elegy "Bread and Wine"], there have been great poets, Mallarmé among them. But his predecessors as well as his successors have achieved greatness by confronting this same obstacle, and not by surmounting it" ("Poetic Nothingness," 18-19). The poet's distress here is identified as an obstacle. But would there be poetry without it? What interests us here is precisely the nature of this obstacle and the essential risk, the abandon of being implied in it, its shipwrecked destiny that is also its historicity and poetry's profound resource.

So, "what are poets for in a destitute time," in a time of ceaseless drift where error feeds on our lack of conviction, where the only beginning is a failure to begin, for gods having disappeared, the conditions that would warrant a beginning are lacking? And this time, Heidegger writes, "forebodes something even grimmer, however. Not only have the gods and the god fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history" ("What Are Poets For," 89). This time, "the time of the world's night" (89), in other words, is even more

destitute, for even the disappearance of gods has ceased to appear. The wanderer cannot stay to abide for even the trace of the laws has been obscured, the path to them sullied, forgotten. Even the trace of this destitution where the wanderer would find repose in the ill-fated promise of a presence, of forgotten intimacy, of recovering the sullied path to the laws, the scattered origin in its very scattering, has withdrawn its nature and its presence. The very destitution has become destitute and the forgetfulness alone now remembers. So, having no certitude of presence or even absence of this presence, having no other law than to lose himself in the foreign that is himself, the wanderer cannot rest but continues to stray, persists to err in the complete groundlessness of the human condition, in Heidegger's *Abgrund*,¹³⁷ that is the essential of our time and the radical exposure of night in which being is risked. So there is no respite because there is neither shelter nor compass but only the threat that looms its claw ahead, blinding every glimmer of insight, rending every venture to tread forward. Treading forward here is always a *coup de force*; it is law-making rather than law-abiding, for nothing justifies it in advance. This *is* the destitute time of the world's night, and it is "now approaching its midnight... now becoming the completely destitute time" (91).

But in this time, in this age where all ground breaks off, "in the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss" (90). If Being is

¹³⁷ Heidegger defines the essential of our time as follows, "The word for abyss – *Abgrund* – originally means the soil and ground towards which, because it is undermost, a thing tends downward. But in what follows we shall think of the *Ab-* as the complete absence of the ground... The age for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss" ("What Are Poets For," 90).

that which presences itself, then, by the necessity of its absolute will to presence, it must manifest itself as that which defines the essential of our time, that is as “the complete absence of the ground” (90). It is only by experiencing and enduring the abyss that we can dwell in *parousia* – that is thus a coming, but it is a coming-to-view of absence that “holds and remarks everything” and a placing of oneself within it: “Mortals... remain closer to that absence [*Abgrund*],” writes Heidegger, “because they are touched by presence, the ancient name of Being. But because presence conceals itself at the same time, it is itself already absence. Thus the abyss holds and remarks everything” (91). In other words, by turning away from the abyss, we turn away from the emptiness that is our utmost possibility – the totality of our possibilities that is and must remain empty.

But this time of absolute destitution, where not only “there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it” (90), but where even the trace of this failure remains visible only in its being-forgotten, the time where “the abyss holds and remarks everything,” is precisely the time absolutely proper to art. Blanchot writes:

The force, *the risk* [emphasis added] proper to the poet is to dwell in God’s default [that is, the god’s failure to appear], the region where truth lacks. *The time of distress* designates the time which in all times is proper to art. But when historically the gods lack and the world of truth wavers, the time of distress emerges in the work as concern – the concern in which the work finds its preserve – threatening it: making it present and visible. (*TSL*, 246)

The risk is the essential here. The *throw of the dice* in “God’s default” and the force of error as the condition of its possibility (without error there,

nothing would be risked and there would be neither decision nor responsibility, we will return to this). The risk then, critical both to Hölderlin and Mallarmé, is what, in the time of dearth, of impotence, becomes a power. A power of straying always in error, but the power, in that it is in error, of necessary invention because the lack of any foreseeable future demands invention. What guarantees the future is its unforeseeability, its being without guarantee. The unhappiness of this ceaseless straying,¹³⁸ “this perpetual departure, the *sorrow of straying* which has no place to arrive, to rest [becomes] also the *fecund migration*” (Blanchot, *TSL*, 246-47). But this “fecund migration” rests precisely on the radical exposure to night that grounds it without grounding, that allows of no beginning or end, the radical uncertainty which is not the other of truth but the truth proper to art.¹³⁹ And it is precisely why it remains impotent, why it begins always anew. What is proper to art is not the truth but its conflagration that guarantees its future. From the beginning, this conflagration belongs to art and constitutes its *ethos*.¹⁴⁰

The obstacle identified by de Man, the distress of the poet, is a certain night walled up in language against which one is powerless. A night that

¹³⁸ Important to note here is that for early de Man consciousness is still unhappy, but after the rhetorical turn, as the following chapters will indicate, this pathology of self-exile will become an opening of affirmation and freedom of reading, indeed of the political that must be thought outside renunciation and eschatology, where absence would still gain a foothold and be put to work.

¹³⁹ Kafka: “Art flies around truth, but with the determination not to get burnt by it. Its skill consists of finding a place in the void where the ray of light focuses most powerfully, without knowing beforehand the location of the light source itself.” Qtd. in Maurice Blanchot, “Kafka and Literature,” in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 18. Truth is the face that irresistibly rivets the attraction of art only by the measure of distance, that *pieuse distance* that is the measure of any attraction. And it is the drift of its face, without location, that produces the desire for its presence. Kafka continues: “Our art is to be blinded by truth: the light on the grimacing face as it pulls back, that alone is true and nothing else” (18).

¹⁴⁰ The *ethos* (from *ethos*, “moral character, nature, disposition, habit(at), custom”), the very spirit of art or its gathering place, its habitat and shared experience, would then be precisely the no-place, the dispersal of places in infinite migration, where one no longer comes across anything like its domicile. It is an infinite nomadism of gathering that would be the habitat of art. Its habit(at) is the most uninhabitable.

consigns thought to error, but is also its utmost possibility. For only when set adrift in the default of ground without assurance of arrival can there be anything like thought. Is this not, in fact, the only chance for thinking? When thought hurls its defiance against the limits that enlighten it? There, along the limits, where one truly does not know? Night is what saves thought, but also what opens up the space of poetry in the default of light that infinitely attracts it.

In Mallarmé, this anguish of thought assumes the specific “theme of nothingness (néant),” as the sunken present upon which poetry rests its words (“Poetic Nothingness,” 20). De Man takes his departure in the last of the sonnets in Mallarmé’s triptych¹⁴¹ that allegorizes the elision of being, the spectacle, Mallarmé would say, of “its resonant near disappearance, according to the game of speech” (21), in the sepulchre of words:

Une dentelle s’abolit
 Dans le doute du Jeu suprême
 À n’entr’ouvrir comme un blasphème
 Qu’absence éternelle de lit.

Cet unanime blanc conflit
 D’une guirlande avec la même,
 Enfui contre la vitre blême
 Flotte plus qu’il n’ensevelit.

¹⁴¹ “Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir” (“Does Pride at evening always fume”), “Surgi de la croupe et du bond” (“Sprung from the croup and the flight”), and “Une dentelle s’abolit” (“Lace sweeps itself aside”) all appeared together in the issue of *La Revue Indépendante* (1887). The triptych dramatises the vanishing of familiar objects, their irrealisation, in the light of consciousness illuminating only the empty vestiges of their disappearance. For further reference, cf. Henry Weinfield’s translation of the sonnets in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems* (Berkeley and London: California UP, 1994), pp. 78-80. Following St. Aubyn’s *Stéphane Mallarmé*, Weinfield describes the triptych as the “[s]umptuous allegories of the void” (232). Weinfield’s translation cited hereafter as *Collected Poems*.

Mais, chez qui du rêve se dore
 Tristement dort une mandore
 Au creaux néant musicien

Telle que vers quelque fenêtre
 Selon nul ventre que le sien
 Filial on aurait pu naître.

[A lace does away with itself
 In the doubt of the supreme Game
 To half-open like a blasphemy
 Only an eternal absence of bed.

This unanimous white conflict
 Of a garland with the same,
 Fled against the pale pane
 Floats more than it buries.

But, in one who gilds himself with dreams
 Sadly sleeps a mandora
 With music's void in its emptiness

Such that toward some window
 Depending on no womb but its own,
 Filial one could have been born.]¹⁴²

“In a poem like this one,” de Man writes, “we are concerned with the dramatic representation of a purely mental process...” (20), of conceptual

¹⁴² “Une dentelle s’abolit,” reproduced here, is from “Poetic Nothingness” (19-20), in de Man’s own translation, which may dispense with Weinfield’s “musical essence” (“I would say,” says Weinfield, “that my primary struggle in this translation has been to render the ‘music’ or ‘musical essence’... of the poetry.” Introduction to *Collected Poems*, xi) but which does retain the semantic erosion that the poem ultimately allegorizes. The image is one of the curtain swept aside along the windowpane by the morning breeze. The windowpane in Mallarmé’s symbolism is the pane of misalignment, the pane of interval without which there would be no exposure to the outside but which also keeps the outside at variance, ever so slightly, with itself. All further references to this sonnet will be to de Man’s own translation in “Poetic Nothingness.”

understanding that, according to Hegel, is equivalent to murder. The “white conflict” of the sonnet is the allegorization of the fractured relation between the intellectual and the perceptual element that ultimately calls into question the organic conception of language precisely by virtue of a certain unevenness: “The dramatic fate of [the] objects [that is to say, their fatality] corresponds to the unfolding of the intellectual process. Things are complicated insofar as the correspondence between each object and its ideal content cannot of course be perfectly stable or symmetrical” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 20). The irrealisation of presence in the labour of consciousness (Mallarmé’s “doubt of the supreme Game”) frees us at a stroke from the flesh of things, their unbearable weight, but does so precisely at the expense of anteriority with which it can never coincide. As the object gives way, its empty resonance, a disembodied vestige “without the hindrance of an immediate or concrete prompting” (21), is left as a trace of separation, an echo of what is never there *for* us but always only *before* us, and we are left to experience its abandon alone. What is given up for lost is the intimacy that the mind can never reconquer and the poem itself becomes the witness and the agent of a perpetual leave-taking that it seeks to abolish, or in Mallarmé’s diction, a “Pure vessel of no liquor brewed / Save the bottomless widowhood.”¹⁴³

¹⁴³ In the second sonnet of the triptych, “Sprung from the croup and the flight,” the poetic act is widowed and destitute, a “vessel of no liquor brewed,” the image it creates – of two lovers kissing – fluttering on the border of emptiness from which it is summoned. Poetry is “bottomless,” because without support (*Collected Poems*, 79). In Weinfield’s comment, the poem is one of “Mallarmé’s *trompe l’oeil* effects... a gestalt image in which figure and ground are reversible, such that we either see two lovers about to kiss or a vase rising in the empty space between them” (233). In other words, there would be no image without the emptiness of the vase that, at the same time, annihilates it.

It is in the “white conflict,” that supreme act of repeating that only repeats omission, that the poem retains its faith to begin. But it is instantaneously made barren by the subject it takes, summoning into being what it plunges to the borders where nothing is all and always on the border of passing from all to nothing. And before the end, it will be folded back to the beginning by the very impossibility, Blanchot’s “deferred assassination,” of its speech (“Literature and Death,” 323).¹⁴⁴ Poetry lives only by the incantation of death upon which its existence is predicated. The “supreme game” of absences is given a dramatic unfolding in this sonnet, but one that unfolds only as fatality of what appears. Mallarmé’s use of objects – of laces, curtains, beds, all domestic, familiar, intimate – far from restoring presence in a semblance of repetition, in which everything is trapped as it were, represents its loss. The poem struggles to free itself for “the initiative [to be] taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision.”¹⁴⁵ The loss of representation is evoked in the slipping away and recoil of objects, and the play, the unequal “collision,” of supplements which erase and substitute to let appear.¹⁴⁶ There is thus a ceaseless slide, coil and recoil, a double reverberation, the clearing and the sully at the thresholds of ambiguity, of presence, leaving the scene of its

¹⁴⁴ Cf. above, note 93.

¹⁴⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis in Poetry,” in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays & Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 40.

¹⁴⁶ “Let us note,” Blanchot writes parenthetically, “that if we accept the observations of Mallarmé, for whom to write is *not to evoke a thing but an absence of thing*, we find ourselves confronting this situation: words vanish from the scene to make the thing enter, but since this thing is itself no more than an absence, that which is shown in the theatre, it is an absence of words and an absence of thing, a simultaneous emptiness, nothing supported by nothing.” Maurice Blanchot, “Mystery in Literature,” in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 49, emphasis added.

appearance always through false exits and “half-open blasphemies,” and the only way to follow is through false entrances and doorways of incomplete allusions.

From the beginning then, the object betrays an “ontological ambiguity,” it is triggered to appear by its very recoil, by sweeping itself aside (“a lace does away with itself”). De Man writes: “By naming an object poetically (as opposed to ordinary speech, merely a means of exchange and communication), this object... acquires an ontological ambiguity; it has lost its primary opacity insofar as it is posited for us, but preserves it insofar as it is not a pure instrument. It exists within the fringe of interference between these two modes” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 21). The name is only the impoverished stain of presence but also its only chance survival. What is named is no longer simply present, no longer simply there. It can now only ever appear within the quotation marks. It lends itself to language only through a detour of reported speech, stripped of any first instance. This “transformation of the given,” de Man continues,

is related to the need of our own consciousness to be grounded in its own being... Self-consciousness needs to ground itself by this transit into the created object, which then becomes what Mallarmé calls “the pure idea” – in reality, the perfect correspondence between the idea of the object and the object itself. *But this gain in consciousness is accompanied by an inevitable dissolution of the object, which explodes, so to speak, in the infinity of its formal possibilities. It is no longer just what it is...* (21, emphasis added)

The “perfect correspondence” here is always already imperfect. And it is this imperfection that triggers and vectors the desire for reappropriation which can only announce itself unevenly, that is to say, as infinitely broken.

Correspondence in general is a testimony of a broken relation it seeks to amend. The object gives itself now as a fictive upsurge flooding back from the dead in a thought with no support. It is a correspondence thus that ricochets back and breaks off against the ground of its own mirror without ever breaking it. It never simply corresponds because something in this correlation always remains unrelated, something “no longer just what it is...” From here on, there is no object, properly speaking, only a suggestive hesitation of its absence, only the “infinity of its formal possibilities” in which it had sunk to entertain the thought with a mimic of meaning. This is Mallarmé’s “transposition.” Speech, he writes, “is no more than a commercial approach to reality. In literature, allusion is sufficient: essences are distilled and then embodied in Idea... This is the ideal I would call Transposition...” (“Crisis in Poetry,” 40). Even if “transposition” here assumes the rigour of eidetic abstraction, it still testifies to the voiding of sameness, to erasure of the first time in which meaning could find reassurance of belonging, and tied, it could be untied to reveal the roots beyond its textual knots in which it voids itself, beyond its doubling and beyond distance of which it always speaks. For what remains foreign to literature are precisely the roots of its duplicity. Whatever begins here begins redoubled. And carried out of itself, it begins by becoming a story of its own unravelling that can only ever “allude” to its missing, and by that very allusion, supplemented present. It becomes “that evanescent movement that flees before the growing consciousness constantly threatening to make it vanish. Mallarmé calls it, very clearly, ‘its resonant near disappearance.’” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 21-22). And “it is precisely this process,” de Man continues, “that the sonnet’s first two lines evoke. The

‘supreme Game’ is the act of (poetic) consciousness, and the ‘lace’ that ‘does away with itself’ is a sort of fringe of the evanescent object in its ‘resonant near disappearance.’ The action is ‘doubt’ by its suspension between being and nonbeing” (22). Without this “doubt” nothing would ever come to pass. It is both the destruction of the unified subject, its historical disbanding, and the emergence of what is not itself – but is older than the subject, that through which the pathos of the subject comes to us. It is what through the loss of unity introduces its mythogenic presence that motivates poetry never to cease echoing in the music it writes, like the seashell, the sound of its lost seas, “a world of a spontaneous contact with things, within a single sphere of unity” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 23). So it surges forth in words, line after line, for there still might be, in the word, there still might survive there, an imperceptible pulse of being, that is also the pounding of the outside it cannot hear. The failing but ceaseless beat of this pulse deep within the shell of growing echoes, its chance survival when everything has been lost to silence, is the promise of the next line that the dead ones bear and hide under the rubbish heap of history.¹⁴⁷ Its beat and “its presence,” de Man writes, “underlies Mallarmé’s entire oeuvre and confers upon that oeuvre its contour and agonizing depth” (23). Indeed, allegorized in Mallarmé’s sonnet “The virginal, vibrant, and beautiful dawn,” the horizon that carries the “drunken” wings of poetry in its surging lines is one of “flights never flown,” but what is evoked is precisely the possibility of transcendence that the next line, the “virginal” and “vibrant” beginnings of the next poem, might

¹⁴⁷ In the first sonnet of the triptych, “Does Pride at evening always fume,” Mallarmé indexes this silence as the “Disavowal’s sepulcher,” the night of renunciation to which all objects Pride keeps close are resigned (*Collected Poems*, 78). It is also the sepulchre of words as the perishing of being.

establish: “The virginal, vibrant, and beautiful dawn, / Will a beat of its drunken wing not suffice / To rend this hard lake haunted beneath the ice / By the transparent glacier of flights never flown?” (*Collected Poems*, 67). This is where poetic consciousness suffers the “agonizing depth” of its pathological privation that constitutes the very ecstasy of its movement. Caught in the impasse of what de Man elsewhere calls its “authentically temporal predicament,”¹⁴⁸ its movement becomes one of catastrophic loss, of melancholia for Benjamin, that mourns the shed contents in the empty casings of allegory.¹⁴⁹ And riveted towards the end of history, the limits of “the here-below,” it is caught in the infirmary of its wounds: “But, alas! The Here-below is master: it sickens me / Even in this refuge where I shelter secure, / And the foul vomit of Stupidity / Forces me to hold my nose before the azure” (“The Windows,” *Collected Poems*, 12).¹⁵⁰ The “azure” is what reveals itself at the limits of poetry that constitute its

¹⁴⁸ Discussing the symbolic conception of Romantic form in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man writes: “The dialectic relationship between subject and object... becomes a conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge... the asserted superiority of the symbol over allegory, so frequent during the nineteenth century, is one of the forms taken by this tenacious self-mystification” (208).

¹⁴⁹ This is why allegorical structure becomes proper to history, both for Benjamin and de Man, as we shall see in the ensuing chapter that deals extensively with allegory as a structure of shedding. For melancholia as an “open wound,” or the impossible mourning, cf. note 204 in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁰ The window or windowpane, as indicated above, is a point of breach in Mallarmé’s symbolic – insofar as it is both a limit and an exposure, both a face and an impossibility of facing. Mallarmé associates it with art, even if negatively as an interpolated injunction, or rather a subjunctive, that marks a desire for transcendence, but also, and at the same time, the pathos of its renunciation: “I look at myself and see myself as an angel! and I die, / and I yearn / –Be the windowpane art, be it mysticism– / To be reborn, bearing my dream for a diadem, / In the former sky where Beauty flourishes” (*Collected Poems*, 12). Desire is sustained only as the following lines, quoted previously, state the impossibility of its completion: “But, alas! The Here-below is master: it sickens me...” The windowpane is a mark that is proximity and distance at once, inside and outside, both interior and exterior, that locks the poet’s art in an asymptotic movement toward “the former sky where Beauty flourishes” by precisely revealing its impossibility, pass as impasse. “The azure” (*l’azur*), alluded to in the stanza, frames the Mallarméan alembic as one of the symbols that metonymically supplements both the forbidden plenitude and the void that rests its full weight there. As a metonymy of sky/heaven, both embraced by the French word *ciel*, it brings a rich connotative fund of Mallarmé’s spiritual crisis during the 1860s (see below) and the

face. But what is revealed in this face-to-face encounter is their irremediable strangeness. Without this strangeness poetry would lose its face in complete effacement of limits. The “azure” must be blinding and intolerable to poetry that can only *face* it in its withdrawal. The gaze of the poet desires precisely what is intolerable to it. If poetry reveals anything it is only the radical strangeness in which being discloses itself to it. So the movement of poetic consciousness is one of disclosure of this limit and not its identity. One thing necessarily supplants and shadows its other that cannot be seen as other than its shadow. Poetic consciousness is torn, stung and cut off by its own tragedy – which is also its own historicity – that gives it its face.

The *Azure* of the poems collected in *Le Parnasse Contemporain* (1866), “the world of immediacy” that consciousness exappropriates by repeating, “in our poem,” de Man writes, “is summed up in the one symbol-word *lit* (bed). The evanescent action of dawning consciousness (*une dentelle qui s’abolit* [a lace that does away with itself]) provokes the dissolution and absence of the world of immediacy... a world that can never exist in consciousness: *absence éternelle de lit* (eternal absence of bed)” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 23-24). The mind reveals the void, “an eternal absence of bed,” that is the *ab-grund*, the (cancelled) support, and the emptying or de-presentation of all its representations. This introduces the inescapable ambiguity in the index of its representations that can no longer map the tracks back to their genetic marker that consciousness has ripped up.

shipwreck of theology, no longer able to confer meaning transcendently. The metaphor for the human condition that governs the entire poem, however, is “sickness,” that forces the diseased poet, *and diseased by existence* which Hegel had already found sickening, to face “the azure” through the hospital windowpane as the only cure – but also one that can never be administered. This is how ontology becomes the pathogenic of existence.

Representations are now in a state of permanent disinheritance that opens them to the risk of false leads and displaced attachments. “But this destruction,” de Man, continues, “is profoundly tragic, for it signifies the mortal blow to life itself. Moreover it implies the death of God, in the Nietzschean sense, for to Mallarmé the Christian God of his childhood is the God of spontaneous and immediate unity who cannot survive consciousness... Such is the outcome of the concept of poetic nothingness for Mallarmé...” (24). Indeed, in a letter to Henri Cazalis (April, 1866), having devoted three months to *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé writes of “the Void:”

Unfortunately, in the course of quarrying out these lines to this extent, I’ve come across two abysses, which fill me with despair. One is the Void... and I’m still too distraught to be able to believe even in my poetry... which this crushing awareness has made me abandon. Yes, I *know*, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!¹⁵¹

It is “verse” then that wrecks theological certainty and reveals the subject in crisis, amputated and fractured. Poetry, as suggested earlier, is the disclosure of difference and not identity. It is a disclosure of identity in crisis, of the bare interior of the subject whose autonomy and absoluteness have miscarried. “By digging this thoroughly into verse,” the destitution of truth, Hölderlin’s “time of

¹⁵¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1988), p. 60.

dearth,” and of the god’s default is made manifest. But it is only in this destitution that modern man acquires his elevation. This destitution – which is then also the destitution of the proper – is properly the *ethos* of art. For only where all support has withdrawn, “in the face of the Void which is truth” (*Selected Letters*, 60), can there be the experience of anything like *ethos*.

The withdrawal of the divine offers us art. But art is also its infinite approach. If the divine comes, it comes in the shatters of art. The divine is the difference that art makes manifest in its withdrawal. The two offer each other at the limit that separates them. For where would poetry be without the sacred whose omitted locus it offers? The poet stays on the traces of the fugitive divine. For Mallarmé, “nothingness” that poetry offers is the locus of its desertion, its trace. *A hole of time* is dug out by words in place of the sacred in which it flies into million shattered pieces.¹⁵² Poetry traces the sacred as it unravels its bare threads in words. Mallarmé knew this well when he wrote: “We dream of words brilliant at once in meaning and sound, or darkening in meaning and so in sound,

¹⁵² In *Blindness and Insight*, de Man writes on the sacred in Hölderlin’s hymn and, *in extenso*, on the nature of the poetic task: “... if it is admitted that the hymn [“Just as on a feast day, to see his field”] expressed the impossibility of the desired identification between language and the sacred, then its development and the difficulties of its conclusion become apparent. The awakening of nature, caused by the poet, is not the immediate manifestation of Being, *but the awakening of history that resumes its progress* [emphasis added]. The poet cannot say Being, but he can awaken its indirect action... This supreme act is also a supreme sacrifice, for the restoration of Being to consciousness is effected at the cost of necessarily denying its ineffable all-presence and the no less necessary acquisition of the finite and alienated character of *Dasein*. The poet knows this necessity... it appears in the guise of sorrow” (“Heidegger’s Exegeses,” 261-62). Again, the poetic consciousness is a historical one and *infinitely* sorrowful, that is to say without assurance of reconciliation. What offers itself offers itself to a *radical* loss, is infinitely lost without ever being able to reconstitute itself in an economy that guarantees a return – economy always does, always returns home (*oikos*), having traversed the full circle of exchange and substitutions – nothing is ever exiled in economy properly speaking, for there is always a reckoning of losses or a *re-partitioning* before the fire in the end. But Hegel, for de Man, is never economical: “... Idealist philosophy is presented in a false light... If there ever was a philosophy of necessary separation, it is Hegel’s; to assimilate the notion of Absolute Spirit with idealist reconciliation is to simplify all the way into misprision” (265). In Mallarmé, as in Hölderlin, the sacred is precisely what sustains the pathos of alienation, of “necessary separation.”

luminously and elementally self-succeeding. *But*, let us remember that if our dream were fulfilled, *verse would not exist* – verse which, in all its wisdom, atones for the sins of languages, comes nobly to their aid” (“Crisis in Poetry,” 38). The “dream” is one of identity that is misshapen in poetry but that would equally be its end. As long as the words express the evacuation and impossibility of expression, there will have been languages to whose aid poetry comes by trying to efface them. The words surge forth to cover lost ground but only end in words that lose ground, or rather liquidate it. Mallarmé already in 1865: “The flesh is sad, alas, and there’s nothing but words!” (“Sea Breeze,” *Collected Poems*, 21). Poetic vision is one of survival, but it ends in “a sort of immense hecatomb,” Blanchot would say.¹⁵³ And nothing is spared – nothing can be, if everything is to begin. “Once this certainty,” de Man goes on,

is established in Mallarmé’s mind, he is obsessed by the problem of survival, not in the personal sense but in the historical sense of *continuity of mind*. Mallarmé would say with Hegel that mere “life” has no history, since it has neither future nor development... This accounts for his being so disturbed by a negating mediation, beyond which any reality of being becomes problematic. (“Poetic Nothingness,” 25)

“Mere life,” life without difference or, what Derrida calls, life “of a ‘zero degree’ with reference to which one could outline the structure, the growth, and

¹⁵³ In “Literature and Death,” Blanchot writes: “... before any word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all of creation into a total sea. God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared; only instead of beings (*êtres*) and, as we say, existants (*existants*), there remained only being (*l’être*), and man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create” (323). Meaning that is a death and birth certificate of being at once. It empties being in one blow to allow the beginning of its withdrawal. Being must be preemptively evacuated, emptied in advance, as it were, in order to begin.

above all the degradation of our society and our culture” (*OG*, 115)¹⁵⁴ – that is to say its historicity – is the moving principle of *logos*. “Zero degree” is both its *arche* and its *telos*: “As always, this archeology is also a teleology and an eschatology; the dream of a full and immediate presence closing history, the transparency and indivision of a parousia, the suppression of contradiction and difference” (*OG*, 115). One does not dwell in it; one can only be *towards it*. One is not in it other than by an infinite approach or *ending* that is always what comes before death that never comes and one risks “falling through eternity:” “Is there a way, O Self, thou who hast known bitterness, / To burst the crystal that the monster has profaned, / And take flight, with my two featherless Wings – at the risk of falling through eternity?” (Mallarmé, “The Windows,” 12). Be that as it may, the law of onto-theology is suicidal. For “mere life” that is its law, and whose historical guise has always been the name of God, is another name for death. Derrida: “Only infinite being¹⁵⁵ can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God, at least as it is pronounced within classical rationalism, is the name of indifference itself” (*OG*, 71).

The movement of poetic consciousness towards the moment that precedes time, its constitution in *logos*, (“To take flight, far off! I sense that somewhere the birds / Are drunk to be amid strange spray and skies.” Mallarmé, “Sea

¹⁵⁴ That is why in *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: “To Dasein’s state of Being belongs *falling*... Being toward entities has not been extinguished, but it has been uprooted. Entities have not been completely hidden; they are precisely the sort of thing that has been uncovered, but at the same time they have been disguised. They show themselves, but in the mode of semblance... *Because Dasein is essentially falling, its state of Being is such that it is in ‘untruth’*” (264). The “foul” facticity of *Dasein*, the malady of its *being-there* that is its being in “untruth,” is what constitutes its historicity. History as falling, as “degradation,” falling away, regressing from light the more it progresses.

¹⁵⁵ Infinity here, and always, not as indeterminate or incompleteness, Hegelian false infinity that would be finitude and difference, but rather as positive infinity, that is plenitude and totality, auto-affectation of the Same. For further reference on this difference, cf. Derrida’s essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, part 3 in particular, pp. 136-92.

Breeze,” 21), the moment then that *endures without future* – no longer a moment, as it is indivisible, in-different – is affirmed always in its ruins. And upon these ruins, poetry builds its dwelling. The “song” is what survives the shipwreck of being that is its only salvation. Mallarmé:

Steamer with gently swaying masts, depart!
Weigh anchor for a landscape of the heart!

Boredom made desolate by hope’s cruel spells
Retains its faith in ultimate farewells!
And maybe the masts are such as are inclined
To shipwreck driven by tempestuous wind.
No fertile isle, no spar on which to cling. . .
But oh, my heart, listen to the sailors sing! (“Sea Breeze,” 21).

Art, “the song,” is thus predicated on destruction, the ruins upon which alone creation crawls on. Only where all support is broken, where distress is infinite – “No fertile isle, no spar on which to cling. . .” – can there be song. And the entire undulation of *A Throw of the Dice* is precisely an unfolding of this tragic movement of the poetic vision that destines all certainty to a shipwreck the poem takes for its subject in order to find there the virginal trace of its own inscription.¹⁵⁶ What survives is the future, the certainty only of uncertainty – without which there would be none – that sustains the poetic vision in an eternal

¹⁵⁶ For Valéry it was a dramatic unfolding of “the Creation of Language” itself that can only be formed in the hollow of experience which it then elegises in compulsive repetitions. Upon reading the proofs of *A Throw of the Dice*, Valéry wrote: “It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms... I was struck dumb by this unprecedented arrangement. It was as if a new asterism had proffered itself in the heavens; as if a constellation had at last assumed a meaning. Was I not witnessing an event of universal importance, and was it not, in some measure, an ideal enactment of the Creation of Language that was being presented to me on this table at the last minute, by this individual, this rash explorer...” (qtd. in *Collected Poems*, 265-66).

promise of a chance survival: “All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice” (*Collected Poems*, 144). But “A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE.” These last words weave a dominant thread along which the poem is spun, as indicated by their typography,¹⁵⁷ but are scattered in the blanks and whites of the pages, as if to suggest that the aleatory, the contingency, that wrecks the eternal is also what may save it, as it makes the pen carry on, scribbling on the empty sheet of poetry and beating the paper in a frustration of impotence that motivates it. Impotence – that is to say, the impossibility of transcendence – is the power of writing, its impelling force, its chance. Its impotence is its potential.

In our sonnet, what survives the shipwreck of experience is only uncertainty: “the lace” near-abolished in the *jeu suprême*, swept aside against the windowpane, “floats more than it buries” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 20). As de Man writes, “‘buries’ suggests death and disappearance, [whereas] ‘floats’ contains a remote promise of survival” (26). But a survival without assurance that would authorize it in advance, “a remote promise.” The question then becomes if there is something that endures, as de Man continues: “Does the action of total consciousness reduce everything to nothingness, or does it permit the survival of what for Mallarmé... can only be history?” What “floats” then is the memory of a promise that history keeps by denying it, by temporizing it in its displacements, by keeping what it at the same time destines to forgetting. Is this not the essence, the impossible work of mourning? To keep close what one must renounce? The

¹⁵⁷ The poem, taking contingency and shipwreck for its motif, is itself written in erratic, torrential waves of free verse pouring across the pages, as we have seen earlier (cf. also note 158 below where part of the poem and its typography is reproduced). The words themselves become the disaster of being of which they speak.

poet's appears to be this impossible future. De Man: "The poet's action [the poet who guilds himself with dreams – "But, in one who guilds himself with dreams / Sadly sleeps a mandora / With music's void in its emptiness," 20] is the annihilating action of all consciousness, but it might leave a trace, the work's memory suspended in an ideal place and revealing that an action has occurred" (26). What is revealed as an impossible witness that keeps a memory of the disaster it mourns is a "mandora" that "sadly sleeps" in the poet; "sleeps," because it is an impossible witness whose speech would only perpetuate the disaster, a silent witness that can only testify to the absence of its own deposition; "*sadly*," de Man writes, "because it contains the essential tragedy of which it is the formal incarnation" (26), mourning that it cannot name, that mourns the loss of its name. And what it keeps from the sight of words is the "music's void in its emptiness." Poetic imagination – that for Mallarmé is not a synthesizer of the Romantic experience but rather its allegorical defacer, as we are trying to show – amidst emptiness and destruction of which it is the agent, secrets – but also secretes, like a black widow – the "music's void," the future of the song predicated upon the disaster it cannot name.¹⁵⁸ The hollowness of

¹⁵⁸ This line of "music's void in its emptiness" is a condensed echo of the one to appear in *A Throw of the Dice*, where:

NOTHING

of the memorable crisis...

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE
an ordinary elevation pours out absence

BUT THE PLACE
some splashing below of water as if to disperse the empty act
abruptly which otherwise
by its falsehood
would have founded

“mandora” is the hollowing of difference, an evacuated origin, or what may be its reserve, in which alone poetry takes its beginning. *Poetry begins in the discretion of what it speaks*. De Man: “The *creux* (emptiness) then describes the instrument that produces music from its hollow center, like poetry issuing from the consciousness of negation” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 26). Mandora with its pregnant form that “sadly sleeps” is the enduring image of the promise that poetry keeps by breaking it. It is given hesitantly in the last tercet which reintroduces “the window” that breaks the poetic vision but, by breaking, keeps its gaze turned towards what its eyes will never have their fill of. The image is one of promised but always uncertain birth, as indicated by the syntax, coming from the threshold of all poetry: “Such that toward some window / Depending on no womb but its own / Filial one could have been born” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 20). What might have been born is what remains without a name, perhaps a hope that that the name would devastate, as de Man writes: “This *something* Mallarmé cannot name of course; short of rediscovering the true meaning of the verb ‘to name,’ that would be to destroy the hope that remains” (27). If the hope cannot be named then the whites and blanks, the nothingness into which it sinks, indeed do “assume importance,” as Mallarmé writes in his “Preface” to *A Throw of the Dice* (*Collected Poems*, 121). For de Man, however, they register a measure of discontinuity that conditions all thought and sets a dispossessed consciousness on what is an infinite procession of *anamnesis* or auto-affection: “The experience of

perdition

in these latitudes
of indeterminate
waves
in which all reality dissolves
(*Collected Poems*, 142).

poetic nothingness that he apprehended so intensely, and that he conceived as the inevitable correlative of consciousness itself, is a specifically ‘romantic’ experience; it is Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness,’ Hölderlin’s ‘separation’ (*Trennung*)...” (28). Out of this originary separation the pathos that shadows *Dasein* is born. Time does not alleviate it because it is the very fabric of time, its becoming and its passing away. But the poet takes comfort in it; it is the vein of marble poetry keeps quarrying. As if one must

distinguish clearly enough between the Real and the Ideal. A modern poet has even gone so far as to lament that ‘Action was not the sister of Dream’ [from Baudelaire’s “St Peter’s Denial”]¹⁵⁹... Dear Lord, if it were otherwise, if the Dream were thus debased and deflowered, where would we retreat to, we unlucky ones whom the earth repels and for whom the Dream alone offers refuge? Henri, my friend, seek your sustenance from the Ideal. Earthly happiness is ignoble – you have to have hands full of calluses if you’re to pick it up. Saying “I’m happy!” amounts to saying “I’m a coward” – and more often “I’m a fool.” For you have to avoid seeing above that ceiling of happiness the sky of the Ideal, or else you have to close your eyes deliberately. (Mallarmé, *Selected Letters*, 22)

But the hope, “the Dream,” that poetry constitutes by shedding it, in the impossibility of its name, is itself nothingness, “a sterile specter,” Mallarmé continues, stiffened on the empty page of poetry: “... my heart, seized with military ardor, leaps through hideous landscapes to lay siege to Hope’s stronghold, in order to plant on it this standard of fine gold. But my mad heart realizes after this brief moment of folly, that Hope is merely a kind of veiled and

¹⁵⁹ “–Believe it, as for me, I’ll go out satisfied / From this world where the deed and dream do not accord...” From “St Peter’s Denial,” in Baudelaire’s *Revolt in The Flowers of Evil* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 267.

sterile specter” (22). As if allegory, the “sterile specter,” defeats the metaphor, and, in defeat, opens the passage of awaiting, of *eskhatos*.¹⁶⁰

The closing sentence of “Poetic Nothingness,” however, distances Mallarmé from the depths of apophatic mysticism of the indivisible origin, a dwelling that cannot be subjected to thematization and does not admit being or thought (*epekeina tes ousias, epekeina ti nou*) that would scatter it in multiplicity of partitions: “If I had to sum up his entire enterprise,” de Man concludes, “I would say that it is the nostalgic but categorical rejection of the temptation of the occult” (“Poetic Nothingness,” 28). It speaks thus not of sheltering of what speech cannot say but rather of the inevitability of its betrayal to which speech will have testified. In other words, in Mallarmé, language, that, *from the beginning*, is the shedding of identity, fully experiences the widowhood of its own destiny.

What saves poetry then is the struggle that constitutes but also incompletes it (“... it is a struggle through and through and forever.” de Man, “Temptation,” 36), that constitutes it by uprooting it. This incompleteness,

¹⁶⁰ Indeed, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, de Man will return to Mallarmé precisely to reassert the nostalgia and valorization of anteriority implied in any thinking of *eskhatos*. Having spoken of the impossibility of the poetic word to be epiphanic for Hölderlin, de Man continues: “At other times, the poet’s loyalty toward his language appears so strongly that the object nearly vanishes under the impact of his words, in what Mallarmé called ‘sa presque disparition vibratoire.’ But even in as extreme a case as Mallarmé’s, it would be a mistake to assume that the ontological priority of the object is being challenged. Mallarmé may well be the nineteenth-century poet who went further than any other in sacrificing the stability of the object to the demands of a lucid poetic awareness. Even some of his disciples [Valéry, Claudel] felt they had to react against him by reasserting the positivity of live and material substances against the annihilating power of his thought... Yet Mallarmé himself had always remained convinced of the essential priority of the natural object... ‘Nous savons, victimes d’une formule absolue, que certes n’est que ce qui est,’ writes Mallarmé, and this absolute identity is rooted, for him, in ‘la première en date, la nature. Idée tangible pour intimer quelque réalité aux sens frustes. . . .’” For Mallarmé, he continues further down, “the priority of nature is experienced as a feeling of failure and sterility, but nevertheless asserted.” Paul de Man, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 8-9. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, hereafter *RR*.

“through and through and forever,” is nothing other than the sleepless negativity that always and everywhere, unconditionally, puts to the question, makes every ground – thought itself – tremble in a seizure of anxiety. It is what constitutes the vigilance of thought and relegitimizes the necessity of its critique. It is the adrenalin of critical thought. An implacable pirouetting movement of a drilling machine that punctures all veils of reconstituted totalities.¹⁶¹ This is the piety and the law of thought that, by this very law, is destined to fall short of its own promise. Transcendence, for de Man, is an impassable threshold, but only so as to be infinitely re-passed. Is this not where thinking is born? Thinking is born of what makes it tremble and lose its bearings. It is magnetized always towards what traumatizes it. It is madness itself that has no place. And only there, set adrift, uprooted, does it truly happen, there in the night that obscures its vision but makes it see. This is not an abdication of thought, for only where it abdicates does it begin.

The “struggle” that for de Man is the beat of time in the work, its *rhythmos*, that which also frays its edges, and, at the same time, announces the dismemberance of being in its oblivion that is without messianic assurances of a stopping point, is where Heidegger identifies a certain “common outline,” or a belonging, in the breach of the adversaries. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger writes:

¹⁶¹ And there will be more on this machine in the succeeding chapters, and the machinic in de Man, the *unauthored*, inhuman, triggered by a certain attraction/repulsion, here thematized as “the struggle,” that makes repetition compulsive – and where there is repetition there is also death – but also, and paradoxically, the machine, because unauthored, makes “the event,” the incursion of the unforeseeable in the hermeneutic programs, possible, as we shall see.

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world... The opposition of world and earth is a striving... In the struggle, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. The more the struggle overdoes itself on its own part, the more flexibly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another... In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this striving.¹⁶²

For Heidegger, it is the “struggle,” but in the struggle the alliance of the “opponents,” the torn irreconcilable difference which however consigns them one to the other, as they only belong to one another precisely in the tearing (*Riss*) that opposes them each to the other (“The conflict is not a rift [*Riss*] as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other.” “The Origin,” 61), it is this tearing, division bound by the common origin that constitutes the work. Its movement, as the movement of contraries that belong to the intimacy of one another, does not abide by measure (rhythm) – that is to say, law, history, finitude, spacing – but by the measure of the measureless where the common origin, in its flight, refuses itself in the clarity of its night: it can appear, Heidegger writes, “openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up” (“The Origin,” 46). It “juts through world” only by absenting itself, continually self-

¹⁶² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 47-48. Hereafter cited as “The Origin.”

occulted. What de Man targets here, however, is precisely Heidegger's seductive leaning towards "gathering" that would repair the wound of temporality that scars being by constituting its historicity and that writing traces, but also, in one swoop, close writing, insofar as writing, the devastation and crossing-out of ~~origin~~ – whose appearance it makes possible in its crossing-out, in which the origin is announced and called for – is the condition of the possibility of history. It is the unity of *Grundriss*, of common outline of belonging, that here for Heidegger predates the uprootedness or technological alienation (*hypomnēsis*) of our experience and, like an axis, pivots the entire structure. What provides remedy for the "fallen" condition to which our secular history testifies is poetry, as the tracing of the common outline that is also the forgotten destiny of Being. Poetry becomes a power insofar as it remains faithful to the originary destiny of Being prior to its betrayal in historical determinations; in other words, insofar as it traces abolition of difference that disfigures it – that is, time, history, politics – in a transcendence that promises to reconstitute its shattered truth. This is an aestheticized notion of history – that is to say, the negation of its politicized – as the unveiling of the *total* work of art that removes the possibility of any (*other*) reading or, in other words, of a *misreading* that is every reading, *the incomplete anthology of which constitutes the very essence of the political*.¹⁶³ Heidegger's later work is infected by this possibility of transcendence, what is referred to as *Kehre* or "turn" in Heidegger, towards a certain "gathering" of what is man's authentic destiny that (German) poetry shelters against its destitution in

¹⁶³ The relation between reading – that is always *other* for de Man, and thus incomplete, as we shall see in the next chapter – as a certain unravelling of the aesthetic, and politics, that there can be no politics without reading, indeed, without a certain impossibility of reading, in a sense, orients our thought on the political as it comes to unfold in the final chapter.

technocracy as a specific and inevitable outcome of humanism. De Man's objection here then, as Norris writes, is "a form of *Ideologiekritik* alert to precisely the dangers and 'temptations' that attend such a project" (*The Critique*, 167).¹⁶⁴ De Man identifies in Heidegger a violence or an unjustifiable leap – every totalisation for de Man is a violence and oppression, that is always precipitate – that "carried by verbal analogies... leaps over in a few moments vertiginous distances, passing from the idea of struggle to that of unifying contour" ("Temptation," 35). The passage concerned is the one in which the tearing becomes "the rift-design" (*Grundriss*) or "the common ground:"

The conflict is not a rift (*Riss*) as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the source of their unity by virtue of their common ground. It is a basic design, an outline sketch, that draws the basic features of the rise of the lighting of beings. This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings the opposition of measure and boundary into their common outline. Truth establishes itself as a strife within a being that is to be brought forth only in such a way that the conflict opens up in this being, that is, this being is itself brought into the rift-design. The rift-design is the drawing together, into a unity, of sketch and basic design, breach and outline. ("The Origin," 61)

For de Man, however, there can be no repose. No rest is afforded in this alliance of the contraries, no treaty signed or agreement ever reached – this is what constitutes the work, *its defiance to the impossible*. The struggle, that is the work, alone prevails. "To conserve being in its truth," de Man writes, "is to

¹⁶⁴ Norris, however, is only half right here. As to why, it will become clear as we go on. Cf. also last chapter, section 2, "Human Relapses, Inhuman Events," p. 278 and further, where this particular problematic is taken up as integral to a more sustained argument.

conserve the incessant struggle that constitutes it..." ("Temptation," 33). Poetry does not begin until everything is unhooked. It tears everything open and, as the ground gives in, a gap, like a wedge of fiction driven in the core of truth, bursts open and spreads out, pivoting on the point of nothingness, revealing nothing where everything takes place. "There is nothing here," he continues, "that could not be translated into Hegelian terms... there have to be two for there to be a struggle; it is true that in the struggle opponents belong to each other... [but] one does not have this belonging in a unity of being, but only in a duality that is the structure of dialectic" (34-35). No unity predates its rupture: "There will not be reconciliation if there was unity" (35). Nothing is there to orient discourse – that is, the circulation of being that has been shed in *logos* – towards its analogical reappropriation. Being then is the site of its shedding without reserve, from the beginning, and history is the manifesting of this shedding without stopping point (Derrida's *arrêt*).¹⁶⁵ What is in question here already is the possibility of political difference that pure negativity – as a certain deflation of dialectic divested of its circularity, the beginning to which it would become equal at the end – opens up. Being is such that in order to be itself it sheds itself; it is unequal to itself. It cannot be thought of beyond the relation of difference – that is, beyond relation in general, as every relation implies the interval or difference that breaks it off so as to become a relation – in which it announces itself. Being is then always and already *other*; it suffers from amnesia, an irrevocable memory

¹⁶⁵ For all the valances of *arrêt*, arrest, sentence, decision, stopping point, interruption, suspension, undecidability, etc., that enter here, cf. Derrida's essay on Blanchot's *récit*, *L'arrêt de mort* [Death Sentence]. Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 62-143.

loss of its own identity.¹⁶⁶ It is the multiplicity of its figures that constitute its *Wesen* from the beginning and there can be no end to this partitioning which is nothing other than finitude, that is, the manifesting of the forgetting of the origin that would justify historical acts in a totality of gathered truths and deactivate difference/writing that is the very pulse of the political, the uninterrupted dissensus or invention of regional rationalities that fray the edge of, “wage a war,” Lyotard would say, on totalities and continue to inscribe the gaps of their incompleteness.¹⁶⁷

The conflagration of “grand narratives” and the effraction of closure that disrupt totalizing political “projects” in the call for identity have always been inseparable from de Man’s writing. Indeed, Derrida writes: “Every reading proposed by Paul de Man, and recently rendered more and more explicitly, says

¹⁶⁶ That this loss is also, and still, a mourning for de Man, is not in question here, but will become after his turn to rhetoric, as we shall see. To quote Derrida on Levinas in *Writing and Difference* here: “... this eschatology which awaits *nothing* [insofar, that is, as it is “without return,” or identity irrevocably lost, as I mentioned above] sometimes appears infinitely hopeless. Truthfully, in *La trace de l’autre* eschatology does not only ‘appear’ hopeless. It is given as such, *and renunciation belongs to its essential meaning* [emphasis added]. In describing liturgy, desire, and the work of art as ruptures of the Economy and the Odyssey, as the impossibility of return to the same, Levinas speaks of an ‘eschatology without hope for the self or without liberation in my time’ (“Violence and Metaphysics,” 118). Eschatology then, that puts the very meaning of *eskhatos*, indeed itself, in question. What is important to bear in mind here, however, is that the pathos of “renunciation,” that will be discussed later in terms of de Man’s authentic understanding of “temporal predicament” that is “infinitely sorrowful,” still belongs to the very structure of poetic consciousness (the loss is still mourned) in his early writing. Later on, however, it is rhetoric that will renounce this pathos of separation and a movement towards the machinic will become apparent; it will be a question of renouncing the renunciation. Identity, as we shall see, will be lost *without grandeur*.

¹⁶⁷ In the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard writes: “We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realisation of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: *Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.*” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), pp. 81-82, emphasis added. The unrepresentable for Lyotard is not a mourning for the “missing contents” or “the lost narrative” but is *writing itself* – it is “perceptible... in writing itself, in the signifier” (80) – that is precisely what does not stop traumatising any closed structure or a totality.

something about institutional structures and the political stakes of hermeneutic conflicts. The characteristics of these readings are most often discreet, but always clear and incisive... directed not so much against the profession or the institution, but against the academisms of the right and the left... ” (*Memoires*, 142). De Man’s reading resists precisely “the temptation of permanence” that would foreclose the possibility of the political. The political is the space that gathers round the loss of ground, emerges only by losing sight of what is in-common. *It states a permanent thinning out of Being in infinite faces of its historicity that can never articulate the same origin that is in common.* For dispersion, as de Man says, “extends precisely to the foundation:”

How can Heidegger say that the work, insofar as it is contour, gathers opposition in its unity [of the earth and the world that is, that introduces decision and measure], and that in a manner apparently permanent? Is *being* this unique foundation of their unity? But if two *beings* are defined in their being as opposed, the common fact of being could not constitute in itself a unifying principle, since their division extends precisely to the foundation. The tearing apart is thus not *Grundriss* (ground plan), that is, a groove in the foundation with a view to construction, *but Riss des Grundes*, a tearing open of the foundation itself that prevents all true construction (“Temptation,” 35-36).

The division parts the crossing, the vision of crossing. *Riss des Grundes*, also the ripping open of space at the centre that, like a hypomnesic machine, prints out ink replicas and false constructions, constructions of cardboard characters and silhouettes lacking depth and presence, surface structure that everything bears but nothing holds according to some general pattern of the source that distributes its operative concepts across the grid, following prescribed

linear movements, as the needle thrusts the paper to carve in it a *diastem*, both the retention and an extension of the fictive limit, at once tearing and stitching together, producing short-circuited copies – as nothing prescribes the movement of the needle that jabs the paper – writing and erasing, crisscrossing and crossing out along the evacuated centre, having no pattern, no blueprint, ceaselessly inventive: writing. Any unity here is undone. If there is any, it is only ever an *effect* of a throw of the rolling signifiers. The common outline, the unitary “design” gets caught thus in the play of dice it cannot arrest (*arrêter*) or hold back. And the rolling never comes to a halt, never unrolls absolutely, because the throw is re-launched without cessation along and by the gap. This is the vigil of writing. There is never any unity finally gathered in a total *arhythmos*, only its splitting in writing that is the tearing or spacing of the whole. De Man’s early work testifies to, is indeed part of, this shedding of identity in writing. In this sense, it is committed to writing from the beginning. It divests thought of transcendence, exacerbates it, and stamps on it a seal of its inadequacy, whose glow, however, far from being extinguished in intellectual nihilism attributed to de Man, is reignited with a promise of perfectibility, of to-come, Derrida would say, of justice always to be done.

Riss des Grundes does not mean that division, consciousness lost for intimacy where deferral itself no longer differs – *différance* as the becoming-space of time and time of space – now becomes the originary signified, that it takes place, replacing the empty place of truth, re-baptizing its vacancy so to speak. It repeats, by repeating it, precisely the impossibility of any such place, the always already of its breaking up that writes it. *Riss des Grundes* is the

impossibility of (re)possession of meaning. It tears open and unravels the limits of being, indefinitely.

Although a certain pathology of disenchantment, as we have seen, like an unfinished Hegelian thread of mourning for the exiled subject left freezing on the shoals of language, runs along the edge of his early writing shrouded in thin existential garments, de Man was getting ready to throw them off. However, as Norris writes of his early work,

the will to renounce... – to do without what de Man calls ‘the nostalgia and the will to coincide’ – still goes along with a certain attachment to the idea of renunciation itself as a measure of authentic understanding. Hence the very marked existentialist tonings of de Man’s early essays, the suggestion that authentic (undeluded) reading is capable of rising above such forms of seductive or naïve understanding. But this standpoint proposes at least some residual notion of the reading *self*, of a subjectivity that becomes all the more authentic as it manages to renounce the false beguilements of premature meaning and method. (*The Critique*, xvi)

The residue of pathos, of mourning and renunciation, Norris suggests, trails unspoken and is present even after de Man’s turn to rhetoric.¹⁶⁸ This, in a

¹⁶⁸ In the closing statements of *The Critique*, Norris concludes that “de Man’s later work grew out of an agonized reflection on his wartime experience, and can best be read as a protracted attempt to make amends (albeit indirectly) in the form of an ideological auto-critique” (190). This, in line with Geoffrey Hartman who sees “de Man’s critique of every tendency to totalize literature and language, to see unity where there is no unity... [as] a belated, but still powerful, act of conscience,” would appear to confirm de Man’s own confession that writing implies experience of guilt, and could be seen as self-restorative, but he also says that “excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default” (*Allegories*, 299). “An act of conscience” then, but one that compounds, rather than clears, guilt by writing it. And in *Blindness and Insight*, he warns against this kind of convergence or “psychological fallacy of confusing the impersonal self [of writing] with the empirical self of the life” (181), a mystification that opens the possibility of confusing aesthetics with history that is precisely a form of aesthetic ideology de Man’s work disarticulates. In other words, de Man’s work is not the work of disavowal and

sense, would imply that de Man's entire critical oeuvre is an apology or expiation for his youthful misguided ideals when cognition and its object seemed to coincide and thought itself seemed capable of upheaval, leaving recognizable marks of its agency on the world. For de Man, Norris writes, "rhetoric is a means of disabling this project at its source, of showing how language always and inevitably 'dissociates the cognition from the act,' thus reducing thought to an endless reflection on its own incapacity for effecting radical change" (*The Critique*, 2). There is no transcendence of ontological difference by which we are – which may also be the end of ontology, but also its beginning. Consciousness is destined to mourn its always untimely belatedness that intervenes between it and its object: "The spirit cannot coincide with its object and this separation is infinitely sorrowful."¹⁶⁹ And it is language that expropriates, introduces the separation. But by recognizing the pathos of our own predicament, the recognition of what we must renounce, as de Man says in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," "corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny" (206). The recognition of loss that inheres in our being also unveils our authenticity. The measure of our authenticity indeed becomes "renunciation." Authentic understanding is thus expiatory and de Man's writing becomes a reflection shadowed by guilt on the naïveté of his early publications that indeed were to become his elegy.

personal redemption; if it is, by de Man's logic – not merely the logic of "Autobiography As De-Facement" but his entire corpus – *it inevitably fails*.

¹⁶⁹ In "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," an early essay from 1954, collected, however, in *Blindness and Insight*, de Man writes: "This conflict can be resolved only by the supreme sacrifice: there is no stronger way of stating the impossibility of an incarnate and happy truth. The ambiguity poetry speaks of is the fundamental one that prevails between the world of the spirit and the world of sentient substance: to ground itself, the spirit must turn itself into sentient substance, but the letter is knowable only in its dissolution into non-being. The spirit cannot coincide with its object and this separation is infinitely sorrowful" (237).

There is indeed a residue of mutilated subjectivity present even in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” an essay regarded by many, and by de Man himself,¹⁷⁰ as the turning point in his critical thought now set on precisely voiding the language of Hegelian pathos by turning to its rhetoricity and its material properties free of any affective residue, marked rather by *a-pathos*:

“The Rhetoric of Temporality” is no longer *solely* concerned with the division within self but also with the division within language. What comes to the fore... is not only the ‘negative self-knowledge’ but, superimposed upon it, the linguistic awareness that ‘the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous.’ This notion of division within language, however, is not so innocuous a repetition ‘on the level of language’ of the notion of division within self... It already attests to an understanding of language as trope...¹⁷¹

The human predicament becomes a predicament inherent in language as the autonomous tropological structure of substitutions and metonymic displacements driven to extreme *askesis*. Language becomes inhuman. De Man: “The way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all” (*RT*, 87). We are now

¹⁷⁰ In his “Foreword to Revised, Second Edition” of *Blindness and Insight*, de Man writes: “‘The Rhetoric of Temporality,’ which I wrote around the same time as the papers collected in *Blindness and Insight*, is a slightly different case. With the deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology, it augurs what seemed to me to be a change, not only in terminology and in tone but in substance. This terminology is still *uncomfortably* intertwined with the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality that was current at the time, but it signals a turn that, at least for me, has proven to be productive” (xii, emphasis added). *Blindness and Insight*, hereafter *BI*.

¹⁷¹ Minae Mizumura, “Renunciation,” in *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, ed. Peter Brooks et al. (special issue of *Yale French Studies*, vol. 69, 1985), pp. 90-91, emphasis added. *Yale French Studies*, hereafter *YFS*. Mizumura’s essay, however, still testifies to the impossibility of renouncing the renunciation in de Man’s writing (cf. below, note 173), that still keeps itself in its erasure, precisely as erasure.

unrecognisable in language and any vestiges of pathos that like “uncomfortable” trappings warmed the nakedness of de Man’s writing are now thrown off, as language, having broken the fetters of its relation to the subject, shows its cold, unfamiliar gaze. This is already at work in *Allegories of Reading* where the material properties of language and their irreducibly random occurrences prior to any consideration of reference or meaning destroy any possibility of continuity that thus, for de Man, becomes a metaphorical aberration or an unwarranted aesthetisation of what is irreducibly singular in service of ideology. Authenticity for de Man is madness. What is authentic is “the materiality of the letter” (AI, 90). And there is neither compunction nor expiation there.

However uncomfortably, this leads us to the next chapter. And perhaps the best way of introducing it is by way of a rhetorical question, de Man’s way:

... asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: “What’s the difference?” Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, whatever this may be, but provokes only ire. “What’s the difference” did not ask for difference but means instead “I don’t give a damn what the difference is.” The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning. As long as we are talking about bowling shoes, the consequences are relatively trivial; Archie Bunker, who is a great believer in the authority of origins (as long, of course, as they are the right origins) muddles

along in a world where literal and figurative meanings get in each other's way, though not without discomforts. But suppose that it is a de-bunker rather than a "Bunker," and a de-bunker of the arche (or origin), an archie de-bunker such as Nietzsche or Jacques Derrida for instance, who asks the question "What is the Difference" – and we cannot even tell from his grammar whether he "really" wants to know "what" difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn't ask?

— Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*

Chapter Four

Reading Con: Rhetoric, Allegory and the Machine

Reading is the spanking [always hitting bottom in the line of hermeneutic address], the syncopation and disturbance, the mechanically beating rhythm that has been in part inherited from this practice at understanding's terminus. It responds to a punishing mechanicity, and, motored by the techno-epistemic conversion, it proceeds according to the logic of disturbance, casting the drama of understanding against the comforting smoothness of interpretative syntheses.

— Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*

Once upon a time, we all thought we knew how to read, and then came de Man...

— Wlad Godzich, "Caution! Reader at Work!"

I will speak, therefore, of reading.

Archie Bunker's been had.¹⁷² Conned by his own language that disconnects the intent: "That's not what I mean!" His wife doesn't get it, she fails to read him: "What's the difference" means "I don't give a damn what the difference is." It seems that misreading is risked every time we speak. Or is it Archie that misreads his wife's ability to read that indeed reads him "correctly" by spelling out the difference? Who is it that fails to read? Or is the failure of reading inherent in every reading? "That's not what I mean!" is perhaps what every text turns to scream back at us once we think we are rid of it. Something unconsumed that compels reading will have always remained whenever there is reading, whenever "literal and figurative meanings get in each other's way" (*Allegories*, 9). This interference is what de Man calls rhetoric. I will speak, therefore, of what in reading power breaks and turns against it, leaving skid marks across the surface as it peels out against the textual grain. Rhetoric is both the cause of reading failure and of its possibility. But the con of reading begins before Arch(i)e, it begins with "The Rhetoric of Temporality." Its "deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology," de Man writes, "augurs what seemed to me to be a change, not only in terminology and in tone but in substance... it signals a turn that, at least for me, has proven to be productive" ("Foreword," *BI*, xii).¹⁷³

¹⁷² In "Semiology and Rhetoric" that opens *Allegories of Reading*, de Man uses an episode from a television sitcom *All in the Family* at one instance in order to show an inherent duplicity of language, its capacity to elide reference, and its unmasterability even when most trivial. It is Archie's rhetorical question, "What's the difference?" that in the end testifies to the impossibility of reading, of deciding "which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails," the figurative or the literal (*Allegories*, 10). Arch(i)e Bunker, an "origin" that commands the use, the *techné* of language, is de-bunked, unmastered by his own art.

¹⁷³ In her essay "Renunciation," Mizumura traces an ambivalence of de Man's rhetorical turn that has never given up the existential moorings of his earlier writing, she argues, "the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality." The turn, Mizumura writes, "is reached not as a result of a disintegration but as a manifestation of the basic structure of tension that has provoked de Man's use of the notion of renunciation [that is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, renunciation of the seductive powers of identity as the condition of authentic knowledge] in the

I will speak, therefore, of an-other reading that is never blank but active, always otherwise, allegorical. Reading, for de Man, always implies allegory as a certain unwriting of historical erasures that he inherits from Benjamin as we shall see, but it also implies a certain perfunctory mechanicity, the repetitive clockwork stutter that prevents reading to fully unwind. One will have always misread, added more and more turns that widen thus, each time and by each turn, the gap that calls for its closure. Reading categorically misreads, even one that thematizes misreading. “Deconstructive readings,” de Man writes,

can point out the unwarranted identifications achieved by substitution, but they are powerless to prevent their recurrence even in their own discourse, and to uncross, so to speak, the aberrant exchanges that have taken place. Their gesture merely reiterates the rhetorical defiguration that caused the error in the first place. They leave a margin of error, a residue of logical tension that prevents the closure of the deconstructive discourse...” (*Allegories*, 242)

Always in need of more reading to close reading. There is no final signified that is not, in turn, given over to reading. In other words, we will never have read enough, deciphering thus what is lost as a cipher, a written code that supplements for what it defers in what is always another turn. Always in need of

first place. This structure continues to persist in his text even after the ‘turn.’” Hence, she concludes, “the story of de Man’s ‘turn’ also becomes a story of an obsessive repetition” (*YFS*, 94). Yes, but obsessive precisely because the original structure of tension was nothing *but rhetorical from the beginning*, pushed back under the surface of human error, and that now returns with all the vigour and force of a primary discharge – the “exhilaration” and *jouissance* of writing or the explosion of the subject. The fact is not that de Man, as Mizumura suggests, repeats now in his rhetorical concerns, what he terms, the “unresolved obsessions” of his earlier writing but rather that his earlier writing was obsessed with rhetoricity from the outset without knowing it. If there ever was blindness in insight, it is evident in the following – de Man on the turn: “I am not given to retrospective self-examination and mercifully forget what I have written... When one imagines to have felt the exhilaration of renewal, one is certainly the last to know whether such a change actually took place or whether one is just restating, in a slightly different mode, earlier and unresolved obsessions” (“Foreword,” *BI*, xii).

more writing to close writing. Which is to say, always in need of more language to exorcise language and let other speak. “The most heroic effort to escape from the prisonhouse of language only builds the walls higher,” as Miller puts it in “The Critic as Host.”¹⁷⁴ Still, if an irreducible silence were not at the heart of speech, there would be no speech. If something at the heart of reading were not unreadable, as de Man would say, there would be no reading, nor would there be a call for writing. It is this irreducible residue of some other that calls for its reading, which will always narrate an allegory of its inability to read it. What is constant in every reading is only its failure to read that it allegorizes and repeats endlessly in a substitutive movement of successive (mis)readings that are without truth, which would silence the call and close writing. And the closure of writing is political. It is impossibility of reading that for de Man opens the textual field – that is, writing in general. Writing, he will say, “can just as well be considered the linguistic correlative of the inability to read. We write in order to forget our foreknowledge of the total opacity of words and things or, perhaps worse, because we do not know whether things have or do not have to be understood” (*Allegories*, 203). Something first must be missing for the narrative to begin. But as long as there is narrative, there will have been missed contents of narration. All narrative, for de Man, is a narrative of its inability to denominate. This is a structural flaw of language that makes language possible but always leaves a residue of undecidability, which does not paralyse discourse but rather enables its

¹⁷⁴ The walls are, however, strangely debordered, he continues on the next page, without any “visible barrier.” “One may move everywhere freely within this enclosure without ever encountering a wall, and yet it is limited. It is a prison, a milieu without origin or edge. Such a place is therefore all frontier zone without either peaceful homeland, in one direction... nor, in the other direction, any alien land...” (189). This frontier line, that is not a line, is our domicile.

politicisation. Indeed, what de Man calls rhetoric, that is, the radical figurality of language or its representational shortfall – in other words, precisely that which makes language epistemologically unreliable – is also what makes politics possible. It is in the constitutive unmasterability of the signifier that politics will have found its conditions of possibility. It is because of its inherent disobedience, its penchant, so to speak, for missing its target, while keeping a phantom relation to it, that something like politics is possible.¹⁷⁵ This also destines politics to an unceasing misreading of the social that is always incomplete. De Man thus points towards a certain disaggregation of total politics – which would precisely sanction the death of the political – that is radically anti-foundationalist.

The rhetorical turn then, usually misconstrued, Norris warns, as “a form of ‘textualist’ mystification, a last-ditch retreat from politics and history into the realm of evasive textual strategies” (*The Critique*, 152), is what opens onto the possibility of the political in de Man while at the same time liberating his discourse from the claims of subjectivity and language of temporality – what Norris calls the “existential pathos” (xvii), evident in his early work. De Man’s

¹⁷⁵ Much is made of missed hits, negative score lines and displaced targets in Avital Ronell’s chapter on de Man in her book entitled *Stupidity*, where the inability of language to score opens precisely the site of infinite contestation that I here, in extension, call politics: “Never hitting home, unable to score,” she writes, “language is engaged in a permanent contest; it tests itself continually in a match that cannot even be said to be uneven... because the fact remains that this match is ongoing, pausing occasionally only to count its losses. The contestatory structure, yielding no more than a poor score, paradoxically depends upon failure for its strength and empowerment.” However, Ronell continues further down, this “contestatory match can never be a dialectic but, *being engaged in a fundamental (mis)match, must, in a more Beckettian sense, go on and on, seeking referent and refuge...* Language never scores; it engages the experience of failure, opening the test site to the irresolvable conflict between cognition and performance [that is, rhetoric and grammar in de Man’s precise terminology].” Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 2002), p. 99, emphasis mine. The “fundamental (mis)match” is the missing fullness that language keeps dismembering while trying to fill it. In terms of the political, this suggests that the body politic is never total but always open, wounded on one side, which permanently prevents its identification with the fullness of meaning that it tries to embody. *Instability of reference, its broken, aberrant trajectory that conditions reading as the site where meaning is contested, is radically democratic.*

turn is thus also an implicit turn *towards* the political, in this case, the politics of representation and aesthetic ideology that will become the increasing concern of his later writing. As Derrida writes in *Memoires*: “‘Reactionaries’ and ‘political activists’ in truth misunderstand, in order to protect themselves, the political stake and structure of the text, the political allegory of the literary text, no less than the allegorical and literary structure of the political text... The word ‘political’ is perhaps no longer only appropriate; it is also allegorical” (142, 43). It is a misencounter between the name on the one hand and the thing on the other – an encounter distinctively allegorical according to de Man, because allegory is precisely a misrecognition of the referent – that offers language its manoeuvrability but also, and with it, offers room for misdirection, the rhetorical play of misreadings that cannot be separated from political strategies.¹⁷⁶ And it is only an axiology, as Derrida says in “White Mythology,” one “supported by a theory of truth” – precisely an aesthetic ideology – that can arrest the play of this uncertainty. And “this axiology,” he continues, “*belongs to the interior of rhetoric. It cannot be neutral*” (241, emphasis added).

Larger stakes are thus at play in Archie Bunker’s misreading of difference in the passage earlier quoted. The radical unease in the relation

¹⁷⁶ Political strategies always imply a desedimentation of total structures or, what is in effect, a decentring of the social. At least seen in the context of radical politics, strategy implies a voiding of the ontological fiat that would ground the moment of political institution. Strategies are a trace of the contingency within the structure of the political; this is what makes politics possible but also what makes it essentially incomplete or *impossible*, if you like. In his essay “Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony,” Ernesto Laclau writes: “For strategy is at the heart of any action which can be called political. Strategy involves, in an indissociable synthesis, a moment of articulation – the institution of the social; a moment of contingency, as far as that institution is only one among those that are possible in a given context; and a moment of antagonism – the institution being only possible through a hegemonic victory over conflicting wills.” *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 66. And “strategy” here cannot be dissociated from de Man’s definition of reading as misreading; they are interchangeable. Hereafter cited as *DP*.

between rhetoric and grammar, as we shall see, will always produce misreadings. For de Man, misreading is the correlative of the rhetorical or tropological nature of language. Every reading is thus a misreading. Trope, de Man says, “is not a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but *it characterises language as such*” (*Allegories*, 105, emphasis added). As soon as this radical rhetoricity of language is recognised, the possibility of reading is placed in question: “... far from constituting an objective basis for literary study, rhetoric implies the persistent threat of misreading.”¹⁷⁷ It is thus the very nature of language that makes reading problematic. All language is figurative, and, as such, structurally fallible. This systematic dysfunctionality of language is what every narrative attempts to correct but only repeats as an allegory of its own misreading.¹⁷⁸ The “persistent threat of misreading” implied in language, however, is not an “aberration” of meaning, to use de Man’s idiom, but rather its condition of possibility. To the extent that all language is figurative, all language is aberrant: as soon as in the territory of language, one is in the territory of aberration – that is to say, from the beginning, one has never left aberration.

Archie Bunker, by making meaning impossible, de Man reminds us, as “the same

¹⁷⁷ Paul de Man, “Literature and Language: A Commentary” From Appendix B to *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 285.

¹⁷⁸ Put in terms of the critic and his text, Miller writes of the same aporetic experience: “The critic’s attempt to untwist the elements in the texts he interprets only twists them up again in another place and leaves always a remnant of opacity, as yet unravelled. The critic is caught in his own version of the interminable repetitions... [that he] experiences as his failure to get his poet right in a final decisive formulation which will allow him to have done with that poet, once and for all... [He] can never show decisively whether or not the work of the writer is ‘decidable,’ whether or not it is capable of being definitively interpreted. The critic cannot unscramble the tangle of lines of meaning, comb its threads out so they shine clearly side by side. He can only retrace the text, set its elements in motion once more, in that experience of the failure of determinable reading which is decisive here” (“The Critic as Host,” 202-03). Decisive is precisely the undecidability that sets everything in motion.

grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning [that] asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (*Allegories*, 9), in fact, makes possible the conditions of its production. *The true nature of language is revealed only when its promise of communication fails*. This is the double rapport of all reading. Or in de Man’s words: “*Die Sprache verspricht (sich)* [“Language promises” but also, and at the same time, “Language makes a slip of the tongue”]; to the extent that [it] is necessarily misleading, language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth” (*Allegories*, 277).¹⁷⁹ But is this not a gift of language? Language as given that traces the legacy of its deceit in the gift of text?

Something in de Man testifies precisely to this failed economy of the gift, always implied whenever there is text.¹⁸⁰ For whenever there is text, something

¹⁷⁹ “Language promises” and slips, “makes a slip of the tongue,” promising only itself (*sich*), is J. Hillis Miller’s translation from “Promises, Promises: Speech Act Theory, Literary Theory, and Politico-Economic Theory in Marx and de Man,” in *New Literary History*, vol. 33.1 (2002), pp. 1-20.

¹⁸⁰ In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Derrida writes: “The definition of language, of a language, as well as of the text in general, cannot be formed without a certain relation to the gift, to giving-taking and so forth, having been involved [*engagé*] there in advance... Even before speaking of some gift or division [*partage*] of languages, it is not insignificant that one speaks of language *as a given*, as a system that is necessarily there before us, that we *receive* from out of a fundamental passivity... Language *gives* one to think but it also steals, spirits away from us, whispers to us [*elle nous souffle*], and withdraws the responsibility that it seems to inaugurate; it carries off [and “carries off” without return, as we shall see] *the property of our own thoughts even before we have appropriated them*.” Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992), p. 80, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as *Given Time*. One could compare this to an interview following “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’” (1983) transcribed in *The Resistance to Theory* where de Man, discussing Benjamin and the inhuman quality of language, will say: “Language is not human, it is God-given: it is the logos, as that which God gives to man. Not specifically to man, but God gives, as such... something which man receives, as such, at a certain moment, and with which he has nothing to do...” And on the next page: “That it [the gift of language] is divine or not makes little difference, and the more you take the sacred out of this picture, the better. But it indicates a constant problem about the [nonhuman] nature of language... 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” (100-101). *Language as a gift that steals in both cases*. And it robs us of the human aspect, of “the whole notion of language as *natural process*” (101, emphasis added) that has always been attached to it. It is this organicist or vitalist

will have slipped away without return. Gift, Derrida says, is *a priori* excessive, beyond measure and thus beyond reckoning. It is what does not return home or rather what home (*oikos*) does not master or manage. Language is first, Derrida reminds us, an economy (“... one must also remember first of all that language is as well a phenomenon of gift-counter-gift, of giving-taking – and of exchange.” *Given Time*, 81). But a failed one; an economy of loss without which there would be no narrative. There must have been a default first, a totality less than equal to itself, for narrative to have begun to supplement it. But narrative only ever compounds this originary debt *in arrears*. It is always in the state of belatedness. Language is always behind in the fulfillment of a duty or obligation it promises. But then, one could not speak of a promise without this belatedness, without this essential failure to meet it. Every narrative, for de Man, testifies to the (im)possibility of this promise to be done, to close the books. Language seen as the circle of symbolic operators, the system of regulated turns (*tropoi*) and substitutions that stabilizes relations without remainder, is a mock archive of an aesthetic fantasy de Man puts in question. Gift would be the sabotage of this fantasy, a genetic trace and a left-over of its failure. The blind matter of language heterogeneous to any stable semantic totalisation – what will later be thematized as the inhuman – its constitutive arbitrariness and its madness, is the effraction of all circles. But also what can never be accounted for without reinstating it within the economy it interrupts – that is, without another referential violence. De Man’s reading could be seen as a testimony (if there can be one, Derrida would

notion of language, its genetic model, that is put in question both in *Of Grammatology* and in *Allegories of Reading*. In de Man, the inhuman is the gift, that which, in language, is “radically out of control” and which cannot be assimilated to the *oikos* but makes *oikos* – both as home and economy – possible.

say) to the possibility of the gift, the possibility that something, some other, without expectation, comes. The circle of exchange can only begin if there were some gift, some inhuman, that is to say, some rupture of equivalence or unequalness, at the beginning. It is this rupture that lends wings to the tropic drift of rhetoric. Coins of language or tropes only move on the condition of this gift that strictly prohibits precisely the exchange it seems to set in motion. Rhetoric is the economic machine of language, the balancing of its books, and, at same time, it points to the imbalance that no books can account for, the imbalance that assures the possibility of books. A machine that is also then a constant reminder of its malfunction.

Rhetoric, for de Man, like literature, is an operative term (“The key to [the] critique of metaphysics, which is itself a recurrent gesture throughout the history of thought, is the rhetorical model of the trope or, if one prefers to call it that, literature.” *Allegories*, 15). It is both constative and performative. Rhetoric stabilises the essential instability, the referential power failure inherent in language. It “articulates,” de Man would say, “a random noise into a definite pattern.”¹⁸¹ In other words, it allows for the illicit substitution of metaphoric and phenomenal orders that engenders consistent conceptual systems.¹⁸² This was

¹⁸¹ Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), p. 107.

¹⁸² This specular structure is the condition of all cognitive understanding: “*the mind occurs as the distortion* which allows one to make random regular by ‘forgetting’ differences” (“Shelley Disfigured,” 107, emphasis added). Following Nietzsche here, thought itself is a falsification from the very beginning; it “occurs as [a] distortion” and a forgetting. And it is the figure that “forgets” precisely by forgetting its rhetorical status, as de Man will say: “... language performs the erasure of its own positions...” (119). Far from being only unreliable, knowledge, for de Man, has always been radically privative.

already a thematic concern of his earlier writing¹⁸³ – *Riss des Grundes*, as we have seen in the previous chapter, that opens up temporality and the possibility of the political that presupposes a certain disinheritance of truth and the inability of time – as long as there is time – to make up for its loss, but temporality now is a specifically linguistic category produced by the impossibility of metaphorical closure or the radical referential dyslexia. Rhetoric, however, is also what performs the undoing of its own aberrant mode, the fact that “all discourse *has to be* referential but can never signify its actual referent” (*Allegories*, 160)¹⁸⁴ – this is what produces temporality; it is rooted, like any other category, in what is a linguistic ruse of metaphor, as this late passage from his lecture on Benjamin, and a certain destinerrance of language we have already discussed, states in no equivocal terms:

Now it is this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, it is this errancy of language... that Benjamin calls history. As such, history is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language; it is not natural for the same reason; it is not phenomenal, in the sense that no cognition, no knowledge about man, can be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication; and it is not really temporal either, because the structure that animates it is not a temporal structure. Those disjunctions in language do get expressed by temporal metaphors, but they are only metaphors. The dimension of futurity, for example, which is present in it, is not temporal but is the

¹⁸³ Christopher Norris also calls attention to the continuity of a certain “unswerving conviction” that shadows all de Man’s writing. From the earliest to “his final essays, Norris writes, “he remained quite unswerving in this conviction that any move to short-circuit the gap between phenomenal and semantic orders of sense was merely a deluded attempt to escape the problems faced by all authentic reflection on language, thought, and reality” (*The Critique*, 3).

¹⁸⁴ Or, “Such is language: it always thrusts but never scores. It always refers but never to the right referent” (*RR*, 285).

correlative of the figural pattern and the disjunctive power... locate[d]
in the structure of language. (RT, 92)

And the tropological model of this “disjunctive power,” of temporality as a failure of identity or the inability of truth to approximate itself other than in a narration of its own impossibility, is *allegoria* – that is, other or another speaking.¹⁸⁵ It is in the errancy of language that texts initiate which is why they always trace the disruptive power of its figuration. Texts thus always imply an allegorical moment – a moment of otherness or rhetorical “self-awareness” – of their own unreadability that makes them possible. “The allegorical representation of Reading,” de Man writes, is

the irreducible component of any text. All that will be represented in such an allegory *will deflect from the act of reading and block access to its understanding*. The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading. But this impossibility necessarily extends to the word “reading” which is thus deprived of any referential meaning whatsoever.
(*Allegories*, 77, emphasis added)

Unreadability is the condition of possibility of reading. The referential flight of meaning that the text narrates, its failure to state what it knows, is what de Man calls allegory.

¹⁸⁵ De Man on Proust in *Allegories of Reading*: “As a writer, Proust is the one who knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, *since what we call time is precisely truth’s inability to coincide with itself*. *A la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight” (78, emphasis added).

Allegory's Contresens: "To brush history against the grain"

— From Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

In his reading of Proust, de Man singles out an episode where Marcel reflects on the nature of allegorical blockage. Swann, who has a keen eye for analogy, compares the kitchen maid to Giotto's allegorical representation of Charity. But the metaphor, de Man writes, "by generalising itself in its own allegory... seems to have displaced its proper meaning" (*Allegories*, 73). Its semantic valence has been carried out of the limits the power of analogical relation confers: "The kitchen maid resembles Giotto's Charity, but it appears [to Marcel] that the latter's gesture also makes her resemble Françoise... if the image, as a representation, also connotes Françoise, it widely misses its mark, for nothing could be less charitable than Françoise, especially in her attitude toward the kitchen maid (*Allegories*, 76).¹⁸⁶ In other words, the vehicle or the *figure* of the

¹⁸⁶ Anxiety of reference, however, is thematized even before Marcel (*un*)ties Charity's gesture to the uncharitable cook Françoise: "... and she [Charity] holds out to God her flaming heart, or, to put it more exactly, she 'hands' it to him, *as a cook hands a corkscrew through the skylight of her cellar to someone who is asking her for it at the ground-floor window.*" Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 83, emphasis added. It is just before this that Proust begins to dramatize the power of allegory to destabilise the narrative continuity by placing in question its referential status that opens young Marcel to the anxiety of reference, which is ultimately unrewarding: "What was more, she herself [the kitchen maid], poor girl, fattened by her pregnancy even in her face, even in her cheeks, which descended straight and square, rather resembled, in fact, those strong, mannish virgins, matrons really, in whom the virtues are personified in the Arena [the Arena Chapel in Padua]. And I realise now that those virtues resembled her in another way. Just as the image of this girl was increased by the added symbol she carried before her belly without appearing to understand its meaning, *without expressing in her face anything of its beauty and spirit* [the beauty and virtue of charity], as a mere heavy burden, in the same way the powerful housewife who is represented at the Arena below the name 'Caritas'... embodies this virtue *without any thought of charity seeming ever to have been capable of being expressed by her vulgar, energetic face*" (83, emphasis added). And further down: "Envy, too, might have had more of a particular expression of envy" (83). Allegory then narrates precisely the dissonance – one that is initially displeasing

metaphor designates the reference of its *ground* split by two incompatible meanings unable to coexist, which makes the passage unreadable. The passage literally becomes a non-passage or an impasse for Marcel. The dissonance between the vehicle and the tenor does not create tension but tears the connective tissue of the metaphor apart as soon as it is allegorised: “From the structural and rhetorical point of view... all that matters is that the allegorical representation leads towards a meaning that diverges from the initial meaning *to the point of foreclosing its manifestation*” (*Allegories*, 75, emphasis added). What is foreclosed then is the possibility of reading. *Allegoria* that haunts the text as its undecidability comes here to arrogate the power of conferring meaning that it has at the same time displaced. It disassembles the trap of literalism set up by tropological systems and, at least, “states the truth of its aberration” (76) – this, however, as de Man cautions, does not make allegory more authentic or epistemologically reliable. Reference caught in a double bind that allows of no adjudication of meaning becomes the allegorical representation of reading that disables the semantic grid. Indeed,

[a] literal reading of Giotto’s fresco would never have discovered what it meant, since *all the represented properties point in a different direction*. We know the meaning of the allegory only because Giotto, substituting writing for representation, spelled it out on the upper frame of his painting: *KARITAS*. We accede to the proper meaning by a direct act of reading, not by the oblique reading of the allegory. (77, emphasis added)

for Marcel, and displeasing because disjunctive, and unaesthetic in the Benjaminian sense – between the sign and its meaning. Both the kitchen maid and Charity are allegorical representations of virtue *only insofar as they are incapable of representing it*. What ties them together is the unreadability of their own narration. They both express what allegory does not narrate; they allegorize, in other words, only the impossibility of narration.

If anything, allegory signifies the errancy of what it states, a certain aporetic irregularity that disconnects the narrative pattern, now troubled and nervous, no longer able to know what it means. There is a sort of static between the allegorical sign and its reference that questions the very possibility of connection.¹⁸⁷ It is “this Charity without charity,” as Marcel reflects in Proust, “this Envy which looked like nothing more than a plate in a medical book... a Justice whose greyish and meanly regular face was the very same which, in Combray, characterised certain petty, pious and unfeeling bourgeois ladies I saw at Mass, some of whom had long since been enrolled in the reserve militia of Injustice” (*The Way by Swann’s*, 84). There is thus a disturbance or a tropological derailment of substitutive patterns that would stabilise the text. Mirrors are broken, the specular structure fissured, pieces do not really coincide as the moment of identity is ripped through by a mismatch that makes the part larger than the whole that would contain it: the face of Charity goes beyond charity it seeks to represent; it is “vulgar, energetic” (83), uncharitable, *charity defaced*. Allegory splinters the text or rather makes its splinters blind the reader in his attempt to read it – paradoxically however, the reader that fully sees is the one that refuses to read. In case of this particular passage from Proust, “a single

¹⁸⁷ Reading a paragraph from *Allegories of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller identifies allegory precisely as a figure of unreadability. Allegory, he writes, “means to say it otherwise in the marketplace, in public, as an esoteric expression of an esoteric wisdom. As in the case of parable, for example, the parables of Jesus in the Gospels, this is the way of revealing it and not revealing it. If you have the key to the allegory, then the esoteric wisdom has been expressed (otherwise), but then you would not have needed to have it said otherwise. If you do not have the key, then the allegory remains opaque. You are likely to take it literally, to think it means just what it says. If you understand it you do not need it. If you do not understand it you never will do so from anything on the surface. A paradox of unreadability is therefore built into the concept of allegory from the beginning.” “‘Reading’ Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*,” in *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 162. Hereafter cited as *RDR*.

icon engenders two meanings, the one representational and literal, the other allegorical and ‘proper,’ and the two meanings fight each other with the blind power of stupidity” (*Allegories*, 76). Blind, because none can see the arbitrariness of its own insight: the allegorical, for Marcel, is unwarranted because it reads what it does not state; the representational, by reading what it states, reads “improperly.” But it is in this blindness that the text is born as a testimony to its own ruin and it is in it alone that reading can continue. Fully having read, or thinking one has, is not to have read at all. For reading, as de Man continues, is “something else:”

Everything in this novel signifies something other than what it represents... it is always something else that is intended. It can be shown that the most adequate term to designate this “something else” is Reading. But one must at the same time “understand” that this word bars access, once and forever, to a meaning that yet can never cease to call out for its understanding. (77)

To read is to have misread, to have read otherwise, to have already deserted what one reads. This “otherwise” keeps the call for its understanding open. It is also what destines reading to a certain messianicity but *without* the proleptic element of expectation – found in Benjamin, as we shall see – that one will ever have read properly. As Miller suggests in *The Ethics of Reading*: “Referential statements [that would ground the text]... are aberrant not in the sense of wandering away from some ascertainable norm, but in the sense of being *a perpetual wandering from beginning to end*... we have no way to measure whether or not they are aberrant. All we can know is that they may be in

error.”¹⁸⁸ This uncertainty is what opens finitude and the possibility of reading. Finitude that is nothing other than the opening to the future of reading. The text, as long as there is one, will always have cut itself loose from the truth of its reading, although it may carry its remains in the odd number of its creases that, unfolded, never really add up. And, as long as the text makes reading impossible, as long as there is unreadability that, as de Man says, “necessarily extends to the word ‘reading,’” (*Allegories*, 77), *there will have been time for reading*. Unreadability that is constitutive of the text is what gives us time to read. Allegory of reading becomes the accountant of time. And this is the shift: what produces time, the ontological difference, the division inherent in Being from his earlier writing, is now a tropological predicament.¹⁸⁹ What is internally rent is

¹⁸⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), p. 57, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as *ER*. Although Miller does not say so explicitly, this is precisely what tears open a space for ethics. There is an imperative, what one *must* do, only against, and indeed *in spite of*, the originary instability of its ground. One *must* precisely insofar as one does not have to – *this is the force of the imperative* that commands only against the fundamental unensurability of what grounds it. Without this contingency the imperative would lose the force of its exigency; in its very categoricity, in other words, it is shadowed by a possible contingency. In “LECTIO: de Man’s Imperative” collected in *Reading de Man Reading*, Werner Hamacher writes: “There can be an imperative only because the referential function finds no correspondence in that imperative... Therefore every imperative must remain exposed to the question of whether it is not merely in the service of contingent authorities and ephemeral experiences” (*RDR*, 186).

¹⁸⁹ So in “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism” (1954), collected in *Blindness and Insight*, for instance, de Man writes that the “problem of separation inheres in Being, which means that social forms of separation derive from ontological and meta-social attitudes. For poetry, the divide exists forever” (240). The transition to strictly linguistic concerns does not have to wait until *The Resistance to Theory* and his lecture on Benjamin where they are announced perhaps most categorically, it is, of course, already at work in *Allegories of Reading*, where, when discussing Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, the same “forms of social separation” and specifically of polity derive from the tension between “the referential and the figural semantic fields” (157), which is to say from the rhetorical model. The political destiny – in Heidegger’s terms, Being-in-the-world, or the originary sociality of Being, as *Dasein*, especially in Nancy’s reading of Heidegger, is first (and last) a Being-with, a *Mitsein*, that is, cut across by the other before it is itself, which opens from the outset onto *logos* and the possibility of the political – “the political destiny of man,” de Man says here, “*is structured like and derived from a linguistic model that exists independently of nature and independently of the subject* [that is, intention]... Contrary to what one might think, this enforces the inevitably ‘political’ nature or, more correctly, the ‘politicality’ (since one could hardly speak of ‘nature’ in this case) of all forms of human language...” And further down, “If society and government derive from *a tension between man and his language*, then they are not natural (depending on a relationship between man and things... nor theological, since language is not conceived as a transcendental principle but as the

language that constitutes us. The ontico-ontological determination of Being is linguistic *before it is ontological*.¹⁹⁰ But language, de Man writes, “is not conceived as a transcendental principle” but precisely as “the possibility of contingent error” (*Allegories*, 156). And only because of this possibility, inscribed in the very materiality of language, can there be anything like time or the existential unfolding of Being in its hard and singular, mutilated faces. Indeed, in the closing paragraphs of *Allegories of Reading*, de Man will say that “[t]he main point of the reading has been to show that the resulting predicament is linguistic rather than ontological or hermeneutic” (300). The predicament is the impossibility of reading, the inability of language to denominate – which is to say rhetoric – that is not derivative but constitutive of all language. Insofar as there is something like language, referential indeterminacy remains irreducible. And this “unensurability of meaning,” as Hamacher writes, “is not an effect of the temporal succession in which the text unfolds, as phenomenological and historicist hermeneutic approaches would happily assume, nor is it a consequence of the historical distance between the text and its understanding. *On*

possibility of contingent error” (156, emphasis added). What is important here apart from “the originary *politicality* of all forms of human language” made possible in de Man’s case by *radical allegorization of the “natural link” constitutive of all language* is precisely the transition from ontological to rhetorical discursive levels. The “political destiny of man” is no longer ontological but rhetorical, “*derived from a linguistic model*.”

¹⁹⁰ Even *Dasein*’s most proper possibility, “that *possibility*,” Heidegger says, “*which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*,” (*Being and Time*, 294), the very site of one’s irreplaceability, one’s ownmost, and at the same time, one’s *utmost* possibility: death, now receives no special treatment. So, in an essay “Autobiography As De-Facement,” de Man writes: “*Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament*, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the *prosopopeia* of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (*RR*, 81, emphasis added). De Man here discussing the (dis)figurative power of *prosopopeia* that takes away what it seems to give: voices are struck dumb and faces it confers defaced.

the contrary, time and history are first opened up by the semantic indeterminacy of language" (RDR, 174, emphasis added).

Rhetoric then is the possibility of misrecognition that is disintegrative and allegory, for de Man, is the figure that makes this possibility apparent. Allegory is always an allegory of figure, a counter-narrative in every text that narrates the story of its own possibility of misrecognition or, in de Man's words, "of its own denominational aberration" (*Allegories*, 162). It is a process of deconstruction that exposes the unwarranted conceptual systems that substitute reference for signification in a bid to finally close off the textual field. Inability to read keeps this field open; it is the very source of reading and its takings. For what is reading if not an allegory of its own repetitive failures to read that keeps the field of signification open to continual renegotiation: the very revenue of reading. For de Man, Ronell writes, "[r]eading involves the undoing of interpretative figures to the extent that it questions whether any synthesis, any single meaning, can close off a text and adequately account for its constitution... [it] 'states the logic of figures and the logic of narratives to be *constantly* divergent'" (*Stupidity*, 104, emphasis added).¹⁹¹ But allegory itself, as suggested earlier, is a figuré, de Man

¹⁹¹ Ronell, however, distinguishes here between interpretation and reading: "In contrast to interpretation, which involves a development over the course of a narrative toward a single figure reconciling all its diverse moments, 'reading 'states the logic of figures and the logic of narratives to be constantly divergent.'" (104). This distinction is highly problematic, not only because the shades of its edges are impossible to delimit – where does reading begin and interpretation end? – but also because it annuls, in a stroke, the very premise of *Aesthetic Ideology* and politico-epistemic stake in reading. It surreptitiously postulates the possibility of authentic or correct reading that somehow precedes interpretative process and regulates the field of its supplementary distribution. De Man makes no such claim for his reading but, on the contrary, repeatedly states (in *Allegories of Reading* alone, pp. 162, 205, 240, 242, 275) the impossibility of any reading, including his own, *not* to forget its rhetorical status. Reading cannot *not* be referential: "All readings are in error because they assume their own readability" (*Allegories*, 202), but this is precisely what opens it to further "mortification." This is why we never will have finished reading. Reading *both* (con)states and performs the undoing its own statement. It "never ceases to partake of the very violence against which it is directed" ("Shelley Disfigured," 119). For de

continues, that can “only repeat this aberration on various levels of rhetorical complexity” (*Allegories*, 162). In other words, allegory does not escape its own figurative mode. Its reactive incision that opens up closed conceptual systems will necessarily lead to another stabilisation of the semantic field that takes its own undoing as the referential closure. In other words, allegory as a figure necessarily reiterates the referential model of its undoing that calls for another reading: “Texts engender texts as a result of their necessarily aberrant semantic structure; hence the fact that they consist of a series of repetitive reversals...” (*Allegories*, 162). Whenever reading stops, it does so prematurely. The possibility of referential reading, however, is the teleological closure of all language – *telos* of any figure is disfiguration¹⁹² – and this possibility cannot be outdone but it only relegitimizes a call for endless critical vigilance of deconstruction. Deconstruction that will never come to rest. This is why de Man can write that “deconstructive discourses are suspiciously text-productive” (*Allegories*, 200). What deconstruction cannot reach is closure; it cannot complete itself, which is why it is not a system but rather a reading of inevitable misreading inherent to all systems.

Man, reading is always already an interpretation – it is never blank or passive – and, only in that it is, does it constantly call for revision, which keeps open the field of its multiple futures.

¹⁹² “The repetitive erasures by which language performs the erasure of its own positions can be called disfiguration” (“Shelley Disfigured,” 119).

De Man's entire writing on rhetoric as a machine for undoing urgency¹⁹³ is thus motivated by allegory and its first tentative formulation is developed in "The Rhetoric of Temporality."¹⁹⁴ As Waters suggests in his introduction to de Man's *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*: "With his title ['The Rhetoric of Temporality']... de Man gestured two ways, backward with the Heideggerian word 'temporality' and forward with the word 'rhetoric.' In this essay he still employed the Heideggerian terminology, but it was being displaced by that of

¹⁹³ Introducing *Blindness and Insight*, Wlad Godzich writes: "Rhetoric, as a mode of language, accommodates itself to human finitude, for, unlike other modes, it need not locate anything beyond its boundaries: it operates on the materiality of the text and achieves effects... de Man's rhetorical inquiry consists in recognising the finiteness of the text and in bringing out its rhetorical machine" (xxviii). Rhetoric, as earlier suggested, is thus a historical structure of aftereffects, a machine of misalignments in the text that produce its temporal structure. Trope produces the very sense of that which it turns aside *in deferral*. Wlad Godzich, "Introduction: Caution! Reader at Work!" Introduction to *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* by Paul de Man (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. xv-xxx.

¹⁹⁴ The essay, hereafter referred to as "The Rhetoric," was written for a conference at John Hopkins University in 1968 and subsequently published the following year. It was later included in the revised 2nd edition of *Blindness and Insight*, 1983. Its radical impact is perhaps best illustrated by David Lehman's account: "'The Rhetoric of Temporality' acquired renown as 'the most photocopied essay in literary criticism.' Students passed it round, and more often than not the copy was heavily underlined with an exclamatory 'wow' or two in the margins. 'You could save your dope money for a month. That essay could blow your mind several times over,' a Yale graduate told me." On a more "sober" note, however, the "'two dogmas'" that have governed poetics have been solicited (in Derrida's sense of the word), "'the conception of irony as a fixed perspective, and of the symbol as a fusion of image and idea which cannot be found in allegory... After one has read this essay, one's sense of the uses of irony can never be quite the same, and there seems to be very little point in ever talking of the symbol again, except for the historical purpose of exhibiting the preoccupations of a school.'" David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), p. 153. Hereafter, *Signs of the Times*. Now, although informative at times, Lehman's "historical" account of Paul de Man as a fallen idol is still largely a fully fledged theatrical effect that stages history in the very ruses of rhetoric and sensationalism it sets out to denounce, presumably in the name of reference and literality. This is a reading that believes in "correct" reading, or, which amounts to the same thing, in closure of reading, using all the force of journalistic rhetoric it can muster in order to vilify deconstruction (in particular its uninformed analogies that level deconstruction with "irrationalism" of fascism, pp. 224, 228, or unwarranted rhetorical obscenities and acts of violence that identify "Derrida's logic" with Hitler's rhetorical strategies in *Mein Kampf*, pp. 238-39). But the more vitriolic the argument, the more it overstrains to put an end to undecidability, that is, the more it overstates precisely the impossibility of exorcising it. At times, it reaches the hysteria of a witch hunt and worse, where all critical thought seen as derivative of deconstruction – "the meteoric rise of 'gender' and 'ethnic' studies," as a deconstructive "example of the marginal supplanting the central" – is part of a "larger problem" that "continues in alloyed form" (261), a problem with one, let me say it, *final* solution against which his entire enterprise was presumably mobilized. To invoke Derrida here from *Memoires*, Lehman's account only "reproduce[s] the exterminating gesture" it arms itself against (248).

rhetoric.” (“Life and Works,” lii). Indeed, de Man opens the essay by restating a rhetorical stake in contemporary criticism that has long been “eclipsed” by what he calls the “subjectivist critical vocabulary” in need of displacement (“The Rhetoric,” 187). But what is thematized from the very outset is precisely the need for an extended definition of rhetoric as the most general figurative structure of language in which the problematic status of linguistic reference is in question: “... recent developments in criticism [that “fuse the conceptual terminology of structural linguistics with traditional terms of rhetoric,” as de Man specifies in a footnote] reveal the possibility of a rhetoric that would no longer be normative or descriptive but that would more or less openly raise the question of the intentionality [that is, the referentiality] of rhetorical figures...” (187-88). However, he continues, “one of the main difficulties that still hamper these investigations stems from the association of rhetorical terms with value judgments that blur distinctions and hide the real structures” (188). In other words, what is also called for is a rhetoric whose structure is older and thus questions the valorisation of meaning. And it is this, the illicit valorisation of one meaning over another to which every reading falls prey but nevertheless fails to attain, that will be the hidden pivot of the entire essay.

Insofar as the text always exceeds its discursive limits, it will always have another text within it, a certain latency or unconscious, a voice of another pushed back that reading cannot account for – which is why every reading is a misreading, but this also allows for what is other to come, to keep coming without injunction. A text, in other words, is thus always divided, “there always is an infra-text.” It is never singular but always plural – there is not a text but,

rather, there are always texts.¹⁹⁵ Meaning then is radically unstable. Instituted, it is subject to revision and continual pressures of reinscription, and it is this essential instability that reading carries within it as its ghost that it tries to exorcise at the same time. It is precisely by looking at the ghost of Romantic diction, at an outside – or, literally here, at an other speaking – within the body of its text, that de Man will open it to an absence of any unifying principle that would arrest its semantic drift and its dismemberment in peripheral readings. Far from being nihilistic, this is nothing other but the affirmation of reading in a Nietzschean sense, as the joyous celebration of dismembering in a maenadic ecstasy of otherness. Deconstruction is already at work in this essay, although it is itself unacknowledged, allegorised, an other speaking. Deconstruction has never really given up this ecstasy and remains complicit, without conscience, with Nietzschean destruction of epistemic orders. What Derrida has written in “Structure, Sign and Play” is precisely the affirmation of reading as a certain continual intoxication of disinscription, the fact that reading disinscribes the protocols of Reading, disfigures its monuments, so to speak, without being governed by a desire for restitution.¹⁹⁶ The body of the text is lost, dismembered

¹⁹⁵ What de Man will say when reading Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” against his later poem “Obsession” in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric:” “There are always at least two texts, regardless of whether they are actually written out or not... Whenever we encounter a text such as “Obsession” – that is, *whenever we read – there always is an infra-text* [emphasis added], a hypogram like “Correspondances” underneath... The power that takes one from one text to the other is not just a power of displacement... but the sheer blind violence that Nietzsche... domesticated by calling it, metaphorically, an *army* of tropes” (RR, 262).

¹⁹⁶ A quick reminder: “Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, [the] structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center.* And it plays without security. For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the *substitution of given and existing, present, pieces.* In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders

in a dance of active interpretation, but it is lost *without grandeur: there is nothing to commemorate.*

De Man thus takes his departure in the valorisation of symbol over allegory as the organising principle of Romantic writing. “One has to return,” de Man writes, “to the moment when the rhetorical key-terms undergo significant changes and are at the center of important tensions. A first and obvious example would be the change that takes place in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the word ‘symbol’ tends to supplant other denominations for figural language, including that of ‘allegory’” (“The Rhetoric,” 188). But it is allegory that will become, what de Man in *Aesthetic Ideology* calls, a “defective cornerstone” (104) of the Romantic project experiencing the impossibility of its own closure.

What motivates de Man’s inquiry here is the power of allegory to demystify the seductions of totality and transcendence vested in the Romantic symbol.¹⁹⁷ The symbolic could be seen as constituting the aesthetic moment

itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.” Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 369.

¹⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, whose influence on de Man’s notion of allegory is stated by de Man himself in *Blindness and Insight* (35), writes: “Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to *intercept the intention*, to triumph over it.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 183, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as *OGTD*. Allegory then interferes; it “intercepts” the intention. And does so precisely by registering the slippage of the signifier from its intended signified. It “reopens the fissure,” Ronell writes, “between word (*Wort*) and statement (*Satz*)” (*Stupidity*, 108). This is the “disjunctive, atomizing principle of the allegorical approach” (*OGTD*, 208) that cuts across and *disrupts permanently* linguistic *anamnesis* and recollection: “If it is to hold its own against the tendency to absorption,” Benjamin writes, “the allegorical must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways” (*OGTD*, 183). In Proust, for instance, that both de Man and Benjamin had engaged in their writing, it is forgetting and dismemberance that powers *mémoire involontaire* as a disturbance that tears open a hole in time. Rather than revealing a consistency of integrated consciousness, *mémoire involontaire* reveals the impossibility of self-knowledge: “It is a waste of effort for us to try to summon it, all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect. It depends on chance

proper, “*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee.*”¹⁹⁸ Form becomes an analogic extension of the natural world: “such as the life is such is the form” (“The Rhetoric,” 191), as de Man, quoting Coleridge here, suggests. Language of Romantic thought seeks to overreach the radically historical nature of its form through the symbolising power of imagination. If the symbol is the fallacy of a desire for identity, allegory would be precisely the site of its exposure, the point where symbolic form as organic unity breaks down. It is “disjunctive and “atomizing,” in Benjamin’s words (*OGTD*, 208), the moment of lacerated beauty

whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it” (*The Way by Swann’s*, 47). Half-asleep impressions and beginnings of lines that linger at the neglected corners of our memory, that, strictly speaking, is no longer ours but that of the other, of *allegoria*, are suddenly “unanchored at a great depth” (*The Way by Swann’s*, 48). Far from being integrative, this means rather that self-knowledge is permanently disjunct and uncertain, unfolded only in what interrupts self-possession, dependent on chance encounters and random occurrences without anything to plot the drama of their appearance, like lightening in sudden bursts that interrupt history only to unfold it. Such disintegrative moments are also effractions of the illusion of continuity and narrative progression; hence, the digressive element of Proust’s writing – in search of time that is always, and remains, out of time. Involuntary memory, in other words, remembers as much as it *dismembers* – what de Man will say of autobiography in general: “[it] deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores” (“Autobiography As De-Facement,” 81). It reveals the impossibility of integrated consciousness. In its sudden exposures, it tells that there is a sort of half-open book to us (a *hypogram*?) whose lines we have written in a language we no longer speak but that permanently speaks as a terror and limit of all language. Not the unconscious but something radically exterior – the unconscious is still implicated in the economy of the ego, a reserve fund for the inadmissible. Some other other that unravels the limits of identity, keeps it wounded *permanently*, prevents it to close in upon its own, that shows the originary impossibility of Narcissus. It is allegory rather than metaphor that is at the heart of Proust’s writing. Indeed, Proust’s entire search for lost time could be seen as an allegory of the impossibility of integration, of permanent loss and mourning.

¹⁹⁸ Hegel identifies beauty as the sensory expression of the idea. It effects thus a reconciliation that circumvents the materiality of the medium that will always interfere to frustrate any attempt at totalisation. Aesthetic in Hegel enables the passage towards the self-realisation of the Spirit, which is nothing other but the progressive erosion of the image whose climax, of course, is the end of art. Art, in this sense of its highest destiny, becomes “a thing of the past.” It is then the incursion of the medium, the materiality of inscription that keeps its future open. In *Aesthetic Ideology*, de Man will write: “The theory of the aesthetic... is predicated, in Hegel, on a theory of art as symbolic. The famous definition of the beautiful as ‘the sensory appearance [or manifestation] of the idea’ does not only translate the word ‘aesthetics’... but it could itself be translated by the statement: the beautiful is symbolic” (93). The symbolic has always been in the service of aesthetic ideologies that de Man’s readings have never stopped troubling, and, overstepping its bounds into the realm of cultural politics, the symbolic could be seen as the poetico-ethnocultural desire for a lost organic community partaking of its roots, identity or common essence, that it works to produce. Autochthony is based on the symbolic relation between the son and the soil, the citizen and the *polis*; it literally means “from the soil itself.” Troubled identity will always find the means to consolidate itself, but it always does so by way of exclusion and violence.

that, as de Man continues, “appears dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it *does not* itself constitute” (“The Rhetoric,” 189, emphasis added). It introduces a fracture into the affirmative realm of the symbolic order; in other words, *it mutilates the beautiful face of art*. Allegory, Benjamin writes, “thereby declares itself to go beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (*OGTD*, 178). And art for de Man has never been anything but disfigured: art that cannot escape the separation it seeks to overcome, which is why it remains a constantly unfulfilled agitation and discontent. The symbol, however, is vested with the power to restore faces, to rid truth of its *phantasma*. It is “founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests” (“The Rhetoric,” 189). The valorisation of symbol over allegory is therefore the valorisation of presence that has always governed, oriented and structured any discourse on value. What confers value to the symbolic is that it is suggestive of presence because the symbol constitutes a living part of what it represents whereas allegory only narrates dissociative relations of difference – it does not partake of its own origin but signifies precisely its misrecognition: “allegory... means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (*OGTD*, 233).¹⁹⁹ The symbol thus abolishes

¹⁹⁹ What is in question in allegory is the accountability of reference or anteriority. De Man takes here his departure precisely in this statement from Benjamin where allegory begins with a loss of reality rather than its reconstitution in symbolic *anamnesis*. So, in “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,” De Man writes that “literature bears little resemblance to perception... It does not fulfil a plenitude but originates in the void that separates intent from reality. *The imagination takes its flight only after the void*, the inauthenticity of the existential project has been revealed; literature begins where the existential demystification ends and the critic has no need to linger over this preliminary stage... The critic... [and] the German essayist Walter Benjamin, knew this very well when he defined allegory as a void ‘that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents’” (*BI*, 35, emphasis added). To understand a text then, as Waters

the difference in which allegory founds its language. The valorisation of symbol, as de Man writes, “coincide[s] with the growth of an aesthetics that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience” (“The Rhetoric,” 188). This refusal is also what denies the figurative dimension of language and consigns rhetoric to perversion. The symbol, “conceived as an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language” (189), becomes then the way of ridding language of excess of language, of sanitizing language, restoring it to its natural origins that will always limit and magnetize its reference, guarding against play and the dizziness of referential attrition.²⁰⁰ Language thus becomes the product of true organic growth limited by nature on both sides of its progression. De Man writes:

We find in Coleridge what appears to be... an unqualified assertion of the superiority of the symbol over allegory. The symbol is the product of the organic growth of form; in the world of the symbol, life and form are identical: “such as the life is, such is the form.” Its structure is that

emphatically suggests in “Life and Works,” is not a matter of “synthesizing it into a whole but *mortifying* it, shattering it into pieces” (lv). *To dismember a text is to sever its organic roots and reveal its radical contingency associated here with allegory, the sheer randomness of its origination.*

²⁰⁰ This is also the primary concern of Derrida’s *Archeology of the Frivolous*, first published in 1973, where *symbolon* of Condillac’s organicism is under watchful critical lens. The deficiency of language, its supplementary structure, is to be genea(na)logically retraced to its natural origins to constitute a new language or, rather, a new first metaphysics, “this time, the most natural one, that which will have preceded all language in general.” But “[i]sn’t that,” Derrida asks, “in order to make amends through language for language’s misdeeds, to push artifice to that limit which leads back to nature?” *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln and London: Nebraska UP, 1980), p. 37. Language should be the analogical unfolding of its natural roots. And this is what its narrative history should retrace: “the question concerns history as a narrative retracing a *prescribed* progress, a natural progress. History is only the development of a natural order” (67, emphasis added). Of course, as Derrida suggests, “nothing of all this seems to make history” (67). History of language, of meaning, is a narrative of aberration, of ruptured origins; it has nothing to do with natural order that once again here confers value, “prescribes” – what is natural is what is right! If there is anything that de Man cautions against, it is the danger of such seductions whose implications are evident enough to warrant further elaboration. The symbolic can always be enlisted in the service of ideological interests that rhetorical reading tirelessly demystifies.

of synecdoche, for the symbol is always part of the totality that it represents. Consequently, in the symbolic imagination, no disjunction of the constitutive faculties takes place, since the material perception and the symbolical imagination are continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole. ("The Rhetoric," 191)

The symbolic saves language from the ravages of history whose stresses allegory registers like a seismograph. "The measure of time for the experience of the symbol," Benjamin writes, "is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden, and if one might say so, wooded interior" (*OGTD*, 165). "Wooded" here referring precisely to the organic totality of the symbolic whose interior finally binds meaning to its natural origin and cancels the creases of time its exile has shaped. It is rhetoric – for Benjamin, however, still "the fallen nature" of language – that collects the dusts of finitude the symbol brushes off from the surface of language ("... it is [its] fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history." 180). If the symbol transfigures the countenance of nature, allegory traces and rips apart the stitches that reveal the depths of its wounds. It divides, says Benjamin, "a living entity into the *disjecta membra* of allegory" (198). In allegory, life and form are not identical; what divides them is the differential hollow of time. The sorrowful drift of language from experience finds its resolution in the false transcendence of the Romantic symbol whereas allegory, for Benjamin, signifies precisely the pathos of this failure that binds it to the finitude and melancholy of human existence, which is why "earthly mournfulness," as he writes, "is of a piece with allegorical interpretation" (227). It is in its failure that allegory "bears the seal of the all-too-earthly" (180). The allegorical mode greets – but with a melancholy

gaze – in its structure the incompleteness of its representation that makes it historically contingent and unstable, subject to revision and decay. It is “as something incomplete and imperfect that the objects stare out from the allegorical structure” (186). Allegory then is like a trace that in its incompleteness points back to the event uncontained in the system of difference that it opens up. It uproots the sign permanently from its own soil. It patterns the very structure of writing and reveals what is an irreducible exteriority of the signifier, its opaque character, black machine-like stains on white. In de Man’s terms, a de-facement to the second degree that “serves the disillusioning function of recalling the substitutive character of the face and the forgotten fictivity of the system.”²⁰¹ This is why, for de Man, allegory is the exemplary figure of rhetoricity that constitutes all language. The differential structure is not only *not* forgotten but what figurative language *masks* is disclosed, like in Giotto’s Charity, in the very structure of allegory. Allegory registers the memory of all figures *as* masks by tearing them off. It is a permanent interruption of the aesthetic recouping: “it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning...” (*OGTD*, 165). And, indeed, Benjamin identifies it explicitly with the written.²⁰² There is an underlying written/spoken binary

²⁰¹ In his contribution to *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, Hans-Jost Frey engages the double movement of defacement and de Man’s use of prosopopeia or “face-lending” in “Autobiography As De-Facement:” First, he writes, “the act of face-lending [*prosopon poiien*, to confer a face or a mask] as such is already a defacement... But this is easily forgotten, because the constructive urge, seeking to create coherence, does not like to recall the disaccord from which it springs. A systematizing drive is at work in prosopopeia. The face fixes itself into a rigid order and is taken seriously. In order to reestablish itself as the hypothetical figure it is, *the face must decompose itself again*. This removal of the face is the second form of defacement, and serves the disillusioning function of recalling the substitutive character of the face and the forgotten fictivity of the system.” (“Undecidability,” *YFS*, 125, emphasis added).

²⁰² Allegory has been denounced precisely because it allies itself with writing: “Allegory – as the following pages will serve to show – is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is. This was the

structure that like a wire filament is spun round the allegorical throughout Benjamin's text to light up the field of the oppositions it regulates: symbol/allegory, nature/history, the eternal/finitude, romanticism/baroque, etc. Towards the end, allegory is considered precisely in terms of this structure that echoes grammatical concerns of deconstruction in advance. Having spoken of "the doctrine of the 'sensual' or natural language," Benjamin writes: "Spoken language is thus the domain of the free, spontaneous utterance of the creature, whereas the written language of allegory enslaves objects in the eccentric embrace of meaning" (*OGTD*, 202). Ec-centric here as drawing away from the centre, out of the centre (*ekkentros*), an embrace that grasps but can never truly hold onto its object, that thus remains open, incomplete in the prison of allegorical structure. Meaning, for Benjamin, begins with finitude as the unfulfilled destiny of humanity. Or rather, history as destining – but without destination – as an essential emptying and ruination of origin in what is an ever more widening ec-centricity of meaning, begins with the linguistic fracture that writing repeats every time it jabs the blank sheet.²⁰³ Writing is the unfinished

experimentum crucis. Writing seemed to be a conventional system of signs, *par excellence*. Schopenhauer is not alone in dismissing allegory with the statement that it is not essentially different from writing" (*OGTD*, 162). Or, "With the theory that every image is only a form of writing... [one] gets to the very heart of the allegorical attitude. In the context of allegory the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask" (214). Other references, pp. 175, 184, are made in the text that insistently push the allegiances of the allegorical toward the scriptural.

²⁰³ Agamben, in his essay "Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin's Thought," argues precisely that, for Benjamin, "*the historical condition of human beings is inseparable from their condition as speaking beings*; it is inscribed in the very mode of their access to language, which is originally marked by fracture." Quoting Benjamin, he continues, 'history is born... together with meaning...' It coincides, indeed, with a fracture in language itself, that is, with the fall of language (*Wort*) from the 'pure life of feeling' (*reines Gefühlsleben*), in which it is 'the pure sound of feeling,' into the domain of meaning (*Bedeutung*)... History and meaning are thus produced together, but they follow a condition of language that is, so to speak, *prehistoric*, in which language exists in a 'pure life of feeling' without meaning" (*Potentialities*, 51, emphasis added). Precisely the schema we have followed in

pattern of history whose skeletal structure is flashed in allegorical X-ray machine. And this is what consigns allegory to finitude. But for Benjamin, the “eccentric embrace of meaning” is an open wound, an embrace of melancholy that rushes in its grasp to keep what it can never appropriate, it leaps towards an impossible closure.²⁰⁴ Writing, for Benjamin, is a form of *genealogical* scripting or melancholy writing, the “secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world” (*OGTD*, 166) that thus inscribes pathos where the play is – and this is where any analogy with deconstruction ends.²⁰⁵ Hence, Benjamin’s persistent pathologising of the allegorical structure and its association with melancholy: “For the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory” (185).²⁰⁶ Melancholy follows the allegorist as he persists along the

the opening chapters. But this not only makes writing an *en-gram* of history – that is, the necessary graphemic nature of history – but also makes mourning inseparable from writing.

²⁰⁴ Indeed, for Freud, melancholia is “an open wound.” Bereavement or an abrupt loss of the cathected object rips open a gap between the external world and the psychic life and to mourn is precisely to allow time for the psychic reality to draw level and master the absence, although it never fully does: “a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up” (“Mourning and Melancholia,” 588). To mourn then is to remember and to repeat, to keep close that whose intimacy one must renounce. In melancholia, however, the psychic and the external reality are never reconciled. The ego internalises the cathexis in a narcissistic identification with the lost object without the possibility of a new libidinal attachment or recathexis in a new displacement. Melancholia literally drains the ego: “The sleeplessness in melancholia testifies to the rigidity of the condition, the impossibility of effecting the general drawing-in of cathexes necessary for sleep. The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies... from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (589). From *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 584-589.

²⁰⁵ At times, indeed, Benjamin’s expression has all the shades of de Man’s rigour. Engaging the baroque, for instance, he writes: “The [allegorical] language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up” (*OGTD*, 207). This is the very nature of disarticulation for de Man, where theoretical constructs are always built on the points or “defective cornerstones” that deconstruct them. So, in *Aesthetic Ideology*, de Man writes on Hegel’s use of allegory that it “functions, categorically and logically, like the defective cornerstone of the entire system” (104).

²⁰⁶ Ronell finds this formulation “enigmatic and unyielding” (*Stupidity*, 108). Unyielding indeed, but not as enigmatic perhaps; in particular, if considered in conjunction with the inhibitive messianic aspect of his writing where history or writing is the allegorical cipher that bars access to the origin of language. In other words, as long as there is allegory, there will have been a promise that in its unfulfillment dries the tears of humanity, so to speak. Furthermore, for Ronell, the melancholic in Benjamin somehow “does not provide a perfect match with the retentive heroes of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*” (108). But the following analysis of allegory does not fall short of a “perfect match:” “the melancholic who drowns her sorrows in allegory latches

path of decay and skeletal remains of meaning scattered in fragments all over the historical progress: “as a faculty of the spirit of language itself, it [the allegorical] is at home in the Fall” (*OGTD*, 234). Nature, writes Benjamin, is not seen by the allegorists “in bud and bloom but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature, they see eternal transience...” (179). Allegory thus pronounces the mortal truth of existence that it mourns like an open wound. But it is radically historical. Benjamin writes:

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all “symbolic” freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious... This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing... secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. *Significance and death both come to fruition in historical development, just as they are closely linked as seeds in the creature’s graceless state of sin.* (166, emphasis added)

Allegory carries within it the standard of its own unfulfillment. Finitude and the awareness of mortality confronting the eternal that is at the heart of the

onto a rhetorical form in which the mark makes itself present only through erasure” (108). That is precisely the lost object that is kept within as *allegoria*, as the other who still speaks, persists in speaking, but whose absence of speech is inadmissible. “Allegory,” she continues, “puts into play the drama of catastrophic loss, permanent disruption, the *Nichtsein* (nonbeing) of what it represents” (108). This truly is the drama of “Mourning and Melancholia” and “the catastrophic loss” its motivating force. Catastrophic because irreconcilable, levelling, inadmissible, one that consigns everything to the defiant silence and refusal to speak.

melancholic attitude produces the allegorical structure. Allegory, says Benjamin, “established itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely” (*OGTD*, 224). In the face of eternity whose call it gathers in fragments, allegory encounters only the impossibility of piecing them together – the very structure of signification rests on this impossibility. But this is also why “meaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness” (209). History that is one of mourning is the history of presence. And although allegory permanently deregulates the reappropriation of presence and, as Ronell writes, quoting Levinas, “interrupts the ‘assembling, the recollection or the present of essence’” (*Stupidity*, 107), it is the structure of mourning, and hence, of the very anteriority that it puts in question, that, for Benjamin, organises and orients the history of its ghostly interruptions. The unfulfilled promise that meaning carries in its ec-centric embrace is the passion of language, its suffering; the sign is only the sign of destitution of humanity, of the “graceless” fall, of history as awaiting.²⁰⁷

Still, allegory as the *memento mori* in the text is what wounds the text and

²⁰⁷ This is all “too archeo-eschatological.” If there is history, surely, it is what interrupts the course of history without assurance, “*for the best and for the worst, without the slightest assurance or anthropo-theological horizon,*” as Derrida says when discussing the messianic in Benjamin. “*This would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death – and radical evil – can come as a surprise at any moment. Possibilities that both open and can always interrupt history, or at least the ordinary course of history... The messianic exposes itself to absolute surprise [this would be the proper allegorical structure]... prepared for the best as for the worst, the one never coming without opening the possibility of the other. At issue there is ‘a general structure of experience.’ This messianic dimension does not depend upon any messianism, it follows no determinate revelation, it belongs properly to no Abrahamic religion...*” Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 56, 57. Benjamin’s “*theory of the Fall and of originary authenticity, the polarity between originary language and fallen language,*” are furthermore explicitly denounced by Derrida in the closing paragraphs of “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” (298) collected in the same volume.

drags history into it. An open or “amorphous fragment” (*OGTD*, 176), the text stands there as a ruin, a petrified body of the past no longer knowing to whom it belongs. It is the disinscription of identity, a disturbance of the unidentified corpse in the text that makes it unstable, split, dispossessed, surrounded. The dead haunt only because of a certain incompleteness, something undone that gives them no rest. Indeed, in Benjamin, corpses are never far off from allegory; one can only “enter the homeland of allegory” as a “corpse” (*OGTD*, 217). For allegory petrifies its object, vacates it and offers it to a reading that will never fulfill its demands. The world that is corpsed and emptied out of the past is the detonating charge and the precondition of the allegorical reading that attempts to restore its dismembered body in the structure of allegory but, in its attempt, only reveals its dead bones. For Benjamin, the allegorical mode is specifically associated with ruins:

When... history becomes part of the setting, *it does so in script*. The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history... is present in reality in the form of the ruin.²⁰⁸ In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. (177-78, emphasis added)

Ruins are the very taking place of history. But they are fragments that testify both to what is an absolute antiquity of the past, its unreachability and absolute remoteness – in other words, a severed link between sign and meaning,

²⁰⁸ Having just written that it “is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born” (*OGTD*, 167).

and this is precisely why the allegorical structure “is present in reality in the form of the ruin,” as Benjamin writes – and its absolute proximity.²⁰⁹ Ruins, like writing, are both the death certificate of the past and its only residue. The past then is present only in the form of dried ink – the ruin of the past that can only “stand to be recast” in an infinite sequence of misreadings unable to stop interrogating it. Allegory, for Benjamin, is an epitaph carved on the grave of historical wreckage. But it stands unfinished amidst the debris of the past that is always yet to come, yet to be decided. This is the power of allegory. Ronell writes: “for Walter Benjamin, ‘allegory seems to name a site of transformation in which anteriority itself stands to be recast, *reinscribed*, and alternate ‘futures’ opened...’ [It is] an inscriptive force capable of effecting mutation in anteriority and the future.” (*Stupidity*, 106). Allegorical moment is the moment that in its undecidability of reference will never stop deciding. As a fragment, it cannot be *at* a closure but will always reinstitute new protocols for reading that make any closure too precipitous. It is in the nature of the fragment to remain incomplete, unfinished. “It is the border of meaning,” as Frey writes in his essay on de Man. “The fragment ends without being at an end.” To integrate it is to disavow it. This disavowal, however, is constitutive of every reading that “avoids the undecidability of the fragment by assigning the abrupt ending a meaning. But the

²⁰⁹ This unreachable anteriority in the structure of the allegorical sign is precisely what de Man insists on in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” In the allegorical structure, he writes, “[w]e have... a relationship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance. But this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition...* of a previous sign *with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority*” (207, emphasis added). This is what de Man calls the “secularized” nature of allegory, the “painful knowledge” of an “authentically temporal destiny” (206) in which Romantic thought “finds its true voice” (207). The valorisation of the symbol and synthesis in the structure of the Romantic image is capsized here.

breaking point of the fragment has no meaning... It is discourse that does not come to an end, that does not reach the point [of reference] towards which it is underway” (“Undecidability,” *YFS*, 132). The allegorical structure as a fragment or ruin desediments meaning and opens it to a territorial loss; it prepares thus for a decision to be made the only way it can be made: in absolutely undecidable terrain.²¹⁰ This is what guarantees – but without guarantee – *an openness* of the to-come as always alter that infinitely transcends any decision but whose openness is kept precisely by deciding alone. Ronell continues: “*marking the disruption of historical narratives*, by a kind of caesura... allegory [is] that which enables alternative pasts to be reinscribed and other, virtual futures to be *redecided*. By introducing the logic of tampering and engineering, allegory evokes ‘an always virtual technology for altering anteriority and the future’” (*Stupidity*, 106-07, emphasis added). What de Man sees in Benjamin’s anatomisation of the allegorical structure is precisely this power of constantly agitated reinscription that, like all rhetoric, disrupts epistemological systems and prevents them from settling in other than ruins of their construction. Allegory is what mortifies cognition by revealing the nakedness of its limits. “There is no available code,” Miller writes, “by which the [allegorical] relationship can be made certain, masterable. It occurs, necessarily, but not in a predictable or rational way... In allegory anything can stand for anything. No ground whatever, subjective, divine, transcendent, nor even that of social convention, supports the

²¹⁰ We will return to Laclau and what he calls hegemony, “a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain” (60), in the last chapter. Cf. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* here, pp. 47-69, and also note 176 above, on the possible overlap between de Man’s notion of misreading and political strategy as developed by Laclau, which would ally de Man with radical democratic politics.

relationship” (*RDR*, 163).²¹¹ Allegory points thus to uncertainty and precipitousness inherent to all systems of judgment. It is a cipher of misreading that constitutes all cognitive understanding. For in allegory, writes Benjamin,

[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance... it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive... from the fact of their pointing to something else... (*OGTD*, 175)

The site of allegory is one of referential undecidability and fatality of judgment, but this is a properly historical site: “a destructive, but just verdict on the profane world.” This radical relativisation of the site where, in de Man’s words, “the relationship between the allegorical sign and its meaning (*signifié*) is not decreed by dogma” (“The Rhetoric,” 207), is also what politicises the site, makes its limits shred. It is what is necessary for judgement, worthy of the name, to begin – because judgement true to its name dispenses without measure, in the absence of criteria. Allegory that points only to the instability of its referential status seems to pronounce judgment on history as *what is always to be done*. This is its truly historical force that, by exposing the contingency of the historical, history that “stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience” (*OGTD*, 177), as Benjamin says, leaves its site open to

²¹¹ Allegorical disinscription is always of a “convention” that has hardened enough through forms of iterative social practices to forget its expiry date. *Allegory is what reminds all conventions of their substitutability*. What Ronell says of irony is just as valid for the allegorical. It governs “its particular moves on the destruction of limits,” she writes, “and advances an ‘ideology’ of Nietzschean rescindability that abounds in his thought on the experimental disposition and the necessity of the test as trial, the *Versuch*” (*Stupidity*, 124).

intervention of new signifying registers that are always performative. Allegory thus disturbs established politico-epistemic orders – no wonder de Man could not resist the power of its appeal. As long as the rapport between the sign and its meaning remains contingent, “not decreed by dogma,” it will always bend to the pressure of misreadings that can never stop relegitimizing the call for reading otherwise. History will always remain yet to be read.

If allegory relegitimizes the necessity of critical heritage by “constantly unfold[ing] in new and surprising ways” (*OGTD*, 183), the symbol decidedly does not:

We can be perfectly satisfied with the explanation that takes the one [the symbol] as a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated, and *which steadfastly remains itself*, while recognizing the other [allegory] as a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time. They stand in relation to each other as does the silent, great and mighty natural world of mountains and plants to the living progression of human history. (*OGTD*, 165, emphasis added)

For de Man, it is precisely this alliance of allegory with temporality and finitude, its constant devaluing of objects – which Benjamin had set in motion but sealed prematurely in the thick drapes of mourning and fallen subjectivity – that truly powers Romantic writing. Whereas the canonical reading – if one could still call it reading²¹² – has always privileged the symbolic as the constitutive

²¹² *Canonical reading is one that does not distrust its figures.* For de Man, one could say that reading always implicates a double bind. It is the Nietzschean forgetting or erasure of its figurative status through its metaphoricity – the very power of figures to disfigure themselves, to be worn out, and circulate as literal – and, hence, its own canonisation. But reading is also, and at the same time, self-reflexive, where the literal or referential is remembered *as rhetorical*. *This remembrance would be the dismembering flash of allegory in the dark of reading.* An

category of romantic thought, de Man, committed precisely to unhinging of this privilege as the organising interpretative category, to de-canonising reading, or mortifying it, in Benjamin's words, *in order to affirm it*, sees allegory as the originary – and always disintegrative – site where “early romantic literature finds its true voice.” (“The Rhetoric,” 207).²¹³ The “historical scheme” of valorisation has thus been capsized: “We are led, in conclusion, to a historical scheme that differs entirely from the customary picture. The dialectical relationship between subject and object [that is, the symbolic relationship] is no longer the central statement of romantic thought, but this dialectic is now located entirely in the temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs” (208).²¹⁴

interruption of the seductive continuity of figures. Reading, then, as Neil Hertz suggests in his essay “Lurid Figures,” would be both “the loss of clear distinctions” and “the discovery of irreducible difference.” It is “invariably entangling the reader in alternating apprehensions of difference and indifference” (*RDR*, 86).

²¹³ De Man here mobilises a few sources, in particular M. H. Abrams and Earl Wasserman, in order to account for the canonised reading that valorises the synthesising power of the romantic image, the “fundamental unity [of the symbol] that encompasses both mind and nature” (194). The relation between subject and object, mind and nature is one of continuity where ontological priority is given to nature as the source of the unifying power that is “implicit in an organic conception of language. So Abrams states: ‘The best Romantic meditations on a landscape, following Coleridge’s example, all manifest a transaction between subject and object in which the thought incorporates and makes explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene’” (197). At times, de Man writes, he even “makes it seem... as if the romantic theory of imagination did away with analogy altogether and that Coleridge in particular replaced it by a genuine working monism. ‘Nature is made thought and thought nature,’ he writes, ‘both by their sustained interaction and by their seamless metaphoric continuity’” (195). Both Coleridge, as “the great synthesizer,” and Wordsworth are enlisted to make the symbolic “the authentic pattern of romantic imagery” (197). The relationship between mind and nature becomes dialectic but, for de Man, an entirely negative or deflated one, without the third term that would close off the field in a positive mastery. The triumph of allegory is the triumph of negativity of self-knowledge. The self, now naked in its finitude, seeks refuge in symbolic mystifications. But, as de Man says, “this symbolic style will never be allowed to exist in serenity; *since it is a veil thrown over a light one no longer wishes to perceive, it will never be able to gain an entirely good poetic conscience*” (208, emphasis added), conscience that Hölderlin, Rousseau, and, for de Man, Wordsworth presumably have. One can see here, indeed, that a certain drama of subjectivity and even guilt is present in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” and has not yet entirely left de Man’s writing but, as suggested earlier, it is rather the displaced rhetorical structure – for de Man, the more archaic – that figures in the guise of the fractured subject. “Rhetoric,” as de Man will later say in *Allegories of Reading*, far from being “incompatible with selfhood... all too easily appears as the tool of the self” (173).

²¹⁴ The hierarchy has not just been reversed here but the allegorical machine is found to be at the origin – which, of course, scatters all origins.

De Man uses passages from Rousseau and Wordsworth to reveal an allegorical disturbance in the text of Romanticism and, hence, a failure of reading to monumentalize itself. What takes place here is de Man's disarticulation of limits that reading keeps exposed, open, and in question. A disarticulation that opens a sustained aggression on limits and that is the energizing accomplice of every reading. It is one of de Man's many reading lessons on reading that here puts in question, as it must, "the assumed predominance of the symbol as the outstanding characteristic of romantic diction" ("The Rhetoric," 198). In the Meillerie episode of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, he first points to the close affinity between the dramatic landscape and the inner state of turmoil of Julie and St. Preux. The "sensuous passion," he writes, "is conveyed by the contrasting effects of light and setting which give the passage its dramatic power. The analogism of the style and the sensuous intensity of the passion are closely related" (201) in a language of vitalism and spontaneity that masks an inside/outside disjunction. The Meillerie landscape "where the language fuses together the parallel movements of nature and passion" (203) is then both thematically and rhetorically played off against Julie's garden, the Elysium, emblematic of "the virtue associated with the figure of Julie" (201) and whose "natural aspect is the result of extreme artifice" (202) and abstraction, usually associated with the allegorical.²¹⁵ The language, furthermore is "purely figural,

²¹⁵ In *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge denounces allegory precisely for the mechanical nature of its *abstraction* compared to the vitalism and naturalness of the symbol. "An allegory," he writes, "is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal [the original meaning, that is] being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot... [They] are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter." Qtd. in Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1964), p. 16. Allegory here is truly *a corpse or a dead letter emptied of meaning*. De

not based on perception, less still on an experienced dialectic between nature and consciousness” (203). It is rather the aspect of abstraction – and death that inhabits it – of dead nature, of its theft by history or “artifice,” its coming apart in its wreckage that Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* sees piling up, that shapes Julie’s garden.²¹⁶ De Man continues: “Julie’s claim of domination and control over nature... may well be considered as the fitting emblem for a language that submits the outside world entirely to its own purposes, contrary to what happens in the Meillerie episode...” (203). The rhetorical conflict between the totalising language of the Meillerie landscape that is also one of vitalism, spontaneity and passion, and the disjunctive language of allegory in the Elysium, one of death, rational abstraction and virtue, figures thematically in the “moral contrast between these two worlds [that] epitomizes the dramatic conflict of the novel” (204). And it is the thematic reading, the very reading that produces what de Man in *Allegories of Reading* will call the “aberrant semantic structure” (162), that here establishes “the triumph” of allegory. The moral conflict, de Man writes, aligning all along Julie’s garden with “the Protestant allegorical tradition” of “hardship, toil, and virtue” (204) compared to the “wilderness,” the “sensuous

Man glosses parts of *The Statesman's Manual* at the outset of “The Rhetoric” when historically tracing what he calls “the nearly unanimous conviction that the origins of romanticism coincide with the beginnings of a predominantly symbolical diction” (200), the conviction that, of course, is subjected to degrees of demystification in the essay.

²¹⁶ The angel of History (Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*) for Benjamin is borne forward by the hurricane of dialectic but as if against its will. An image of sheer pathos, the angel, suspended in the storm of history, is turned mournfully back toward the origin it no longer perceives for the wreckage: “His face,” Benjamin writes, is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249, emphasis added.

passion,” and “temptation” (202) of the Meillerie landscape, is “ultimately resolved in the triumph of a controlled and lucid renunciation of the values associated with a cult of the moment, and this renunciation establishes the priority of an allegorical over a symbolic diction” (204). Allegory thus demystifies the symbolic stability of what is a fundamentally discontinuous temporal structure. It “corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny” (206) – that is, finitude – that reveals the previous condition to be one of error. It shows that “the term ‘symbol’ had in fact been substituted for that of ‘allegory’ in an act of ontological bad faith” (211). An act of self-mystification that now stands fully revealed as “a veil thrown over a light one no longer wishes to perceive...” (208), light that of course is the flash of allegory, the negative insight of finitude it reveals. However, the priority of allegorical attitude is determined here precisely by an iconic or thematic reading that de Man cautions against. But again, every reading cannot *not* misread; it is guilty of its own aberrant function without which no reading would be possible nor would there be anything like text. What appears here as a failure to differentiate between performative and constative or thematic levels of articulation is an instance of the inevitability of thematic violence or, in de Man’s idiom, of “tropological coercion” (*Allegories*, 208), implicit in every reading that systematically calls for its undoing.²¹⁷ De Man is bound to repeat the disfiguration allegory unmasks.

²¹⁷ The referential or iconic function is always imposed upon what is an arbitrary power of textual effects or effects of the general grammatical structure as the most general possibility of meaning, conceivable only in the suspension of reference: “Grammatical logic,” de Man writes, “can function only if its referential consequences are disregarded” (*Allegories*, 269). Reading then is always a violence, a coercive “application of an undetermined, general potential for meaning to a specific unit” (268). What is important here is “the indifference of the text,” its machine-like quality, “with regard to its referential meaning” (268). The text, however, can only reflect the

Every disarticulation “turns immediately into a new unifying principle.”²¹⁸ But this is the general condition of the possibility of reading. De Man: “Reading is a praxis that thematizes its own thesis of the impossibility of thematization and this makes it unavoidable, *though hardly legitimate*, for allegories to be interpreted in thematic terms” (*Allegories*, 209, emphasis added). In other words, de Man’s reading here reveals what it says it does: the priority of allegorical reading, but only just as much as it testifies precisely to the impossibility of allegorical reading ever being done. Every reading, including de Man’s – and especially de Man’s – will always “relapse into the figure it deconstructs” (*Allegories*, 275). Allegory will always end up a metaphor of its own unreadability.²¹⁹ Even the most self-reflexive allegorical reading that hollows out a system of meaning to uncover the forgotten skeletal remains of its rhetoricity “reintroduces the

error of reading precisely because “it is impossible for a statement not to connote a referential meaning...” (209), that is, for a reading not to be violent.

²¹⁸ In “Setzung and Übersetzung,” first published in *Diacritics* (1981) and later collected in *The Wild Card of Reading*, Rodolphe Gasché writes precisely on the unavoidability of thematic coercion and self-reflexivity in deconstructive readings: “Undoubtedly, as soon as the rhetorical structure of a poem or piece of literature has served to debunk the mystifications specific to the thematic level of the text, it turns immediately into a new unifying principle... Consequently, *to deconstruct* does not simply mean to escape the possibility of error and illusion distinctive of literature in general...” (23). Indeed, it is to retotalize reading in a new aberrant mode deconstruction has invalidated. Deconstruction still belongs to the referential mode of the text, but as a negative insight of this mode. Further down, Gasché continues: “The very rigour with which the rhetorical is opposed to the grammatical [the opposition and interference of the two orders, as will be shown, is what for de Man constitutes the text], and by means of which the thematic levels of a text are deconstructed, leads to a reassertion of values that are as deceptive as those deconstructed. Thus, for instance, the debunked referentiality of a text reappears as the self-referentiality of the deconstructive reading. The reason that this return cannot be prevented is that ‘the notion of a language entirely freed of referential constraints is properly inconceivable.’ Consequently, a ‘relapse from a rhetoric of figuration into a rhetoric of signification’ is inevitable...” (24). Rodolphe Gasché, *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard UP, 1998), pp. 11-48. “Setzung and Übersetzung,” will be cited separately with page references to this edition. *The Wild Card of Reading* hereafter cited as *The Wild Card*.

²¹⁹ Carol Jacobs, engaged in a dialectic between allegory and irony in de Man’s writing, points precisely to this compulsive disorder of the text unable to arrest the movement of its reversals: “Thus the movement of the literary text is restated and repeated on an increasingly conscious level by the critical reading that must, no less than irony, fail to overcome the inauthenticity of its own language. Things can never be left to rest at any point one reaches, for the whole process takes place at an unsettling speed” (“Allegories of Reading Paul de Man,” *RDR*, 118).

metaphorical [or thematic] model whose deconstruction had been the reason for its own elaboration. *It is therefore just as unreadable...*" (257, emphasis added). The movement of reading is one of repeated reversals that "persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do" (275), namely, to read. De Man's reading is thus not exempt from but is rather a dramatization of a radical failure to read.²²⁰ Jacobs even argues that de Man's reading is "at its most symbolic" when allegory is used to demystify "a former state of inauthenticity" (*RDR*, 116), to dispel an error in "authentic" understanding. "For, it is in such a rhetoric," he writes – and rhetoric here in the full sense of its disfigurative power that does not depend on the speaker²²¹ – rhetoric "that claims to dispense with the symbolic – where time as rupture has given way to the "now" of [authentic] conclusions, where other texts are read for a gain in knowledge rather than for a genuine recognition of their allegoricity – that de Man's diction is at its most 'symbolic'" (117). However, it is precisely the allegoricity of reading that cannot

²²⁰ "Shelley Disfigured" is an essay entirely structured round this particular *aporia* of reading. It pivots precisely on de Man's own failure to read. Having seemingly loosened Shelley's last, unfinished poem *The Triumph of Life* – truly a fragment here or ruin – from any referential or subjectival concerns, de Man argues toward the end of the essay that the drowned body of the poet "is present in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem" (120). What shapes the poem is the disruptive instance of the poet's death: "It may seem a freak of chance to have a text thus moulded by an actual occurrence, yet the reading of *The Triumph of Life* establishes that this mutilated textual model exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts" (120). Again, one could say, that a referential *hors-texte*, "an actual occurrence" that reinscribes disfiguration of the rhetoricity of the poem shapes its allegorical status, that is, the impossibility of its closure – hence, "the mutilated textual model," here literally cut off and wounded on one side, the edge of meaning open to endless disinscription and misreading, is taken as a general model of textuality, "a fracture that lies hidden in *all* texts." In other words, disfiguration here unmasks the figurative status of the text. But also, as Hertz suggests in "Lurid Figures," it is the fact that aberration or thematic violence, that de Man in this essay calls "a delusive act of figuration or forgetting" (121), is inescapable: "de Man has shown [in his reading of Shelley] how and why readers cannot help forcing their texts, but (or rather: *and*) this awareness in no way prevents him from forcing his text... he will produce... the alternative reading... But he will do so by means of a series of interpretations that culminate in another strange, delusive act of figuration" (*RDR*, 95).

²²¹ The implication being that even the rhetorically minded critic, and, indeed, none more so than de Man, cannot escape the aporetic nature of his own discourse. Rhetoric of his *text* disfigures the intended meaning of its writer.

be re-recognised without a rhetorical bad faith, without defacement and forgetting. On principle, Miller writes, “each reader must be blind to his or her own blindness. Attempts to recognize it or to formulate it would be futile gestures, merely compounding the error. This may be an area where it is better to keep silent, as de Man does” (*RDR*, 166). But de Man, indeed, says as much: “the form of a language [allegorical as well as ironic] that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity... *does not, however, make it into an authentic language*, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic” (“The Rhetoric,” 214, emphasis added). To know it is already to have given way to it. De Man’s authentic understanding, in other words, has never been anything but inauthentic from the very beginning. Now this statement fissures the entire first part of “The Rhetoric.” There is a double reading, a retractive rent in a text – there always is – that treads across it in reverse. As if to say that the historical tracing and redressing of the symbolic mystification that has taken place in the essay is indeed as inauthentic as the error it has attempted to set right.²²² De Man ungrounds here his own statement leaving it open to harassment of reading. It is now indexed precisely as a misreading open to the reversed engineering of allegory. This, one could say, is indeed the triumph of allegory as the

²²² De Man ironizes his own attempt at historical criticism here that manifests his suspicion of naïve genetic models of history as linear successive narrative patterns that share all the unwarranted mystifications of the symbol in their unfolding, as developed in the introductory chapter. For more on the ironization of allegory, Jacobs’ essay provides a lucid critical (mis)reading. I will only cite a part of an “Interview with Paul de Man” published in *Yale Review*, 1984, referenced in a footnote, that bears on the tension of irony and history and also sheds light perhaps on the necessity of de Man to place his own historical trajectory here under erasure. Irony, de Man says, “is for me something much more fundamental... One gets beyond problems of self-reflection, self-consciousness. For me, irony is not something one can historically locate, because what’s involved in irony is precisely the impossibility of a system of linear and coherent narrative. There is an inherent conflict or tension between irony on the one hand and history on the other, between irony on the one hand and self-consciousness on the other” (*RDR*, 120). It is the “authenticity” of the allegorical mode that is ironized but the irony of allegory is already constitutive of the trope itself whose reference is never rid of an other speaking.

impossibility of narrative closure that keeps the past forever undone. “For de Man,” as Miller will say, “this process,” the process whereby language cannot escape its overdetermination,

can never be closed off in the triumphant mastery of the text by itself in its revelation of the erroneous figures on which it is built. *In the act of deconstructing itself a text commits again another version of the error it denounces*, and this means that all texts are a potentially endless series of repetitions of the ‘same’ error only arbitrarily brought to closure. (RDR, 158, emphasis added)

What is exposed here is the wound of his own text as an allegory of unreadability or a misreading that catalogues its own lack in need of supplementing. Someone, as we have said, is always absent in allegory, a voice dead that is not there, and yet allegory insists on hearing its call and constantly registering its absence. This is the general condition of writing and de Man knows here that he is the victim of its incompleteness in a sequence of mortifying reversals or misreadings, none of them authentic, that constitute literary history. De Man’s reading here, after all, is not “symbolic,” as Jacobs judiciously contends, but a tension rather, stretched out and *always breaking*, between the symbolic and the allegorical, precisely insofar as it draws itself out towards an understanding of its own rhetoricity. And it is the frustration between the last two terms that produces reading.

Turning to Wordsworth, de Man first uncovers an allegorization of geographical site that in Romantic diction, according to Abrams, is ““a specific locality... present to the eye of the speaker”” (“The Rhetoric,” 205). The

referential specificity of the landscape is a symbolic anchor for the reading experience and the descriptive naturalism of poetic language. However, revealing a crack in it crudely welded for a rhetorical reading, de Man writes that even in “as geographically concrete a poet as Wordsworth, the significance of the locale can extend so far as to include a meaning that is no longer circumscribed by the literal horizon of a given place” (206). The specific becomes a catachresis, “a mere name whose geographical significance has become almost meaningless” (206). The allegorization of the site here truly comes to signify “the non-existence of what it presents” (Benjamin, *OGTD*, 233). De Man, citing Wordsworth from his “Essay upon Epitaphs” that he will revisit in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, writes: “The spirit of the answer [as to the whereabouts of the river] through the word might be a certain stream, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a Map, or from a real object in nature – these might have been the latter, but the spirit of the answer must have been, as inevitably – a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; – nothing less than infinity” (“The Rhetoric,” 206). The specific here, for Wordsworth, is anything but specific, it is “without bounds or dimensions,” an empty allegorical echo whose phenomenal nature is now immaterial and, to evoke Coleridge, “shapeless to boot.” Indeed, following Benjamin, the specific here could be “any object, any relationship [that] can mean absolutely anything else” (*OGTD*, 175). The allegorical, as Benjamin continues, is precisely “characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance.” The metaphorical object could “be a certain stream,” Wordsworth writes, perhaps “an image gathered from a Map,” or “a real object in nature,” but it is “nothing less than infinity” that puts a stop to referential

displacements. Allegory seems to detonate a closed structure wide open. It performs what de Man calls “the grammatization of rhetoric” (*Allegories*, 15), a deconstruction of all mimetic rhetorical structures “that use resemblance as a way to disguise differences...” (16). An allegorical charge reveals an indifferent, impersonal skeletal code – for Derrida, *arche-writing* – as the most general structure of inscription that constitutes the very possibility of signification. De Man: “By passing from a paradigmatic structure based on substitution, such as metaphor, to a syntagmatic structure based on contingent association... the mechanical, repetitive aspect of grammatical forms is shown to be operative...” (*Allegories*, 15). The indifference of the grammatical machine in which the detail truly is of no great importance – grammar can function only in the absence of referential detail – is the assertion of the negative knowledge that exposes the fallacy of valorised thematic structures. Grammatization of rhetoric, de Man writes, like allegory, “seems to reach a truth, albeit by the negative road of exposing an error, a false pretense.” (16). His reading of Wordsworth’s poem “A slumber did my spirit seal” in “The Rhetoric” dramatizes precisely the proleptic temporal structure of allegory where the state of error is “recovered from the mystification of a past now presented as being in error” (224). The poem, writes de Man, “describes the demystification as a temporal sequence: first there was error, then the death occurred, and now the eternal insight into the rocky bareness of the human predicament prevails... The difference has been spread out over a temporality... in which the conditions of error and of wisdom have become successive” (225). But wisdom here, as suggested earlier, is unwise insofar as it irresistibly performs what it denounces. Its reading remains “in the same state of

suspended ignorance” (*Allegories*, 19). This is perhaps the law of stupidity, of the machine, Ronell did not articulate: the fact that “it is forever impossible to read Reading” (77). Reading always fails to understand the implications of its own insight. De Man’s text blindly performs what it is helpless to avoid. It commits itself, as it must, to the exact error it demystifies. Miller writes:

what is bound to take place in each act of reading is another exemplification of the law of unreadability. The failure to read takes place inexorably within the text itself. The reader must reenact this failure in his or her own reading. *Getting it right always means being forced to reenact once more the necessity of getting it wrong.* Each reader must repeat the error the text denounces and then [or rather, all at once, I would say] commits again. (*ER*, 53, emphasis added)

It is impossible to read the aberrancy of metaphor without committing it.²²³ The more the text reveals its inauthenticity, the more it remembers, in other words, the rhetoricity of its figures, the more radically it forgets. Reading is thus helplessly generated by its own memory defect. The defacement of figures reading unmask only in compulsively repeating it. And there is no end to this

²²³ When revising one of his 1967 Gauss Lectures at Princeton, “Time and History in Wordsworth,” a few years later, de Man’s transition from questions of temporality to rhetoric and questions of reading can be traced in his opening remarks. And the lecture begins precisely with the inescapability of the “thematic element” in reading, the impossibility of ridding reading of the error. In his preparatory notes, reading gets tentatively defined as a certain “interference,” that will be fully articulated in *Allegories of Reading*. The notes proceed, as if arbitrarily, by breaking off: “reading... not declaim it – pure dramatic, vocal presence... not analyze it structurally... but *read*, which means that the thematic element remains taken into consideration... we look for the delicate area where the thematic, semantic field and the rhetorical structures begin to interfere with each other, begin to engage each other... they are not necessarily congruent, and it may be (it is, as a matter of fact, it is the case) that the thematic and the rhetorical structures are in conflict and that, in apparent complicity, they hide each other from sight... in truth, there are no poems that are not, at the limit, about this paradoxical and deceptive interplay between theme and figure; *the thematization is always the thematization of an act of rhetorical deceit by which what seems to be a theme, a statement, a truth-referent, has substituted itself for a figure.*” Paul de Man, “Time and History in Wordsworth,” in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 200, emphasis added.

obsessive de-facing of figures.²²⁴ The displacement of reading is permanent which is why with allegory, says de Man, we “end up in a mood of negative assurance that is highly productive of critical discourse” (*Allegories*, 16). What reading resists is reading itself or, what amounts to the same thing, the formalization of its limits. And this, for de Man, is precisely what allegory archives in its structure: a permanent aberrancy of reading. In Ronell’s words, “allegory pleasures otherness; to the extent that it organises itself around difference and absence, it never comes back to itself...” (*Stupidity*, 108). It points to the deflection of all language and, in that it does, also to otherness, a certain “muteness,” Hamacher says, but that is also what “attracts all speaking” (*RDR*, 200).

In allegory, de Man finds thus a structure of temporization constitutive of language in general that derails all mimesis. Like irony, it is a structure of permanent disruption that “leads to no synthesis” (“The Rhetoric,” 220).²²⁵ Allegory is linked to irony, de Man continues, in “their common demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide” (222). What both modes disrupt, and make possible, is the

²²⁴ Miller: “Deconstruction reaffirms at the same time as it puts in question, which means that the whole chain of positings and putting in question remains unerased to the end, however many new layers of the allegorical narrative are superposed on the original figure or system of figures: *‘the allegory does not erase the figure’*” (*RDR*, 161, emphasis added).

²²⁵ Irony, to which the latter part of de Man’s essay is dedicated, and to which de Man returns in *Aesthetic Ideology* with an essay ironically (be)headed: “The Concept of Irony” – as irony, de Man shows, is precisely always of the concept – will not form as extensive an engagement as allegory for several reasons, economy being one of them. It is in the allegorical structure that rhetoricity first finds its proper site that also strongly bears on the political, the opening of its field, that will be under lens in the final chapter. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, insofar as allegory blindly compounds the error it dispels, irony appears as the irreversible truth of its own mode of displacement. There can be no allegory without irony. Irony then, indeed, runs like a secret narrative throughout, as the allegorical tip, so to speak, and a permanent dysfunction of relieving reading of its impossibility.

compulsive repetition of identity, compulsive because impossible. They both reveal what is essentially an allegorical distance within the moment of identity, a dysfunctional gap of time that makes possible precisely what it disables at the start. The symbolic is only a delayed allegorical effect that can only be rehabilitated as a nostalgic loss, an auto-affective asymptote of the text and this, de Man reminds us, is “the true voice” of romantic writing:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self [or, in other words, from borrowing the stability of natural forms to hide from finitude allegory structurally implies] which is now fully, though painfully recognized as a non-self. It is this painful knowledge that we perceive at the moments when early romantic literature finds its true voice. (“The Rhetoric,” 207)

The symbolic then is a mystification, “a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge” (208), as de Man writes, but one that the text compulsively keeps erecting. This impossibility of authentic mastery of textual guilt, of the text that would have “an entirely good poetic conscience” (208),²²⁶ although fully developed in *Allegories of Reading*, is already at work

²²⁶ What is important to note here is the radical eviction of psychologism and subjectivism that will take place in *Allegories of Reading* but trails unspoken, as suggested earlier, already in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” For guilt, for de Man, is structurally inscribed in the text as its failure to read; it is not the subject but the text that carries the guilt of its own unreadability. Insofar as the text compulsively misreads it only ever compounds the guilt it tries to excuse. As de Man will say of Rousseau’s *Confessions*: “Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default... there is a lot more guilt around [at the end of the text] than we had at the start... No excuse can ever hope to catch up with such proliferation of guilt” (*Allegories*, 299). But the other side here is equally valid, as “there can never be enough guilt around to match the

here: “The dialectical play between the two modes [that is, precisely the imbricative structure of allegorical and ironic mode, earlier indicated], as well as their common interplay with mystified forms of language (such as symbolic or mimetic representation), *which it is not in their power to eradicate*, make up what is called literary history” (“The Rhetoric,” 226, emphasis added). The ironic emptying of allegorical renunciation of error is what compels the text to a renewed rigour of allegorical reading. This is precisely the referential function the text cannot eradicate, although its status is in question in every reading. Metaphor, de Man writes, is always “shown to be based on the misleading assumption of identity, but the utterance of this negative insight is itself a new metaphor that engenders its own semantic correlative, its own proper meaning...” (*Allegories*, 240). De Man’s text then, like any other, not only says what it does not mean but means what it *cannot* say.

Allegory, as a deconstruction of figure, reduces “to the rigours of grammar... rhetorical mystifications” (*Allegories*, 17). But the rhetorization of grammar, as we have seen, is as unpreventable as the grammatization of rhetoric. In fact, for de Man, the text is produced precisely as an interference of the two codes:

We have moved closer and closer to the “definition” of *text*... The system of relationships that generates the text and that functions independently of its referential meaning is its grammar... We call a *text* any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective: as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and a

text-machine’s infinite power to excuse” (299). There can be no parity or “good conscience” in the text and it is the disjunction between the constative and the performative levels of the text that produce guilt. Guilt then would be only the “aberrant metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning” (299).

figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence. The “definition” of the text also states the impossibility of its existence and prefigures the allegorical narratives of this impossibility. (*Allegories*, 268, 270)

The double bind that constitutes the structure of reading, its impossibility or its pulling apart by the pressure of asymmetric demands of grammar and rhetoric, cannot be squared because the error always gets cloned, reencrypted in the new series of readings. This is what Miller calls “a built-in fatality of language” (*RDR*, 157-58). It is not only “the positing that contains the deconstruction” but deconstruction, as he writes further down, “is at the same time a committing again of the error” (158). Aberrancy remains irreducible. This also implies the radically impersonal performative function of the text.

The Machine

*Each “text” is a machine with multiple reading heads
for other texts.*

— Jacques Derrida, “Living On: Border Lines”

There is something machinistic, death-like²²⁷ in this pre-programmed systematicity of textual aberrancy reading cannot escape. What reading performs

²²⁷ The machine is death. “Not because we risk death playing with machines, but because the origin of machines is the relation to death,” writes Geoffrey Bennington. “Machines *repeat*, and repetition means danger – compulsion and death” (“Aberrations: de Man (and) the Machine,” *RDR*, 214).

is independent of the authority of the subject. When considering the status of autobiographical writing in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the law of unreadability is shown to be neither voluntary nor involuntary but radically formal: "The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar" (*Allegories*, 298). And "to the extent that [every] text is grammatical, it is a logical code or a machine... there can be no agrammatical texts..." (268). Grammar is an automated self-disconnecting zeroing of meaning coded in the text-machine that occurs every time one makes it mean – except that one does not make it mean but is every time meant by it. The sheer senseless fact of language – senseless because possible only if referential meaning is suspended – that performs *anyway* or rather outperforms the reader's attempt to hold it back. It is what wounds the text permanently or what, in Gasché's words, determines "a text as the narration of its impossibility to become a whole" ("Setzung and Übersetzung," 44). The text, he continues, "as an agonistic field opposing the machine of its grammar to the particular meanings that come to restrict the text's generality... leads to the notion that a text is the narrative (the temporal and metonymic display) of its impossible closure, that is to say, of the impossibility of what one calls (metaphorically) a 'self-reflexive' text" (44). There trails in the text the possibility of being otherwise that keeps it wounded,²²⁸ a register of what is not meant, an unregister of reading that allegory narrates which spells out the

²²⁸ This damage is the permanent condition of reading. It is also that textual excess or its default that reading cannot take account of – but perhaps must count on – that destabilises every reading while precisely making it forever possible.

very condition of its politics. The task of reading is to idiomatize what reading does not and cannot register, a stutter that interrupts it. This means that reading must remain plural and open to what it cannot say, to that other that remains mute in it but is also that which compels reading, without which reading would stop, exhaust its disturbances in a negation of its futures that is also a negation of politics. But this machine of unreadability that thus performs (in) the absence of the subject is also what maintains an unrelieved openness of its definition in an infinite alterity of (mis)readings that constitute it. The text-machine is indeed “both the life and the death, the life-death of anything like a subject.” Bennington writes:

As supplement to the *logos*, it [the machine] gives rise to facility only by opening up the possibility of uncontrollable mimetic doubling and degradation and generates further apotropaic supplements to control and police that threat. The machine is thus both text and text-productive; conversely, the text is a machine and produces further machines... machine is an allegory of writing and/or reading that... simultaneously dispossess[es] the “subject” of writing/reading and set[s] up the drive to signature as a means of legislating for that “subject” and its “legitimacy” against such dispossession. The text as machine is thus both the life and the death, the life-death of anything like a subject, be that subject determined as “author,” or “reader,” “inventor” or “user.” (*RDR*, 213)

No reading without the machine that makes it misread, no politics without reading that keeps its future open to disturbances. The machine-text spins the weave of its misreadings in order to foil the threat of the failure it repeats. The threads of its web can only multiply in “further apotropaic supplements,” in what

it secretes to prevent. Reading carries within itself the seed of its own degradation that is the ruin of the subject in its signatures. The iterability as the necessary technical structure of the machine is also a progressive erasure of the subject. It accelerates the more one signs to legitimate its absence. The machine both performs and protects against the loss of the subject it structurally implies. And there can be no end to what is an abortive mnemonic of reading that itself produces the amnesia of origins it attempts to remember. The other name, however, for this amnesic evil is finitude. The perverse possibility of *hypomnēsis*, “of uncontrollable mimetic doubling and degradation” (*RDR*, 213), that the machine opens up within history is encoded in its very beginning.²²⁹ History is given over to this possibility – is this very possibility – from the start. No history without the machine, the technicity of deferral, destructive of the very memory it keeps. And in *Allegories of Reading*, de Man becomes increasingly attentive to its performances. The machine, he writes, is an “anti-grav,”

the anamorphosis of a form detached from meaning and capable of taking on any structure whatever, yet entirely ruthless in its inability to modify its own structural design for non-structural reasons. The machine is like the grammar of the text when it is isolated from its rhetoric, the merely formal element without which no text can be generated. There can be no use of language which is not, within a certain perspective thus radically formal, i.e. mechanical, no matter how

²²⁹ Cf. Derrida here. In particular *Dissemination* for his reading of Plato’s *anamnēsis* where the recollection of presence, from the beginning, is always already infected by its technical supplement, by *hypomnēsis* or writing that constitutes the very structuring of the *mnesic* activity. Without signs, that defer the very thing they offer, memory would not be able to recall what is not present. It needs signs to recollect, precisely the signs, however, that produce and multiply its own amnesia. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes of history and the supplement: “From the first departure from nature, the play of history – as supplementarity – carries within itself the principle of its own degradation, of the supplementary degradation, of the degradation of degradation. *The acceleration, the precipitation of perversion within history, is implied from the very start by the historical perversion itself*” (179, emphasis added).

deeply this aspect may be concealed by aesthetic, formalistic delusions.
(294)

What the machine maintains for de Man is the radical aberrancy of reference – that is, precisely the alterity of the text. What is most inhuman in language, the indifference of its “semi-automatic grammatical patterns” (*Allegories*, 16), is what preserves the possibility of what is most human: the rigorous openness to questioning. The machine clears the “aesthetic delusions” of rhetoric, the foreclosures, and unwittingly opens onto the ethical where one decides without criteria, that is to say, always aberrantly. But it is in the aberrancy of judgement – its essential nervousness – that something like ethics is possible. It is the fact of judgement *not knowing* that makes it possible to judge. This has nothing to do with cognition then. In fact, it is the interference of the machine in the cognitive that enables judgment.²³⁰ And, as Bennington writes, insofar as “this machinelike performance is, in its disruption of cognition (in the

²³⁰ Decision taken in the abyss of knowledge, one that is mad, split, indeed undecidable, is the only possible decision. One only ever decides where one does not know. For de Man, as for Lyotard, the prescriptive categories can never be – and it is decisive that they remain so, if anything like politics is to be possible – can never be reduced to the denotative categories of the epistemic order, referential statements in de Man’s terminology (“No bridge,” he writes, “as metaphor or as representation, can ever connect the natural realm of essences with the textual realm of forms and values.” *Allegories*, 100). What is right is only ever, can only be, *necessary*, never true. The ethical demand is an irresistible one, not a verifiable one. And insofar as it is and remains owed to the other, *it is irreducible to referential orders*. It is, indeed, what interrupts these orders and opens them up to the exigency of reinscription. This is why, in his chapter on allegory, de Man will say that “[a]llegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems” (*Allegories*, 206). For Lyotard, the impossibility of a justified decision is irreducible. If there is “to be” justice, its “being” cannot be ontologically determined: “No one can say what the being of justice is. That, at least, seems certain... Here we are in a relation that is proper to prescriptives, because there is no test for the just whereas there is for the true... There is no state of affairs that corresponds... and it is proper to prescriptives not to make commensurate their discourse with a reality, since the ‘reality’ they speak of *is still to be*... With the ontological axe, one always cuts a divide between that which conforms to being and that which does not, by calling ‘just’ that which does.” Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (published as part of *Theory and History of Literature* series, vol. 20, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1985), p. 66, emphasis added.

guise of referential dimension of descriptive or cognitive sentences), definitive of what de Man means by ‘text,’ and thereby what ‘reading’ might possibly mean...” (*RDR*, 215-16), judgment becomes impossible without text or rhetorical reading that makes it unwise, lost for reason, and, in this loss, harassed by its other that cannot be sublated in the judgement but remains interminably an unwanted silence within it that keeps its criteria open to question.²³¹ Allegory, in this sense, is the unrelieved delirium of every judgement because it unmasters it, reveals the patterns of its contingency.

The text then, as de Man sees it, is essentially resistant. There is something in it that refuses phenomenalization, a materiality that does not cooperate with the order it seeks to enforce.²³² And like a machine, this

²³¹ Allegory would have to remain silent if it were to escape the rhetorization – that is, the metaphorization, the levelling out – of its own disturbances that it *cannot* escape. This does not mean that it is not at work. It is a walled up sickness in the rhetoric of every text, a programmed virus that shuts down the system every time it connects, without permission or even knowledge of the user.

²³² So in “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” it is the machine, the empty “materiality of inscription” without any reference to meaning that disconnects the closure of Hegel’s aesthetic project. The articulation of the entire system in Hegel is dependent on the passage through the aesthetics where the absolute Spirit will have exhausted its “objective” representations – in what is law, politics, history – and finally *recollected* itself in “the sensory appearance of the idea,” that for Hegel is the definition of the beautiful. Aesthetics in Hegel is thus predicated – and it is structurally critical that it be so – on the symbolic conception of art (cf. above, note 198). But, asks de Man, “[w]here is it, in the Hegelian system, that it can be said that the intellect, the mind, or the idea leaves a material trace upon the world, and how does this sensory appearance take place?” (*AI*, 101). And it is memorization (*Gedächtnis*), distinguished from recollection (*Erinnerung*), that enables the transition. Memorization that is emptied of images and can be associated with learning by rote: “We can learn by heart only when all meaning is forgotten and words read as if they were mere list of names. ‘It is well known,’ says Hegel, ‘that one knows a text by heart [or by rote] only when one no longer associates any meaning with the words; in reciting what one thus knows by heart one necessarily drops all accentuation.’” (101-02). And this is where the system depending on the stability of the aesthetic gets undone. De Man: “Memory, for Hegel, is the learning by rote of *names*... and it can therefore not be separated from notation, the inscription, or the writing down of these names. In order to remember, one is forced to write down what one is likely to forget. The idea, in other words, makes its sensory appearance, in Hegel, as the material inscription of names. Thought is entirely dependant on a mental faculty that is mechanical through and through... The synthesis between name and thing that characterizes memory is an ‘empty link’ [constitutive of the sign] and thus entirely unlike the mutual complementarity and interpenetration of form and content that characterizes symbolic art” (102). Art then becomes precisely what destabilises the category of the aesthetic in Hegel as the loss of the symbolic. It disarticulates the symbolic synthesis that would end the destitution of

resistance is blind and implacable in its recurrence. It produces effects it cannot account for and nothing

in the blind aberrant machine of archiperformance [performance of grammar here that has no access to any kind of referential legitimation] allows us the comfortable pathos of attributing any purpose or meaning to it: the machine has no will but generates what we call the will – before any specification as will to power, to truth, or to anything else, this “will” strives for and against its blind “origin” in the aberrant activity or passivity that opens the ethical. (Bennington, *RDR*, 220-21)

The perfunctory function of grammar, “its impersonal precision”

(*Allegories*, 16), performs without subjectival motives or intentions, without “the will,” and, indeed, in spite of it. It is inhuman. This senseless machine, the inhuman in language, what de Man calls “the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning” (*Allegories*, 299) – in other words, what in language is unanalysable and radically heterogeneous to sense – is what disrupts the cognitive patterns and, by revealing their contingency, opens the aberrancy – that is, the politics – of reading.

The machine can never escape the negative valorisation of the inhuman, the death and dissolution of the subject: “Traditional literary studies habitually use the language of machines in a negative way, deploring the mechanical and

the Spirit in self-reflection. And since “the only activity of the intellect to occur as sensory appearance of an idea” is as *unaesthetic* as the mechanicity of memorization by rote, then such “memory is a truth of which the aesthetic is the defensive, ideological, and censored translation [emphasis added]. In order to have memory one has to be able to forget remembrance and reach the machinelike exteriority, the outward turn... the *techné* of writing” (102). For there to be closure then, in the sensory manifestation of an idea, “consciousness... has to become like the machine of mechanical memory, a representation which is in fact merely an inscription or a system of notation [grammar, in terms of *Allegories of Reading*]” which is precisely the breach that makes closure impossible, “leav[ing] the interiorization of experience forever behind” (103).

the technical as the death of the values attached to life, form, inspiration, and so on. At best, a ‘technical’ use of concepts is accorded an uneasy neutrality, without ever being allowed to become the heart of the matter” (Bennington, *RDR*, 214). Indeed, even readers sympathetic to de Man are unwilling to see the cogs at the dead centre of his writing staging with indifference the scenes of performative disruptions and engaging the language-machine for its repetitive motion, but rather opt for pathos and renunciation, saving de Man precisely by resuscitating the corpse at the centre.²³³ Norris is thus only too quick to register the “still” human in de Man. Already in the opening pages “one thing must be clear:”

But if one thing is clear, it is the fact that de Man’s language is still haunted by ideas of sacrifice, loss, and renunciation – that he has not so much broken with this habit of thinking as attempted to generalize it far beyond the limits of any straightforward thematic understanding. Mizumura makes this point in her essay when she remarks that ‘he continues to speak about renunciation even in his later works when the word itself has disappeared from his text...’ Any reading of de Man that ignores this dimension will accept too readily his own rhetoric of impersonal rigor and detachment. (*The Critique*, xix)

The “still” human in de Man makes him more human(e), intimate even if unacceptable, forgivable at least. The machine cannot be forgiven because it cannot be blamed. Forgiveness always exacerbates the blame it attempts to

²³³ This is nothing but a deep-seated prejudice of humanism and liberal individualism that cannot see the subject as an effect of language, taken in its most general sense of organising structures. The human with all its psychological and motivational concerns is not given prior to language, it is language that constitutes and articulates these very concerns. There can be no subject without language that articulates its lack. It is the always already being-there in language that is the subject.

exonerate. It points fingers and requires renunciation in order to forgive. It is never given graciously, unconditionally. But the machine is radically outside any criteria of accountability or forgiveness. It is unassimilable to the order of forgiveness. The valorisation continues. Saving de Man here is saving our ability to forgive him by ridding his text of the machine and testifying instead to the moments of “lived experience” in his writing.²³⁴ In the closing paragraphs of her essay, Mizumura writes:

The relentlessness with which de Man’s text seems to have left behind ‘the wealth of lived experience’ – including ‘the wealth of lived experience’ of reading – gives us the impression that we are forced in reading him to become increasingly deprived of what seems most dear to us. And yet de Man actually had never left “the wealth of lived experience.” For, in pointing to the necessity of renouncing it, he is in fact acknowledging the existence of temptation, and is thus already speaking about it, albeit in a negative manner. The impression of deprivation comes closer, nonetheless, to grasping the quintessence of de Man than a placid acceptance of the extreme ascesis that reigns in his work. (“Renunciation,” *YFS*, 96-97)

Pathos of reference or “deprivation” recoups the human behind the

²³⁴ Forgiveness introduces here a new set of questions that for the sake of economy and architecture will not be exhaustively treated. However, the entire tracery of its effects given in Derrida’s *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* is implied here. Forgiveness that forgives only what is impossible to excuse, the unforgivable, what one cannot and should not forgive: “there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible.” Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 32-33. There is thus something inhuman, ex-orbitant, of which forgiveness partakes. However, it is not this forgiveness, but rather one that “must rest on *human possibility*” (37), one that measures guilt and is capable of forgiving only what it can punish that is in question here. One must find excuses for de Man, one must find what will have abolished the very call for forgiveness, to finally forgive him. Cf. also de Man’s last chapter in *Allegories of Reading*, “Excuses (*Confessions*),” for the impasse of excuses that only excuse by compounding the guilt they seem to exonerate. Which is why the text, he writes towards the end, “can never stop apologizing for the suppression of guilt that it performs” (300).

writing in order to make it readable, to retotalize the text.²³⁵ What is inhuman, in other words, is reduced to a continuous gathering of the human subject in reading. Language has never stopped speaking about man in its silences. Renunciation of “lived experience,” rhetorical reading demands, only acknowledges the fact that it still precedes and orients the effects of its own thinning-out in reading. But reading is radical negativity. Perhaps not even a negativity insofar as it, however radical, shelters, in the reserves of the repressed, precisely what it cancels out. The subject here is never truly lost in reading, only displaced, held in the negative fund of misreadings and by reading its “deprivation,” we come to master its loss. But reading, allegory, is not a working through, it is what unworks absolutely and then more. It never points to anything but the sheer taking place of language. Language is the subject in making that is undone the moment it states itself. There can be no residue of pathos or renunciation in rhetorical reading precisely because, for de Man, this would be another metaphor that “reclaims a measure of authority for the self” (*Allegories*, 175). In other words, a metaphor that does not account for the aberrant conditions of its own production but reinscribes performativity, the deconstructed subject, back within the referential system of cognition that saves the shatters of the text in the very error it denounces. This is what Miller implies. De Man, he

²³⁵ “If *to read* is to understand a text and if *to understand* means thematically, aesthetically, or conceptually to totalize a text, then the production of insights into the mechanics of the text will certainly render that text... unreadable” (Gasché, “Setzung and Übersetzung,” 23). It is precisely the reverse temptation that is in question in Mizumura’s reading of de Man: “the gesture and the temptation of totalization” (22). A reading that covers the tracks of its own deconstruction in a repossession of disarticulated subjectivity. This counter-pull of rhetorical reading, as we have noted, is always at work, but de Man’s rigour, “the extreme ascesis that reigns in his work,” although unable to stop the retotalizing thrust of reading, is what points to the negative labour, the unwork, of its deconstruction. In other words, it is rhetorically – not fully as this would close the text in assurance of its negative insights – self-conscious.

writes, “clearly recognizes... that the self is a metaphor, moreover a metaphor without particular authority. Especially does the self not have authority in that attractive form of a return of the self beyond its deconstruction, as the wielder of the instrument of deconstruction.” (*RDR*, 166, emphasis added). In *Allegories*, de Man continues: “The same strategy occurs... for example, in Heidegger, who also locates the deconstruction of the self as substance in a hermeneutic activity which, in its turn, becomes the ground of a recovery of selfhood as the springboard of futurity...” (175). The self here is only ever a question of *topos*, of place and displacement, not of radical loss. The “extreme askesis” of de Man’s writing is a necessary element in a rhetorically self-conscious reading and not an arbitrary, misconceived distraction from human concerns, as implied by Norris and Mizumura, that could and should be overlooked in favour of “lived experience” or rehabilitated human subject. De Man wants to read precisely what reading destroys. His reading itself is a performance of its own undoing, a rhetorically self-conscious reading. Hence, the impersonal rigour, the machine-detachment of his own writing: “The first person pronoun is used rarely and sparingly by de Man... This goes along with an austere rigor that makes his essays sometimes sound as if they were written by some impersonal intelligence or by language itself, not by someone to whom the laws of blindness and the impossibility of reading also apply, as they do to the rest of us” (Miller, *RDR*, 165).

The inhuman in de Man is the negative cognition of the text that tirelessly repeats the failure to account for its own rhetoricity. It is a machine that performs indifferently and, like a machine, testifies to the impossibility of reading its own

performance. Performance here cannot be read precisely because it is what disrupts reading.²³⁶ It points to the unread in reading, to the unreasonable – both that which is without reason and for which there is no reason. De Man would say, to that which is not governed by the “necessary link” of analogical or metaphoric structures but by “chance” and contiguity “in the purely relational metonymic contact” (*Allegories*, 14), that de Man associates with the generative power of grammar. It is “determined not by human will but by impersonal laws of language over which we have no control and which we cannot even clearly understand, since our understanding always contains a residue of misunderstanding” (Miller, *RDR*, 167). But insofar as the machine disconnects cognitive structures, insofar as it disables reading, it is also what enables the text to assume the properties of the event. The eventfulness of the text, that is the possibility of disinscription that threatens the modes of its receptivity precisely by liberating them, by making possible what they make impossible, is dependent on this very disconnection. The disruption of our modes of understanding happens only by way of the silences they impose. The machine is what activates the silences in the text. It is what endlessly calls for the event, as the trauma of the unexplained, and keeps open the possibility of disruption.²³⁷

²³⁶ De Man will repeat this in *Aesthetic Ideology*, in the opening remarks of his lecture on Kant and Schiller: “[I]t doesn’t mean that the performative function of language will then as such be accepted or admitted. It will always be reinscribed within a cognitive system, it will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition again. That relapse, however, is not the same as a reversal. Because this is in its turn open to a critical discourse similar to the one that has taken one from the notion of trope to that of the performative. So, it is not a return to the notion of trope and to the notion of cognition,” what could be said to motivate the movement of Mizumura’s reading, but now, continues de Man, “it is equally balanced between both, and equally poised between both, and as such is not a reversal...” (133). There can be no full recovery of cognition here that would also be the closure of the text.

²³⁷ Derrida in *Given Time*: “The text, then... is a machine for provoking events: First of all, the event of the text that is there, like a narrative offering itself or holding itself open to reading...”

In the machine, the text then is equipped with what outmatches its potential to be read but this is what keeps its reading uninterrupted. There is always infinitely more text or a promise of text that reading will keep breaking. “This complication is characteristic for all deconstructive discourse: the deconstruction states the fallacy of reference in a necessarily referential mode. There is no escape from this...” (*Allegories*, 125). However, de Man continues, “the reversal from denial to assertion implicit in deconstructive discourse *never reaches the symmetrical counterpart of what it denies... The negative thrust of the deconstruction remains unimpaired*” (125-26, emphasis added). Not a reversal then but an asymmetrical interference of the performative as the machine and the cognitive structure of the text that produces excess of textuality which compels reading. A residue of traces that are also a promise and a call to which one *must* respond – there is a certain to-come, Derrida would say, of the text in the text. In other words, what is promised in deconstruction is evermore deconstruction, or what amounts to the same thing, evermore reading. “The play of the text, as Gasché says, “is without end:”

The irreducible performative constitutive of the text is manifest in the ‘quantitative economy of loss,’ in the textual thermodynamics governed by a ‘debilitating entropy’ of the linguistic structure of the text, ‘in which grammar and figure, statement and speech act do not converge,’ or which is the same thing, in the production of textual excess. It is visible as surplus or as deficiency.” (“*Setzung und Übersetzung*,” 45)

Reading then, far from being an economy – in terms of return or

but also and consequently, from there, in the order of the opened possibility and of the aleatory, an event pregnant with other events...” (96).

repatriation of the self in Romanticism, or an exile plagued by homesickness in the pit of time hollowed out by allegory in Benjamin – is what in de Man, like a gift, parts without return, it parts partitioning itself always slightly more (or less) than it can account for. Not an economy but an uneconomy that suspends the ratio. Reading simply does not pay off. It goes off empty-handed, broke, with only a negative potential to accrue its losses. It speaks of an aborted merger in the text and remains interminably overdrawn. Reading is like a permanently negative credit report. It moves only on credit that it busts up every time it borrows, which is why it is continually required to contend with the question of its own credibility.²³⁸

Compulsively aberrant, the machine-text overruns the circles of reciprocity that it forces open in the very name of their historicity. Gasché here continues on the performative as a disjunction in the text that powers its temporality: “The performative constitutive of texts as displaced totalities of paired but incompatible functions, far from permitting texts to close upon themselves (from becoming selves, reflexive and autonomous entities) temporalizes, historicizes them. The performative, then, is characterized by its power of dissociation” (“Setzung and Übersetzung,” 45). Generative of misreading, this does not invest in reading the task of stabilizing its negative

²³⁸ Text is “a body on credit,” as Derrida writes in *Given Time*. “Everything is an act of faith, phenomenon of credit or credence, of belief and conventional authority... which perhaps says something essential about what here links literature to belief, to credit and thus to capital, to economy and thus to politics. Authority is constituted by accreditation, both in the sense of legitimation as effect of belief or credulity, and of bank credit... One might draw from this all the consequences regarding the institution of a body and a corpus and regarding the phenomena of canonization that follow... There would be no problem of the canon if this whole institution were *natural*” (97). The fact that it is not, however, is a chance for politics, for reading other(wise), for perfectibility – perfectibility that is not governed here by teleology of progress, but by the irruption of always other than expected, the im-possible.

economy. If reading is a gift then reading is *for nothing* in the economy of sense that would still animate it. A certain idleness or unemployability generated by the system as a counter-productive inefficiency it cannot assimilate. Not a reconstitution but a deconstitution of associative levels that govern the topology of reading. The dissociative power of the performative then is not a task of the hermeneutic of reading but precisely an unmasterable disturbance of cognition at loss that disempowers it by opting for the radically untranslatable.²³⁹ There is something acutely estranging in reading for de Man that is not only untrackable by cognition but that shortwires its entire conceptual grid while at the same time offering it to thought. This untrackable static that engages thought is what de Man's reading compulsively stalks. De Man, Ronell writes, "locates himself at the dead and dumb center of signification... gambling his insight on that which fails to make sense..." (*Stupidity*, 111). Reading what refuses itself to reading or what reading *qua* reading destroys, not "the meaning or the value," as he writes in *The Resistance to Theory*, "but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment" (7).²⁴⁰ It is a reading of a

²³⁹ That which disrupts cognitive structures and archetypes at all points along the line. It is important, Lyotard would say, indeed it is "necessary," he says, "to posit the existence of a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation..." (*The Postmodern Condition*, 61). What is radically untranslatable here is also *the differend*, what incurs debt (*but debt beyond economy*), what is owed to the one deprived of standing *in whose name there is politics*. Politics is not only the name that has none but, if there is any, it is *in* the name of who/what has none.

²⁴⁰ Modalities that, as we have already noted, reading cannot account for. Reading "can never hope to know the process of its own production (the only thing worth knowing)," says de Man (*Allegories*, 300). This productivity is what at the same time zeroes out any surplus of insight, any positivity, when the books are closed and maintains the negative thrust of reading that re-opens them – always something fraudulent and deceptive with reading, an entry forgotten, not accounted for, that keeps the books open. What reading resists, in Gasché's words, is "the effort to aesthetically reify its referential structures and to transform them into phenomena, into sensibly appendable commodities. By phenomenizing the production process, the process itself is stripped of what is proper to it, made into meaning and understanding" (*The Wild Card*, 133). However, he continues, phenomenization itself "is also an illusion made possible by language" (133), by its rhetoric, to be precise, that enables aestheticisation of texts. But rhetoric is always the forgotten entry, a disfigured figure of identity in general.

certain paralysis of reading, a “mere reading” Gasché calls it, in that it

has silenced the power of the eye to hear as much as its power to see. For mere reading is not to proceed anymore in analogy to the plastic arts and music.²⁴¹ Mere reading is a silent reading in that it silences all intuitive, perceptual, sensual approaches to the written text. As if echoing Saint Augustin’s denunciation of the seductions of the senses, mere reading practices radical asceticism. It is deliberately mute, and deliberately blind. (*The Wild Card*, 121)

A reading of the disaster of reading, of the dumb machine, blind and mute, that wrecks it and where what is estranged, what awaits in reading is not a negative ontology or an exteriority of the other that is unreadable and without idiom, offering itself in withdrawal of reading, but precisely offering itself as a devastation of reading, the clearing and the openness to (of) what comes. And what comes, comes before, indeed in spite of, is older than, all cognition and always comes beyond recognition. The *it happens* one does not see come. And given that theory, Gasché continues, “– from *thea*, sight, contemplation – is in essence a perceptual approach, it comes, therefore, as no surprise that, from the outset, de Man defines *mere reading* as a reading ‘prior to any theory’” (*The Wild Card*, 121). Hence, the apathetic rigour of rhetorical reading, its “dumb formalism,” in Ronell’s words (*Stupidity*, 114), that stuns cognition in its loss of sight or rather stalls its tracking devices by opening up the initial *thaumazein*

²⁴¹ Indeed, in *The Resistance to Theory*, de Man writes of the cancelled aesthetic moment of reading and instead of reading “by analogy with plastic arts and with music, we now have to recognize the necessity of a non-perceptual, linguistic moment in painting and music, and learn to read pictures rather than to *imagine* meaning” (10).

every time one reads.²⁴²

What is at stake in de Man's "nonphenomenal reading" is a retracing of the half-erased figurality of the text that systematically unforgets the unwarranted aesthetic levelling of its alterity.²⁴³ This is the aesthetico-ideological function of reading that, one could say, de-politicises the text. The machinal in reading, for de Man, is not only a recovery of a certain originary technics of cognition but also, and importantly, what points to a latency of structural possibilities as its profound resource. What enables the self-reflexive closure of the text is the forgetting of its rhetoricity that uproots it, a certain stupor of reading. But it is precisely rhetoricity, the radically generative potential of the text, that will have always saved the noise of other worlds in the very still of reading. That the text is the natural power haunt of otherness is what Gasché prefers to overlook. And the

²⁴² Ronell: "To assert that de Man's work stages a contemporary rendition of *thaumazein*, taking a step back in bewilderment, allows for the possibility that it both discloses critical involvement with the question of that which baffles absolutely and comes from elsewhere, from a place of exteriority, and is itself implicated in the autistic (the undisrupted singular dimension) of such a repertory" (*Stupidity*, 112). For Gasché, however, it is precisely the stepping back in *thaumazein* from the immediate or the authority of "philosophical difference" that is subjected to systematic levelling out at the hands of de Man: "A rhetorical reading, for de Man, is, indeed, a reading that seeks the transgression of philosophical difference in an indifference that is so radical as to become entirely indifferent – devoid of *all* relation – to the philosophical" (*The Wild Card*, 51-52).

²⁴³ In his essay "In-difference to Philosophy," first published in *Reading de Man Reading* (1989) and reprinted later in *The Wild Card of Reading*, Gasché is writing on the purely formal aspect of de Man's reading that traces the blind matter of language – the *texte brut* in every text that is prior to any relation – that punctuates and reformats cognitive content. This reading is for Gasché "a nonphenomenal reading:" "A linguistic or rhetorical reading, as de Man understands it, is essentially a nonphenomenal reading... [It] is, thus, first, a nonperceptual or nonaesthetic reading. It centers not on images and tropes but on what de Man calls at one point the 'para-figural...' For de Man, however, the phenomenal [what is accessible to the senses] 'implies the possibility of a determined totalization, of a contour' as well... It captures the meaning of texts not only as tangible figures but also as totalizing figures. A nonphenomenal reading, consequently, is a reading that reaches beyond the imposition... of unity upon the text. It extends beyond the totalizing function of figures or tropes... It is an approach to the *texte brut*, to the text before it starts to signify... a reading 'by rote,' as he also calls it, that is, a reading that proceeds mechanically and unthinkingly" (*The Wild Card*, 53, 55). It is also a noncognitive reading then or, in other words, *the resistance to reading that is integral to any text*. "In-difference to Philosophy" cited hereafter separately as "In-difference" with all subsequent page references to this edition.

pressure its to-come exerts on reading, as we shall see in the following chapter, is what enables political effects.

The fact that reading – and, in extension, language – resists aestheticisation, that “its very nature is the resistance to all meaningful and propositional commodification” (*The Wild Card*, 128), is what, for Gasché, makes de Man’s reading ultimately unassimilable to the order of intelligibility. If reading is “encountered only where all understanding breaks off, that is, where all aestheticization has been successfully checked, the encounter itself, with its unintelligibility, escapes intelligibility as well. It is marked by an irreducibly opaque moment, *a moment of pragmatism or the empirical*” (146, emphasis added) that cannot be accounted for, except by deflection, that is to say, by default or surplus of cognition that remains irreducibly misaligned or out of touch.²⁴⁴ De Man’s reading then is an encounter with what is radically heterogeneous to the cognitive agencies that always advance by a certain blockage of paths. This is the order of identity – and always also exclusion by one and the same stroke of difference. Identity presupposes this blockage by reducing – but never truly mastering – its field of synchronicity and associative overlaps to a binary logic that blocks the right of passage to the outside of structural poles, or rather cancels out the allegorical resources of the text, the reserve and the threat of its alterity, that is also the possibility of its future(s). But there is blockage only insofar and precisely because language is radically unstable. What the machine does is precisely unblock the passage opening the

²⁴⁴ More will be said of this radical pragmaticity in de Man – that is not strictly empirical, as we shall see – and its resistance to totalizing structures in the next chapter, as it opens onto the political. It is what Derrida calls “materiality without matter” that resists “every possible reappropriation.” Cf. below, note 272. It is what, in de Man, fractures the aesthetic.

terms to allegorical valences that the structure of identity pushes into latency, opening them to textuality in other words. Reading is not natural, but only because it is not does it give us to read. And the gift here is the possibility of the other. It is as if de Man by opening the book were promising the future or leaving the future open. For Gasché, however, de Man's reading

seeks to locate in a text a point of unintelligibility, associated with figural undecidability, a point, moreover, that sends shockwaves throughout the whole text with the effect that on none of its possible strata any certitude whatsoever is allowed to occur. No unfolding takes place either. By contrast, there is only a repetitive reverberation of the text's figural undecidability... mere reading destroys, by dint of a reactivation of the rhetorical, all the sediments of meaning... to exhibit language in its pristine state of unintelligibility, before all epistemological and aesthetic commodification. Reading is the negative process in which the text is restored, as it were, to the bare facticity of language... (*The Wild Card*, 146, 147-48)

But this un-reading or what amounts to an unforgetting of the radical potential of language that in its arbitrariness and naïve state of unrelatedness, in its pragmaticity, repeatedly cuts, with a precision and obstinacy of a machine, what it stitches, what it effects or makes possible, is, for Gasché, a pathological stutter destined by "lack of generative power" to "endlessly repeating the punctuality of [its] lone meaninglessness" ("In-Difference," 82). This autism of de Man's reading is due to the fact that the blind and dumb rhetoricity, "the formal materiality" that punctuates the text and "makes figuration as such possible," but that is unrelated to reading, "cannot be made part of the text" (83). It cannot be read, in other words, without committing itself to the aberrancy of

reading, its metaphoric reversion which makes reading itself the recurring object of reading, the empty reference of its own incompleteness. Indeed, if there is reading, it requires the forgetting of its rhetoricity: "... the possibility of a meaningful text requires that the material and formal cause of the text recede into oblivion. Such constituting forgetting is achieved by imposing the authority of sense and meaning on the material and formal linguistic event and on the senseless power of positing language" (84). But this circularity is a commitment to a certain resistance of reading that structurally unbinds it from the circle to incompleteness, a commitment to what separates reading permanently from itself *and demands that it answer, and answer now, for the absence of what speaks in it. Nothing in it is as yet constituted but precisely this exigency.* Reading is in the reserve of reading and there is a stake of responsibility in this "indifferent" and "idiosyncratic" reading that Gasché does not recognise. "In contrast to philosophy," as he writes in the closing paragraphs of his essay, "de Man's readings do not attempt to make any difference. In this sense they are 'different,' idiosyncratic to a point where, by making no point, they will have made their point – so singular as to make no difference but, perhaps, in that total apathy a formidable challenge to philosophical difference" ("In-Difference," 90). On the contrary, it is a difference that makes all the difference. Unreadable, it gives us to read. And in its obsessive repetition of the failure to speak of it, de Man's writing is committed to the gift of reading. Furthermore, *apathos*, as we have said, is not only structurally implied in de Man's reading but points to a certain irreducible resistance of reading that dissipates it by ruining its work, that guarantees its future by destroying all guarantees. For Gasché, however, it is the work of

philosophical text that can no longer be guaranteed as it goes bust under the pressures of rhetorical reading: “The difficulty in question first arises from a systematic estrangement to which the philosophical texts are subjected in rhetorical reading” (“In-difference,” 57). Gasché’s anxiety is one of limits, one of territories and failed topographies, as suggested in the opening chapters. Philosophy, he writes, “hinges entirely on its sharp distinctions of levels and conceptual differences” (51), precisely what de Man systematically disarticulates. What Gasché finds “baffling” is de Man’s arbitrary incision in philosophical texts where, “from a traditional philosophical perspective, it is altogether incomprehensible why certain passages [in de Man’s reading of Kant and Hegel in *Aesthetic Ideology*, for instance] to which de Man refers in his readings are supposed to be ‘baffling,’ ‘surprising,’ ‘bewildering,’ or ‘startling,’ and thus taken as key passages” (57). As if rhetorical reading were determined by a point of departure. Rhetorical reading begins before one departs and *whether one does or not*. It is what makes departure possible. “The philosopher,” he continues further down, “has also difficulty realizing why certain philosophical movements are said to occur ‘somewhat abruptly’ or why the introduction of certain specific statements is judged ‘unexpected’ or ‘sudden’” (57). Sudden disconnections, abrupt movements, unaccounted stresses that all throw “the philosopher” of guard, “the traditional philosophical perspective” is divested of sight, indeed castrated, can no longer see, no longer “look through,” the medium has turned opaque, seductive – one can no longer not look, hence misleading and abusive – much like rhetoric.²⁴⁵ But if every reading is a misreading then every

²⁴⁵ In *Stupidity*, Ronell comments on Gasché’s anxiety here: “Gasché finds incomprehensible

point of entry is misleading, a missed entry. If the center has deflected from the text then every passage is a key passage that does not fit the lock. Every nook across the body of the text is sensitized with disinscriptive energies. Wherever one begins, one will have been aroused to look – even Gasché is. The text then is opened there where it appears most shut, and it is opened by its corners or margins that for de Man are abortive of the entire system. The idiocy and the radical materiality of the signifier, in its absolute exteriority, disrupts the conceptual “architecture” of the work, any work; the body, like the machine, has no meaning, it is what un-works any work. And philosophy carries as much – or rather more – textual guilt for unwarranted aesthetic ruses, where metaphoric placeholders are constantly used for what is an irreducible ignorance that founds it.²⁴⁶ The philosopher, in fact, is “flooded:”

... the philosophically trained reader is certainly flooded when he or she realises that the rhetorical reading of philosophical texts not only completely disregards the literal meaning of texts but proceeds by means of a *total levelling* of everything constitutive of the text’s specificity. The nonphenomenal reading collapses all differences that

what de Man finds incomprehensible. Hence their differences. One aspect of the uncomprehending emerges on the side of sharpness (Gasché doesn’t understand what’s not to understand)... De Man introduces certain passages, Gasché insists, as though he is stumped by them. Where there is relation and the index of coherency, de Man opts for absolutely singular and disconnects. His resolve keeps him bound to the anxiety of unrelieved ignorance, a condition stipulated by language to the extent that it is hounded by referentiality” (110, 111). Gasché is too much of a philosopher, the one who “connects,” to *not* understand de Man.

²⁴⁶ In *Aesthetic Ideology*, for instance, speaking of Schiller’s psychological misappropriations of Kant’s sublime, de Man will comment towards the end of the lecture on *hypotyposis* in Kant, “the difficulty of rendering, by means of sensory elements, purely intellectual concepts. And the particular necessity which philosophy has, to take its terminology not from purely intellectual concepts but from material, sensory elements, which it then uses metaphorically, and frequently forgets that it does so. So that when philosophy speaks of the *ground* of being, or says that something *follows*, or that something *depends* on something else, it is really using physical terms, it is really using metaphors, and it forgets that it does so. Since [Derrida’s] the ‘Mythologie blanche,’ we have all become aware of that and we would never do this nasty thing again!” (153), says de Man.

serve as barriers between concepts and discursive levels, as well as between the premises and conclusions of the separate steps of argumentation, differences on which the whole argument and its movements are dependent. Such a reading pays no respect to the architecture of a work of philosophy or to the differences between different works in the corpus of a philosopher. (“In-difference,” 58)

De Man disrespects what one must not by debordering distinctions and narrative taxonomies. He is too frivolous. But the diachronic structure of narrative progression in a philosophical text is a rhetorization of an undecidable grammatic pattern. A metaphoric ruse without authority. The text gazes finally with no semantic depth and if it has any, it is an attempt to aestheticize what is absolutely arbitrary – and, therefore, radically disintegrative. Precisely what de Man in “The Concept of Irony,” following Schlegel, refers to as *reelle Sprache*, the authentic language as “the language of madness, the language of error, and the language of stupidity” (*AI*, 181). There is no border that can be instituted and protected against this because, like “a terrorist weapon,” it attacks from within (*Allegories*, x).

Deconstruction, at the hands of de Man, seems thus to pirouette outside the margins of its legitimacy as a serious philosophical discourse, turning into a tropological stunt that “shows little or no concern about philosophy” (“In-difference,” 89). It aborts any connective attempt, even its own, as it is constantly re-called to account by its own disconnections. It can thus make no claim without denial. In fact, as we have seen, it makes no difference at all: “... it is the unheard-of attempt to think an indifference that makes no difference at all. A rhetorical reading, for de Man, is, indeed, a reading that seeks the transgression

of philosophical difference in an indifference that is so radical as to become entirely indifferent – devoid of *all* relation – to the philosophical” (51-52).

However, what is indifferent to all relation, the machine, the randomness of linguistic matter that ruins epistemic calculative grids, is also what in reading resists absolutely. Whereas Gasché labours to expose its ultimate indifference, the linguistic material *event* becomes a point of possible resistance, of that which interrupts every economy and, like madness, irrupts into the scene of reason to open the closed circles of tropologic and symbolic exchange.

De Man’s thought, for Gasché, is aligned with formalism and apathy that “achieves a singularity so radical that it defies all communication, all mediation, and thus, all universality... It is thus impossible that it could seek imitation, let alone become an integrating factor in a humanistically inspired *paideia*” (*The Wild Card*, 112). If it does anything, it is to force “mere reading into running in place and into the monotonous repetition that language (is) language (is) language (is). . .” (233). But the obsession of reading is what escapes its mastery. It *repeats* compulsively because it attempts to master the failure of reading, the default in its economy. It is infinite resistance to everything that would close the books. It un-reads whenever and wherever it reads. What Gasché seems to repeat and resediment, however, is that history that will have forgotten de Man, and that, precisely in order to be able to read, to make sense of its own texts. This history is well known; it is prompted by unsavoury dangers of collusion that would wreck the policed borders between the serious, the philosophical, what deconstruction in the end merits, and the play and technicity of rhetoric, of

doubling that must be contained like madness, not realising that philosophy is already taken hostage by the very thing it believes to master.

De Man's reading is like a wrongly put, reversed tag question, that, having contracted an allegorical bug, constantly seeks disaffirmation, shadowing each sentence and repeated with an automaticity of a reflex. It is a reactive failure in the nervous system repossessed each time anew with the possibility of understanding that remains a head of it or lagging behind. And everyone has grown tired of it. What it names, however, is an imperative to understand. But if there is one it is because of its impossibility, because finally "understanding does not come, but remains lost to us" (Ronell, *Stupidity*, 161). Incomplete, allegory reiterates this imperative, *giving* us to understand, its only injunction being:

◆ *Keep watch over absent meaning.*

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

Chapter Five

Politics de trop

What is to be done? . . . it is ineluctable to invent a world, instead of being subjected to one, or dreaming of another. Invention is always without model and without warranty. But indeed that implies facing up to turmoil, anxiety, even disarray. Where certainties come apart, there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match.

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*

The excessive demand to keep watch over absent meaning is one that cleaves de Man's work. It is devastating. It ruins the work, unworks it, makes it split from the start, makes it accountable. This patience disables judgement in a recoil of undecidability where one will have always been too quick. In this demand, that is a demand of language, the subject will have found his anonymity, no longer an agency of social and political change but of his own undoing. But the work is called upon to be only under the threat of its alterity, the absentee that disidentifies the work is alone what makes it possible. And does one not owe oneself, everything and then more, to this absentee? Is not the political the coming of its interruption?

Any given text, as we have seen, exists on account of the disruption of its own unity. There is something in it unrelated, machinelike, that unbinds, that will have not only escaped but severed all relations and yet, precisely in this coming apart, in this breach of all relation, will have opened the possibility of another. This opening up by coming apart is what de Man calls reading. And the disintegrative force of reading, one that in disrupting its hermeneutic keeps watch over its future, is allegory.²⁴⁷ Allegory tears open the memory of unrelatedness in reading. In other words, it frees up the passage between sign and meaning, blocked by referential systems, as we shall see. It articulates a concern, the distress of reading held hostage by a radical demand that calls for an interminable critique of its politico-epistemic inheritance. The fact that “the relationship between the allegorical sign and its meaning (*signifié*) is not decreed by dogma” (“The Rhetoric,” 207), to reiterate de Man, means that the relays of reading are never assured in advance, other than by a “sleight of hand,” but

²⁴⁷ Allegory, as we know, commits itself to fragments, or rather to certain blanks at their borders. This is what Blanchot writes of the fragment: “Fragments are written as unfinished separations. Their incompleteness, their insufficiency, the disappointment at work in them, is their aimless drift, the indication that, neither unifiable nor consistent, they accommodate a certain array of marks – the marks with which thought... represents the furtive groupings that fictively open and close the absence of totality... For fragments, destined partly to the blank that separates them, find in this gap not what ends them, but what prolongs them... causing them to persist on account of their incompleteness. And thus are they always ready to let themselves be worked upon... instead of remaining as fallen utterances, left aside, the secret void of mystery which no elaboration could ever fill.” Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: Nebraska UP, 1995), p. 58. Hereafter cited as *WD*. For de Man, every text is a fragment or a separation that undersigns its own conditions of unreadability. What resists in the fragment – the blank at the end that incompletes it – is what makes it infinitely malleable without ever approaching it. *This resistance is also what makes the text accountable*. Something left aside for which the text cannot account is what makes it infinitely responsible. In the preface to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, for instance, de Man will come to stress precisely “the fragmentary aspect of the whole,” where the essays in the volume “do not evolve in a manner that easily allows for dialectical progression, or ultimately, for historical totalization. *Rather it seems that they always start again from scratch and that their conclusions fail to add up to anything*” (viii, emphasis added), as if to reiterate that the failure of reading is the responsibility of *right* reading whose task is always to be done, for right reading is precisely the one that is never done as it continuously fragments its own attempt at aesthetic closures.

called to account and continually redecided. Allegory points to a past that is always other, and, therefore, one that we will never have finished reading. Reading it, for de Man, is always rewriting it but this is the very exigency of reading. If history is not guaranteed by language, as allegory implies, then it is always hounded by reading that keeps watch over its absent archives of meaning. In other words, reference, our addiction to it, is submitted to a programmatic and continual pressure of unlearning. The passage of discontinuity allegory supervises is a site of intervention. The empty space of detachment that reserves the possibility of what Blanchot calls “the ethics of revolt,” that is to say, the exigency of the political that “is opposed to all classical notions of the Sovereign Good, and to all moral or immoral claims, for it constructs, protects, maintains an empty place, letting another history come to us” (*WD*, 138). It is in the reserve of reference then, one that is irreducible for de Man, that “another history” comes to us. This is where the possibility of reinscription of anteriority is kept and with it the possibility of thinking anything like politics or the future of politics. What never stops in reading is the reinscription of the past – the disturbance of the dead called to account. But that one is never done with the past, one could say, guarantees the coming of the future that is always plural, and, thus, without guarantee. And this may be the challenge of de Man to politics: the fact that it arrives in plural, there is always *too much* of it, politics de trop.

De Man’s machine then is reactive, mobilised by aesthetic levelling and totalization of difference. By reactivating difference the machine does not paralyse but rather enables the political as much as it requires its rethinking because it introduces a persistent threat of dismemberment that binds the political

to a certain unfulfilled agitation. The text one reads never fully integrates itself into the practice of reading, *it is never one*, but is sustained by a continuous demand to uproot itself, to continually disrupt and surpass the formation of an overbearing unity. In this sense the text is the allegory of the political. It sustains itself through an idea of coming apart in dispersion, of the continuous political demand of going outside of identity that has been established. There is thus a dissatisfaction in the text with what it is and politics, indeed, is no different, it implies the same laceration of identity: “When one says politics,” Lyotard responds in an interview, “one always insists that there is something to institute. There is no politics if there is not at the very centre of society... a questioning of *existing* institutions [a decentring then and a coming apart], a project to improve them, to make them more just. This means that all politics implies the prescription of doing *something else than what is*” (*Just Gaming*, 23, emphasis added). This does not only bind the political to the prescriptive that surpasses the given and demands inventiveness but also implies that living in a world does not exhaust the political, the political begins rather with *imagining alternatives to the world*. It is essentially linked to “the possibility of relating things differently” (42), says Lyotard, that is to say, to a certain narrative interruption that does not found a politics but renews the pressure against its foundations. For politics precisely cannot be founded and is the place and exposure of this very impossibility. A demand then to contest all projects of its completion insofar as it protects an empty place for an always other history unwritten by the existing orders of meaning. This is where the political begins, at the emptiness of its limit, an allegorical fragment, where the question of the political is raised.

The text, for de Man, is dangerous *precisely because it is innocent*, anonymous and radically unrelated – like a machine. Its pragmaticity, “the material and formal base” of the text, as Gasché says, “is absolutely indifferent to what comes before it and what follows it. It is irreducibly singular, destitute of all possible relations” (“In-difference,” 84). What comes to be a meaning then, the applicability of the text, is only an attempt to master the innocence of its passive refusal. There is thus a withdrawal in the text, an estrangement that holds itself and escapes systems of meaning. And politics would be an approach on the basis of this estrangement, a distance that must be preserved if there is to be politics. It is precisely because the text is absolutely innocent that it remains politically active. It is the passivity of its refusal, the inability of its integration, that calls into question the instituted order of meaning.²⁴⁸ The text is thus an unpower of contestation charged against all identity. And in this sense is it political. The “stony gaze” at the bottom of the text, “entirely devoid of any substitutive exchange, of any negotiated economy,” the moment, de Man says, of its “a-pathos, or apathy, as the complete loss of the symbolic” that “entertains no notion of reference or semiosis” is the absolute anonymity of the text that punctuates the identification and authority of meaning.²⁴⁹ But the machine in the

²⁴⁸ This inability is unrelieved because reading, as we have seen, only ever reiterates a deflection of the text it deconstructs. It is what Gasché calls the “negative cognition” of reading, “an invitation to endlessly and in an infinite process debunk the totalizations of knowledge, *its own included*” (“Setzung und Übersetzung,” 27, emphasis added). Something unworkable will have resisted.

²⁴⁹ This is the gaze de Man finds in Kant’s vision of the sublime. The gaze that in “Kant’s Materialism” disarticulates the aesthetic ruse of transcendental closure that in *The Critique of Judgment* would make cognition and act cohere and thus guarantee the totality of the philosophical system. The aesthetic category would be the articulation of the unity and closure of epistemology and ethics opened up by pure and practical reason. It is what regulates the entire system, and the sublime, as the manifestation of the unrepresentable, is the hinge – as it manifests what is beyond the limits of experience, it is precisely what makes “the junction of cognition with morality possible,” as de Man writes in the essay (*AI*, 125). Quoting Kant on the sublime, he

text that disengages any attempt to master its passivity is also what puts mastery in play as a repetition of aberrancy that keeps open the empty place of the political.

It is thus the estrangement in the text, this rock-bottom of the text, that opens a hole in the instituted semantic order precisely by revealing the illicit make-up of its aesthetic and conceptual constructs. For in its passivity, the machine-text is not coextensive with any applicability of its use. It is rather what undercuts all motivating relation that would legitimate its applicability. It stands radically foreign to the effects it produces. In other words, its significance is always yet to come. “Like the legal text,” Gasché writes,

all texts are distinguished by ‘an unavoidable estrangement’ between the generality of their functioning and the particularity of their meaning, says de Man. This estrangement is one between ‘the system of relationships that generates the text and that functions independently of its referential meaning’ (i.e., its grammar) and its referentiality; between the text as ‘a logical code or machine’ and considerations of its applicability or interpretability.” (“*Setzung and Übersetzung*,” 44)

continues: “If we call sublime the sight of a star-studded sky, we must not base this judgment on a notion of the stars as worlds inhabited by rational beings... We must instead consider the sky as we see it, as a wide vault that contains everything. This is the only way to conceive of the sublime as the source of pure aesthetic judgment. The same is true of the sea: we must not look upon the ocean with the enriching knowledge that makes us conceive it as, for example, the vast habitat of nautical animals, or as the water supply... or even as an element that keeps continents apart... All these are teleological judgements. Instead, one must see the ocean as poets do, as the eye seems to perceive it... as a transparent mirror when it is at peace... and when it is in motion, as an abyss that threatens to swallow everything” (126). What de Man sees here is not an articulation of closure but a certain radical and absolute formalism “that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis” (128), a passivity of vision without any perceptive depth or insight that resists totalization and breaks open the system: “No mind, no inside,” he writes, “to correspond to an outside, can be found in Kant’s scene. To the extent that any mind or judgment are present at all, they are in error... the eye, left to itself, entirely ignores understanding... The passage is entirely devoid of any substitutive exchange, of any negotiated economy, between nature and mind... The dynamics of the sublime mark the moment when the infinite is frozen into the materiality of stone, when no pathos, anxiety, or sympathy is conceivable; it is, indeed... the complete loss of the symbolic” (127).

This estrangement, a certain sundering in the text, is also the battleground where the nature of the political relation is to be continually redecided. When writing on Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and the problematic relation between the general and the singular that for de Man constitutes any text,²⁵⁰ he will come to countersign an interruption of relation as the very possibility of the political. And he will come to sign this in spite of himself, answer to a call of another in secret, and by pretending not to, by not wanting to, he still will have signed, or rather (his) writing that is no longer his, the text, will have opened the possibility of signing on.²⁵¹ And is not the text precisely an opening up and a possibility of countersignature in which the text infinitely reserves itself while making possible a response-ability without end that constitutes its very historicity? This is the generosity of writing. An invitation extended to the to-come of an always *other* possibility of reading. For responsibility without end is nothing but a finitude as depropriation of all ends. This is where the political begins, in the possibility of misreading. *Not* to be able to respond, to shed limits of a discourse that is the very injunction of reading – *it is in this injunction that totality will have seen itself be exceeded* – to be excluded from playing the game, as Lyotard says, is

²⁵⁰ In the previous chapter, we have seen that it is precisely the interference of “a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system” and “the referential moment” that “subverts the grammatical code” to which the text owes its existence (*Allegories*, 268, 270). This *aporia*, however, is the very specificity of “the legal text.” All texts then, in a sense, articulate the aporetic nature of juridico-ethical imperatives.

²⁵¹ A countersignature that comes in form of a disclaimer he writes in the chapter, as if to carry no risk of unreasonable misappropriations, kidnappings and sense abductions: “We are not here concerned with the technically political significance of this text,” he writes, “still less with an evaluation of the political and ethical praxis that can be derived from it. Our reading merely tries to define the rhetorical patterns that organize the distribution and the movement of the key terms – while contending that questions of valorization can be relevantly considered only after the rhetorical status of the text has been clarified” (*Allegories*, 258). But it is precisely “the rhetorical patterns that organize the distribution and the movement of the key terms,” as we know from de Man, that carry the traces of misappropriations – ideological and political. It is impossible *not* to be concerned, *not* to claim what de Man disclaims.

absolute injustice: “Absolute injustice would occur if the pragmatics of obligation, that is, *the possibility of continuing to play the game of the just, were excluded*. That is what is unjust. Not the opposite of just, but that which prohibits that the question of the just and the unjust be raised” (*Just Gaming*, 66-67, emphasis added). The raising of the question here is countersigning the text in what de Man calls misreading that cannot be closed off. Signature, reading, the just is not finished until countersigned in a response that incompletes it. Derrida on Joyce and countersignature: “[O]n the one hand, we must write, we must sign, we must bring about new events with untranslatable marks – and this is the frantic call, the distress of a signature that is asking for a *yes* from the other, the pleading injunction for a counter-signature; but on the other hand, the singular novelty of any other *yes*, of any other signature, finds itself already programophoned in the Joycean corpus.”²⁵² Everything appears to hinge on the possibility of “playing the game,” that is one of response, indeed of *dis-course* or even *dis-corpus*, of mutilated body, to use de Man’s terminology, that is never far from the political. It solicits an opening *making possible and being made possible* by the call of the other as disaster/chance event. What is “programophoned” in the corpus, Derrida says, is not only the fact that the unforeseeable, an-other *yes* of reading, is being suspended, in advance cut off, so to speak, but also that the possibility of countersigning is always already “programophoned,” in and by the text. The text, that is the body, “the Joycean corpus,” precipitates, in advance, its own shattering. It is this very shattering. It is

²⁵² Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” in *Acts of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 282-83.

a “yes from the other” and “a counter-signature” before it is itself. Everything, Derrida continues, addressing the Joyce scholarship,

is integrable in the “this is my body” of the corpus. But from another point of view, this hyper-mnesic interiorization [the competence of Joyce scholarship, that is] *can never be closed upon itself*. For reasons connected with the structure of the corpus, the project and the signature, there can be no assurance of any principle of truth and legitimacy, so you also have the feeling, given that nothing new can take you by surprise *from the inside*, that something might eventually happen to you *from an unforeseeable outside*. And you have guests. (*Acts*, 283, emphasis added)

But before any identity of a host inside, protected by the “domestic interiority” of its laws and competence (283), *before any signature*, there must be already a guest, the possibility of some other, coming from an elsewhere of outside already countersigning, putting domestic laws and their legitimacy in question. The structure of identity of a body of writing preprograms its coming apart, its mutilation and dismemberment; this is the condition of its possibility – it lives on by allowing the possibility of its ruination alone. The possibility of response then, of an *other* yes, of signing on, that is also, and always, a disastrous unravelling of totality – the beginning of the political – is inscribed in the *adventure*, the to-come, of reading.

We must sign on, continue to play the game.

Space Engineers

De Man's text, as we have seen, opens a relation of estrangement in the political. A relation that must be outside belonging, that gathers those who in coming together only seem to affirm the dispersal of the collective being, but in dispersal a desire for solidarity. A gathering of others that can always interrupt the gathering. Of others who cannot completely say "we" because of a certain unbinding and tremor in the structure of belonging. Being together, in fact, is never total, and is possible only as an affirmation of a *diastem* that sustains the relation. What constitutes collectiveness, its affirmation, is precisely the possibility of reserve in the in-common of the political bond, that which in its mad exposure to the call of the other threatens to tear the very fabric of collective being. But this would be the most profound affirmation of solidarity. Without this exposure there would be no common relation, one would not belong. There is something dissimilar, dissymmetry and curvature of social space, in political relation that requires another thought of the political. This "decisive relationship" is what constitutes "the political entity" here precisely by always exposing it to the risk of deconstitution because political relation, as de Man insists, is not essential but "contingent," constituted not by *what (it) is*, in other words, but precisely by *what (it) is not yet*:

The decisive relationship is no longer between constituting and constituted elements... The very concept of a political entity, be it a State, a class or a person... changes: an entity can be called political, not because it is collective (constituted by a plurality of similar units), but precisely because it is not, because it sets up relationships with other

entities on a non-constitutive basis. The encounter between one political unit and another is not a generalization in which a structure is extended on the basis of a principle of similarity (or of a proximity considered as similarity) to include both under its common aegis... the relationships of the units among each other are not stated in terms of affinities, analogies, common properties or any other principle of metaphorical exchange. They depend instead on the ability of one entity, regardless of similarities, to keep the relationship to another contingent... In other words, the structure postulates the necessary existence of radical estrangement between political entities. (*Allegories*, 254)

There could be no politics, no response that constitutes its empty place, and thus no concern for justice without this contingency. “Such patterns of estrangement are an inevitable aspect of political structures” (255), writes de Man. For politics is essentially an *ethos* of destinnance, of improper and the unfamiliar. A site of contestive demands hypersensitized by a concern for justice it can never embody or approximate. For justice is disembodied, undecidable, weak, a force of weakness, Derrida would say, and it is essential that it remain so. Insofar as it cannot be represented by a body politic it will demand its continual dismemberment. Without disembodiment, the without-content of justice that exceeds the horizon and history of its becoming in the conditionality of law and politics, there would be no exigency of political transformation, no perfectibility of its performatives.²⁵³ Justice is always estranged, and as such, it is a *permanent* interruption of the political.

²⁵³ In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida gives an instance of the heterology here in question between the calculative and conditional order of politics and law and the unconditional interrogative demand of justice: “For example... human rights, such as the history of a certain number of juridical performatives has determined and enriched them from one declaration to the next over the course of the last two centuries, and the exigency of an unconditional justice to which these performatives will always be inadequate, [and thus] open to perfectibility... exposed

The contingency of the social space, its structural undecidability and incompleteness, the fact that it rests “on a non-constitutive basis,” as de Man says, is what ensures the possibility of politics and decision. The “political entity,” in other words, is always a transitional state, subject to a constant revision and undoing from what is exterior to it. This contingency extends to the entire system of which it forms a part – the part then always being larger than the whole. The totality of social relations, the social bond itself, becomes a mythogenic effect of its own impossibility. And the political would be precisely what effects the ruin of the bond, an unlocking of the social to the loss of its presuppositions. It is the affirmation of constitutive openness of all social relation. Incompleteness here is not a negativity, however, that needs to be filled. What makes the social incomplete is also what makes it experience its own limit at which it is exposed to the other. But the limit is also a passage that opens, a point of contact. It is the limit that makes the outside its face. Everything happens

to a rational deconstruction that will endlessly question their limits and presuppositions, the interests and calculations that order their deployment, and their concepts...” Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2005), p. 151. Hereafter cited as *Rogues*. For the undeconstructibility of justice, in the name of which, and by virtue of which alone, deconstruction gets under way, cf. Derrida’s “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in *Acts of Religion*, in particular pp. 230-51. “[L]aw is essentially *deconstructible*, whether because it is founded, that is to say constructed, upon interpretable and transformable textual strata (and this is the history of law, its possible and necessary transformation...), or because its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded. The fact that law is deconstructible is not bad news. *One may find in this the political chance of all historical progress...* [emphasis added]. Justice [on the other hand], in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. *Deconstruction is justice*” (242-43), in the sense here, I would add, of its indefinite interrogative right. “For in the end,” Derrida will say a few pages later, “where would deconstruction find its force, its movement or its motivation if not in this always unsatisfied appeal, beyond the determinations of what one names, in determined contexts, justice, the possibility of justice” (249). *Between* – because there is a disjunctive and irreducible between here, it is what makes deconstruction possible – “between law and justice, deconstruction finds its privileged site, or rather, its privileged instability” (249-50). There is no distance here between de Man and Derrida in terms of politicized deconstruction as a continual desedimentation of superstructures, although it remains curious whether de Man here would have seen justice as a rhetorical cipher or *metaphor* for the unrepresentable and, hence, implicitly deconstructible.

here on the limit that defines social relation while, at the same time, opening it to the experience that undoes its definition. It will thus never complete itself, never seal itself narcissistically round its being and sink in it, as it is constantly emptied from along its limits. This empty space that is in the midst of us, the fire that is now completely snuffed out and no longer gathers us round, its ashes rather that scatter us, is also what radically opens us to the ethical. This also means that social identity is never saturated by the fullness of the social bond but by a relation to a totality of its possibilities as an empty space. And it is this relation that constitutes the political.

Insofar as it thus disconfirms the social bond, exposing it to its limit and, at its limit, to an outside, the political cannot be aligned with the law. Law is precisely what is under constant erasure in the political:

The *Social Contract* does not warrant belief in a suprahistorical political model that... would make the political State 'perpetual.' [which, in Geneva, had led to "the condemnation of the *Social Contract* as 'destructive of all governments,' de Man comments in a footnote]. For this would... cause the State to relapse into the kind of aberrant natural model... The declaration of the 'permanence' of the State would thus greatly hasten its dissolution. *It follows, however, that the meaning of the contractual text has to remain suspended and undecidable: 'there can be no fundamental Law that is binding for the entire body of the people...' Revolution and legality by no means cancel each other out, since the text of the law is, per definition, in a condition of unpredictable change. Its mode of existence is necessarily temporal and historical, though in a strictly nonteleological sense."* (*Allegories*, 266-67, emphasis added)

The political would be the space that opens the law to its undoing. An

unlawful place within law where “the meaning of the contractual text has to remain suspended and undecided.” If there is a specificity of the political, it lies precisely in this undecidability that exposes the law to the infinite demand of reading. It opens the law to a certain hauntology, to the ghosts of its others that constitute its history. For the history of the law, “the text of the law” – it has no other – as de Man says, is the history of its illegitimacy, it is “per definition, in a condition of unpredictable change.” Its historicity then is dependent on its epistemological unreliability. Any attempt to ground the law in a foundational epistemology, to legitimize it referentially, an idiom specific to ideology for de Man, would amount to a closure of the political, a desire to end contestation, to be right without remainder. A terror, Bill Readings calls it, “the terror of the real that governs the government and the argument (so that argument is limited to government) of Western politics in democracy or in its most extended form in totalitarianism, a terror that operates by grounding its prescriptive judgments as the descriptions of an empirical reality outside signifying practice.”²⁵⁴ Wherever the authority of the law is referentially determined, the alterity of its future that the political maintains will have been foreclosed in advance.²⁵⁵ It is the refusal to close politics, that is, “to allow law to assume the status of a literally representable nature” (Readings, *RDR*, 241), that makes de Man always insist on

²⁵⁴ Bill Readings, “The Deconstruction of Politics,” in *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989), p. 230.

²⁵⁵ This is why Readings can write further that “the ‘real’ is the accomplished ground of injustice...” The real is always mobilized as a strategy of depoliticization in the service of specific ideological ends. It is a strategico-political concept that relies for its force on a certain pre-conceptuality. Readings continues, “it is always, the assertion of the possibility of a nonmetaphorical voice, a pure literality. To appeal to the ‘real’ is always to lend a voice to the state of things – what we do when we appeal to a ‘political reality’ is to *personify* literality, to invoke a possibility of a purely literal voice that would provide the criteria of justice, in that it would speak a nature. Thus a literal voice would provide both the form and the content of justice: as mimetic adequation to a nature that would be just because it would be just nature (no rhetoric)” (*RDR*, 231).

the textuality of law, “the contractual text” or “the text of the law” (*Allegories*, 266), and its radical unrepresentability.²⁵⁶ The refusal to provide any positive grounding of law is the refusal of political closure. The structure of the text follows closely the structure of the law:

Just as no law can be written unless one suspends any consideration of applicability to a particular entity... grammatical logic can function only if its referential consequences are disregarded. On the other hand, no law is a law unless it also applies to particular individual. It cannot be left hanging in the air, in the abstraction of its generality. Only thus by refereeing it back to particular praxis can the *justice* of the law be tested, exactly as the *justesse* of any statement can be only be tested by referential verifiability, or by deviation from this verification. For how is justice to be determined if not by a particular reference? (*Allegories*, 269)

There would be no justice without its juridical determinations, without the procedural practice or system of laws that distribute its history unevenly. Justice, in other words, demands its idiom of dispensation, the step of the law that engages its history: “For, how is justice to be determined if not by a particular reference?” Disembodied, justice needs the body of its laws in order to be effective. But, writes de Man, “the incompatibility between the elaboration of the law [possible only in suspension of reference] and its application (or justice) can only be bridged by an act of deceit... [To appropriate the general structure of the law] is to steal from the text the very meaning to which, according to this

²⁵⁶ Indeed, law, politics, is never substantialist for de Man, it can never be justified, which is why it is never divorced from the text. It is the “legal *text*,” for instance, that in its general form “subsumes” the aporetic structure of the polity: “The structure of the entity with which we are concerned (be it as property, as national State or any other political institution) is most clearly revealed when it is considered as the general form that subsumes all these particular versions, namely as legal *text*. The first characteristic of such a text is its generality...” (*Allegories*, 267).

text, we are not entitled, the particular *I* which destroys its generality...” (269). The legitimacy of the law requires “an act of deceit,” an ideological sleight of hand that conceals the theft.²⁵⁷ The demand of justice, the demand that it be tried, can only be answered to in its corruption and threat of pervertibility. But this pervertibility, Derrida will say, is both essential and irreducible. Writing on the unconditional law of hospitality that reiterates the structure of estrangement engaged here, Derrida notes: “In order to be what it is, *the* law [that is unconditional, disembodied, as I mentioned earlier] thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this. For this pervertibility is essential, irreducible, necessary too. The perfectibility of laws is at this cost. And therefore their historicity.”²⁵⁸ The step of the law can thus never approach a certain madness that inhabits justice but that also exposes the order of law to (r)evolutions and countersignatures that punctuate its history.

The structure of *just law* then, in de Man’s terms, would be reflected in the aporetic structure of the text: “It seems that as soon as a text knows what it states, it can only act deceptively, like the thieving lawmaker... and if a text does not act, it cannot state what it knows” (*Allegories*, 270). The singular, idiomatic address, the *justesse* of the law, compromises the justice of the law. Is this not why the gate in Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” is finally shut? It is the very address, the announcement: “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this

²⁵⁷ This would be the light of *eidos* in ideo-logy that blinds the vision of its inscription, that is, its contingency.

²⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 79.

gate was made only for you,”²⁵⁹ that shuts the gate. The command of the law fails and deceives, as it must, in the *exemplarity* of its address, in “the particular *P*” (*Allegories*, 269) that it demands for its determination and that measures its finitude. But it is in its very failing that *the* law continues to command. This failure is not only what constitutes the imperative of the law, the “it is necessary” of its injunction, it is also what writes the law, what orders the narrativity of its history. That the story is written at all testifies to the failure of the law, for the law itself is unrelatable. It relates itself only allegorically, in the full sense of the term, as a missed encounter between the *justesse* of its address and the justice of its command. To respond to the law is to respond to a radically formal command that, like grammar, is no longer dependent on the notion of reference or semantic intention. And like grammar, it refers irreducibly but never to *the right* referent, producing thus always “a little more or a little less” than expected, which disables structural closure and opens “the game of the just” one will never have finished playing:

The legal machine, it turns out, never works exactly as it was programmed to do. It always produces a little more or a little less than the original, theoretical input... Regardless of whether the differentiation engenders excess or default, it always results in an increasing deviation of the law of the State from the state of the law, between constitutional prescription and political action. (*Allegories*, 271, 272).

The default or excess of judgment, its always misdirected force that

²⁵⁹ Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 4.

generates destabilization of closed systems is what constitutes the political. That there is the political traces a primary dislocation of the system, its impossibility to close itself off in a representable totality. One could say that politics is precisely the possibility of “*deviation* of the law of the State from the state of the law,” an irreducible emptiness lodged between prescriptive and denotative orders, for Lyotard, language games, or later, phrase regimens, translatable to one another only at the price of terror, that is the closure of politics.²⁶⁰ This “deviation,” or misalignment, “a debilitating entropy” that governs “the political thermodynamics... illustrates the practical consequences of a linguistic structure in which grammar and figure, statement and speech act do not converge” (*Allegories*, 272). Once again, for de Man, politics cannot be dissociated from the rhetorical structure. Indeed, politicization, “the game of the just,” as we have seen, its very possibility, depends on the aberrancy of referential misrecognition, “this tendency,” Laclau writes, “of a signifier to evade its strict attachment to a signified:”

It is because of this constitutive split between singularity and universality – this tendency of a signifier to evade its strict attachment to a signified while keeping a ghostly relation to it – that politics is possible at all. Otherwise, there would be only a blind clash between

²⁶⁰ “[I]t must be clear,” Lyotard is adamant, “that it is our business not to supply reality but to *invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented* [that is, to the sublime that destabilises reality by offering visions of alternate futures]. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which under the names of faculties Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81). Terror then, as Readings argues in “Deconstruction of Politics,” “consists in seeking to establish the justice of an ethical judgement (prescriptive statement) by reference to a representable order of things (a descriptive statement).” Lyotard, like de Man, “stresses the impossibility of passage from the true to the just, the incommensurability of descriptive and prescriptive language games” (*RDR*, 232).

impenetrable social forces. It is because particularity of the decision [reference in de Man's terms] assumes the function of imaginary closure [a "*hegemonic*" decision for Laclau that is irreducible, where "a particular element assumes the impossible task of a universal representation"] – while not being entirely able to perform an actual and final closure – that no blind clash exists, but instead, a reciprocal contamination between the universal and the singular or, rather, *the never ending and never totally convincing impersonation of the former by the latter.*" (DP, 59, emphasis added)²⁶¹

The structure of hegemonic relation here where a referential model "impersonates" the undetermined content of the law, while never being "entirely able to perform an actual and final closure," is a rhetorical *agonistic* relation of tropological and grammatical code interference, a certain grid static, that for de Man, as we know, reiterates the structure of the text:

From the point of view of the legal text, it is this generality which ruthlessly rejects any particularization, which allows for the possibility

²⁶¹ Laclau's significance here and in general for the tropologico-political implications of de Man's thought is addressed by Laclau himself in the opening lines of his essay "The Politics of Rhetoric:" "Why would a political theorist like me," he asks, "working mainly on the role of hegemonic logics in the structuration of political spaces, be interested in the work of Paul de Man?" (229). And one of the reasons is precisely the tropological structure of the political field that he calls hegemony: "[E]ach political institution, each category of political analysis shows itself today as the locus of undecidable language games. The overdetermined nature of all political difference or identity opens the space for a generalised tropological movement and thus reveals the fruitfulness of de Man's intellectual project for ideological and political analysis. In my work, this generalised politico-tropological movement has been called 'hegemony'" (230). Ernesto Laclau, "The Politics of Rhetoric," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), pp. 229-54. Hereafter cited as *ME*. Hegemonic relation is necessary because of the inherent structural undecidability of the political – *decision is when taken in undecidable terrain alone*. Insofar as there can be no positive grounding of a decision, every decision is constitutively hegemonic (but also contingent) and only as such can it be accountable. Decision, he continues in "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony," "can *only* be a hegemonic one – i.e. one that is (a) self-grounded; (b) is exclusionary, as far as it involves the repression of alternative decisions [this would be the threat of *differend* for Lyotard present in every phrase]; and (c) is internally split, because it is both *this* decision but also *a* decision" (DP, 60), that is, the hauntology of a decision that cannot be laid to rest, its spectral other lodged in it that makes it responsible. For Laclau then, de Man is very much a part of radical anti-foundationalist politics, clearing the path, so to speak, for agonistic pluralism by increasing structural undecidability.

of its coming into being. Within the textual model, particularization corresponds to reference, since reference is the application of an undetermined, general potential for meaning to a specific unit. The indifference of the text with regard to its referential meaning is what allows the legal text to proliferate. (*Allegories*, 268)

Grammar like law is bound to be overdetermined without ever receiving its full. And “as that fullness has to express itself through contents which have no common measure with it, a plurality of contents will be equally able to assume the function of universal representation... It is the indeterminacy of the content through which the universal finds its expression...” (Laclau, *DP*, 58). Law like text can thus only narrate the impossibility of its becoming whole in what we call politics. Its gate being shut in the end is the equivalent of the text never being finished. In other words, there is an injunction to write, for writing measures the pulse and rhythm of the political. It is in fact a residue or trace of fractured law that implies infinite resistance to its becoming whole. It is in writing that the true political exigency is inscribed.²⁶²

²⁶² Cf. Nancy’s demand for “literary communism,” the imperative *not to stop writing* in *The Inoperative Community* (esp. towards the end of chap. 2 and chap. 3) here for cross-fertilization, e.g. “The task of what has been designated as *écriture* (writing) and the thinking of *écriture* has been, precisely, to render... impossible a certain type of foundation, utterance, and literary and communitarian fulfillment: *in short, a politics* [emphasis added].” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. and trans. Peter Connor et al. (part of *Theory and History of Literature* series, vol. 76, Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1991), p. 69. Blanchot’s “unavowable community,” of course, also implies unworking of its limits that is writing. Writing as the absence of the work that would constitute the true being of community, in other words, writing, again, as politics. For de Man of *Allegories*, writing is the radical unravelling of the subject, its ex-position, Nancy would say. This is “the lethal quality of all writing,” de Man writes. “Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favour of the arbitrary power play of the signifier [that is, a certain materiality of text as event machine] and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration” (*Allegories*, 296). What is important here is precisely the irreducibility of the text to any desire or psychology of the subject which ties it to the possibility of the event that will have always caught desire unprepared – the event devastates the subject or it is not at all – and thus to historicity. Only as “beheaded” does the text become a chance for event, for what incompletes, the watchword for which may be politics.

Although de Man, in this chapter, uses the structure of political space to come closer to a definition of text (“In the description of the structure of political society the ‘definition’ of a text as the contradictory interference of the grammatical with the figural field emerges in its most systematic form.” *Allegories*, 270), its rhetorical structure turns out to be the most systematic articulation of the political. A degree of tropological or referential coercion of sheer syntagmatic structures is equivalent to a partial stabilization of political discursivity that, Laclau writes, “always keeps the traces of its own contingency and incompleteness visible” (*ME*, 250), or, in other words, that is partially self-conscious of its own rhetoricity. Any act of political institution is as arbitrary – and as necessary – as the referential function of the text that exceeds it. It is essentially incomplete and without positive identity, a signifier of an absent whole. The attempt to supplement this lack of foundation²⁶³ with a referential content ends, for de Man, in aesthetico-ideological stabilization or a metaphoric recouping of dispersed politico-referential systems. This recuperation is one of imaginary closure of meaning and the memory of a certain virtuality that inhabits it. It is a tropological reinscription of a disruptive field of contingent forces that ends in a society that has found its full expression, is fully transparent and present to itself, an “aesthetic state” that Tom Cohen, writing on the important notion of disinscription and materiality in de Man, specifies as “the manner in which hermeneutic and humanistic programs function in a repressively epistemo-

²⁶³ To recall Derrida here for a moment: “the moment of foundation, the instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. It is thus *outside the law*, and violent by that very fact... This foundational violence is not only forgotten. The foundation is made *in order to* hide it; by essence it tends to organize amnesia, sometimes under the celebration and sublimation of the grand beginnings” (*Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 57).

political and statist fashion.”²⁶⁴ What is recuperative here then is essentially nihilistic, for politics is precisely constituted in the dispersal of the conditions of its full closure, that is, in the memory of its rhetoricity reactivated constantly. This is why Cohen sees de Man as a kind of mnemonic “*engineer*” at pains to “alter the archive, the prerecordings out of which experience is projected and semantic economies policed...” (*ME*, ix). De Man’s

intervention in received programs of history prepares for and theorizes itself as an event – associated with mnemonic suspension or ‘shock’... that emerges from the *katabasis* of ‘literary history’ and philosophical aesthetics as a kind of technical apparatus that tracks and aims at a virtual disruption, and alteration, of *anteriority* itself... out of which, necessarily, various ‘futures’ are projected as well. (ix-x)

Without this possibility of mnemotechnics, of intervention in “the politics of hermeneutic regimes and epistemo-aesthetic programming” (x), that de Man calls aesthetic ideology, all possibility of resistance would be lost. What activates resistance is a mutation, “a radical (re)programming of the (historical) archive out of which the ‘sensorium’ would be alternatively produced” (x). But this is made possible by the essential unmasterability of reference alone.

The tireless unworking of hermeneutic closures in which judgment could settle finally sees space being open for justice as the possibility of an *always-other*. The impossibility of ever being done that Gasché identifies in de Man’s deconstructive readings (“it always stages only a figure in need of further deconstruction,” *The Wild Card*, 86) is then precisely the possibility of justice

²⁶⁴ Tom Cohen, “A ‘Materiality without Matter’?,” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. ix.

always to be done. What does not end is the ideological reinscription of alterity in recognizable tropological systems. Justice, in a sense, is a response to this alterity, it can only consist in letting it come. But this demands a certain madness or paralogic of reading, a compulsive reactivation of undecidability that stalks all structural closure, that reactivates disturbances, occurrences that cannot be reassimilated as moments within its history but that make up its history by ripping it apart.²⁶⁵ A rhetorical mnemotechnics that liquidates certainty and suspends knowledge, and, *in that it does*, obligates us freely in our response. Indeed, without it, there would be no place for responsibility, one would no longer hesitate, and where one no longer hesitates, as Derrida says, one no longer decides.²⁶⁶ This is why undecidability is essential to any political analytic. That there is politics, one could say, is only because undecidability is irreducible, or, in other words, because reference cannot be mastered. It is this unmasterability that produces politics de trop and is that which keeps open the to-come of justice. The “engineer’s” interventionist task then, that reactivates undecidability in aesthetico-political reference regimes, as de Man reminds us, would be the task of reading: “The commentator,” he writes in “Reply to Raymond Geuss,”

²⁶⁵ Laclau: “It is only through the pure, irreducible event that consists in a contingent displacement not retrievable by any metaphoric reaggregation that we can have a history, in the sense of both *Geschichte* and *Historie*.” (*ME*, 243).

²⁶⁶ Derrida: “The responsibility of what remains to be decided or done (in actuality) cannot consist of following, applying, or carrying out a norm or rule. Wherever I have at my disposal a determinable rule, I know what must be done, and as soon as such knowledge dictates the law, action follows knowledge as a calculable consequence: one *knows* what path to make, one no longer hesitates. The decision then no longer decides anything but is made in advance and is thus in advance annulled” (*Rogues*, 85). Undecidability then is the trial of every decision. The moment in it that cannot be (sur)passed or exorcised. “The undecidable remains caught,” he writes in “Force of Law,” “as a ghost at least, but an essential ghost, in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness [sa fantomaticité] deconstructs from within all assurance of presence, all certainty or all alleged criteriology assuring us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision” (*Acts of Religion*, 253). What undecidability cannot do is provide a positive fiat for a decision, *but this very inability accounts for its responsibility*; without it no decision is ever made.

should persist as long as possible in the canonical reading and should begin to swerve away from it only when he encounters difficulties which the methodological and substantial assertions of the system are no longer able to master. Whether or not such a point has been reached should be left open as part of an ongoing critical investigation. But it would be naive to believe that such an investigation could be avoided, even for the best of reasons. The necessity to revise the canon arises from resistances encountered in the text itself (extensively conceived) and not from preconceptions imported from elsewhere.²⁶⁷

The exigency of reading seems to arise precisely from an infinite pledge to alterity, one that is “ongoing” and cannot be “avoided.” It is impossible to domesticate reading and every such impossibility reiterates the empty place from which the authority of received narratives derives. Every obstacle in reading, every stutter, like the one de Man identifies at the end of Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” where “the symbolist ideology” of the text, its totalizing claim, is disrupted by sheer “enumeration” that gets stuck in the repetition of its own register, carries within it a virtuality coming from an alternate future.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Paul de Man, “Reply to Raymond Geuss,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1996), p. 186.

²⁶⁸ In the first part of “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” de Man traces a symbolist desire of Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” that through a series of tropological substitutions triggered by analogies of “*comme*” seeks transcendence of subjectivity and “states the totalising power of metaphor as it moves from analogy to identity, from simile to symbol and to a higher order of truth” (*RR*, 248). However, the last instance of “*comme*” is no longer analogical, an operator of disfiguration or identity, but introduces what for de Man is a tautological stutter that catalogues the examples of scents that interrupts the analogy: “For although the burden of totalizing expansion seems to be attributed to these particular scents... the logic of ‘*comme*’ restricts the semantic field of ‘parfums’ and confines it to tautology: ‘Il est des parfums... / Comme (des parfums).’ Instead of analogy, we have enumeration, and an enumeration which never moves beyond the confines of a set of particulars... [examples] refrained by ‘*comme*’ ever to lead beyond themselves” (250). Analogy that remains stuck in “transport,” as de Man will note. “Enumerative repetition,” he goes on to conclude, “disrupts the chain of tropological substitution at the crucial moment when the poem promises, by way of these very substitutions, to reconcile the pleasures of the mind with those of the senses and to unite aesthetics with epistemology.” There can be no “transport” then, only an obsessive stutter “that never goes

Reading, to invoke Cohen, is what “redistributes (and voids) the inherited uses of each term to designate how a rewriting of the archive stands to intervene in received narratives, with the aim of optioning alternative pasts, and hence futures” (*ME*, ix). In reading then, “the present” always stands to correction. And it is justice that demands this.

Human Relapses, Inhuman Events

However, the recognition of the essential failure of language to positively ground its own statements that accounts for its epistemological instability also folds the cognitive ground of judgment, a desertion of foundation of the political that finds itself held hostage by the text. Precisely the issue of Andrzej Warminski’s question when considering the initial title of *Aesthetic Ideology* – intended by de Man as *Aesthetics, Rhetoric, Ideology* but modified posthumously on “quite legitimate” marketing grounds: “Would [not] the (re)insertion of the word *rhetoric*,” he asks, “merely reconfirm the suspicion or assumption that de Man’s notion of ideology and of the political never gets beyond the analysis of purely linguistic phenomena and their reduction to rhetorical structures?”²⁶⁹ Does rhetoric, and the evacuation of grounding criteria that seems to shadow every reference to it, prepare for disruptive relativism that defers consensus and disables a politically mobilized collective subject? Rhetorical structures, as we

anywhere:” “the enumeration could be continued at will without ceasing to be a repetition, without ceasing to be an *obsession* rather than a metamorphosis, let alone a rebirth” in higher spirituality (250, emphasis added).

²⁶⁹ Andrzej Warminski, “‘As the poets do it’: On the material sublime,” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. 22.

have argued, cannot be separated from the political. If politics takes its point of departure in a continuous drift of referential ground – which also prepares for Laclau’s hegemonic articulations of the political – then rhetoric is rather what makes it possible. What rhetoric sheds is precisely a history of oppression that always stakes the claim of its authority on the existence of pre-discursive categories that would stabilise reference and enforce irremovability of social structures. It is to give voice to “pure literality, which might speak the law as such, [and which] always performs the operation of terror, in that to assert the law as literally representable is to silence its victims by relegating the operation of resistance to the condition of transgression” (Readings, *RDR*, 232). Rhetoric then by reactivating undecidability of the social, that is, the impossibility of its closure, also intervenes in the regime of reference opening a possibility to reinscribe the ruses of its force. Rhetoric always *reinscribes* the new. It unravels pre-machinal genetic ruses that give foundation to the law and not just sustain but authorise a regime of oppression by foreclosing differential effects. These regimes are always historically revisable and rhetoric only reveals traces of emancipatory possibility of their disruption.

Warminski’s response is that the question of “[h]ow to take the next step, the step beyond merely linguistic phenomena, to what really matters, to political stands and political programmes and political power...” (*ME*, 23) is misleading altogether because there can be “no direct, immediate, royal road to the performative, to action and the act, political or otherwise” (28). In other words, the question itself plots a pre-discursive political field *separate* from its signifying practice. But, as we have said, pre-discursivity only ever signals the

imminent closure of the political in total aesthetic systems. Indeed, it is an impossibility, one could say, that rhetoric generates and prohibits at the same time. Political space begins rather with the withdrawal of totality. Its only measure is the absence of any measurable content that would ground it.

The question itself then relies on a radical divorce of the rhetorical and the referential, or literal as phenomenalized reference, in de Man's terminology. And it is precisely this binary structure that de Man refers to as aesthetic ideology. It reveals, Readings writes, "the whole project of classical 'political' criticism of literature as organized through an abiding opposition between the literal or contentual (the political) and the rhetorical or formal (the textual)" (*RDR*, 226). The "literal," however, would always be obliteration of virtuality rhetoric opens up that ties politics precisely to the coming of an always other future. "The textual," in aesthetic ideology, Readings continues, "is implicated in the political only at the expense of its relinquishing the rhetorical for the literal... To put it bluntly, literature is political only to the extent that the political is in some sense the *referent* of the text, a referent that is conceived literally, as something exterior to the text" (226-27). First, to relinquish the rhetorical is, in fact, to relinquish the political. Second, the literal is itself an effect of rhetoric always offered to further tropological displacements. As mentioned earlier, rhetoric both generates and prohibits it at the same time. In other words, what rhetorical reading retraces is precisely the tropology of the literal: "The distinction of figural from literal must not be read as a difference *in the order of literal meaning*... the literal is a trope within rhetoric, *rhetoric's trope of the absence of rhetoric* [emphasis added]. The referent is the text's fiction of the

absence of text, the text's fiction of its own outside... There is no pure exteriority, no referent outside the text" (*RDR*, 230). To think the political as the literal is precisely to deny the political as that space that frees virtuality of reference by ceaselessly overtasking the borders of the possible. Rhetoric makes resistance only too apparent, which may be why it is shunned. It is

a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. (de Man, *RT*, 11)

This, however, does not imply that rhetorical exposure of mimetic machinery in aesthetic politics can escape the metaphoric relapse of the shock-event or mutation in symbolic historical archives it performs. In other words, it is not a form of *ideologiekritik* in that it does not, as we have pointed out in the previous chapter, escape retotalization of its own performances. This relapse or hermeneutic retracing "recurs routinely," Cohen writes, "*as an artificial humanization*, effacement and interpretative inversion of what the (textual) event performed..." (*ME*, xi, emphasis added). There is always a cognitive retracement of performativity in reading ("It will always be reinscribed within a cognitive system, it will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition again." De Man, *AI*, 133) because to read, as de Man insists in "Shelley Disfigured," is precisely "to understand, to question, to know, [and thus] to forget, to erase, to

deface, to repeat...” (RR, 122). Referential blockage of paths is irreducible. De Man is clear:

The Triumph of Life warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. *It also warns us why and how these events then have to be reintegrated in a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy.* (122, emphasis added)²⁷⁰

The negative knowledge of ideological blockage is itself reflexive and ends in a relapse “regardless of the exposure of its fallacy.” If there are arbitrary, paralogic markers and crypt sequences, phantoms, that like free radicals traverse across the textual surface to form unforeseen protocols of reading, generating an unsystemic excess, a *de trop* that cannot be accounted for and is exterior to the system²⁷¹ – these would be precisely the ciphers of deregulating stutters, disintegers and aphasic signifiers de Man usually identifies in his texts and that

²⁷⁰ For further reference on the complicity of reading with the aesthetic violence against which it reacts and de Man’s failure to read Shelley’s poem, cf. note 220 in the previous chapter. “The process [of reintegration] is endless,” he writes, “since the knowledge of the language’s performative power is itself a figure in its own right and, as such, bound to repeat the disfiguration of metaphor...” (“Shelley Disfigured,” 120). Tropes, and by extension language, are caught in a double, specular structure. Specularity that admits of analogical substitutions and articulation of identity is also what at the same time still keeps the seeds of its own disruption. And this process “is endless.” This double bind is registered by Cohen as a stunted reading movement: “There is ‘the entire transformational system of tropes’ that sustains representation or mimetic ideologies, and there (already) is a ‘movement’ that tries to locate itself in different indices – an interruption of ‘movement’ as though by itself...” (ME, 123).

²⁷¹ What de Man says in “Kant and Schiller:” “[C]ertain linguistic elements will remain which the concept of trope cannot reach, and which then can be, for example – though there are other possibilities – performative” (AI, 133).

Derrida will later term “materiality without matter”²⁷² – they are always reintegrated in a referential metaphoric of reading that effaces the occurrence or event of its disruption. Aesthetics would be precisely the category that supervises and equalizes this excess. And what is effaced, Cohen writes, “is the programming, the mnemotechnics, so as to affirm a putative immediacy of the perceived, of facticity [that is to say, literality], and so on – yet just this mnemotechnic order is what would have to be assaulted, or altered, if the prerecordings of historicism, agency, or for that matter the sensorium were to be ex-posed or suspended.”²⁷³ Aesthetics then is always generated out of human forgetfulness. And this amnesia is called reading. Reading, rhetorical or otherwise, can thus not escape the ideologico-cognitive grid it attempts to reformat. The evisceration of the representational content in rhetorical reading is caught up in its own epistemic structure it cannot successfully close off. De Man’s reading then is not a form of *ideologiekritik*, an epistemic and a mark

²⁷² In “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) (‘within such limits’),” Derrida will reiterate several times, what may be clear by now, that “materiality” in de Man, far from being a metaphysical concept, is a resistance and assault on any notion of matter or body, a kind of a shock wave machine that collapses the solid (Derrida will later associate it with the automaticity of the machine and the threat of subject-mutilation always implied, as earlier indicated, in the machine): “The literality of the letter situates in fact this materiality not so much because it would be a physical or sensible (aesthetic) substance, or even matter, but because it is the place of prosaic resistance... to any organic and aesthetic totalization, to any aesthetic form. And first of all, I would say for my part, a resistance to every possible reappropriation... The materiality in question – and one must gauge the importance of this irony or paradox – is not a thing; it is not even the matter of a body... and yet it works, this nothing therefore operates, it forces, but as a force of resistance... I would say [not without risk, he notes] that it is a materiality without matter...” (*ME*, 350). “This force of resistance,” as he continues on the next page, that is “without material substance derives from the dissociative, dismembering, fracturing, disarticulating, and even disseminal power that de Man attributes to the letter... [which] affects not only nature but the body itself – as organic and organized totality” (351). It is thus indissociable from the textual event that, as we shall see, still occurs. There will have been an occurrence still, that is not without political consequence or rather that is *the* political *con*-sequence, I would say – because reintegration is never total. Jacques Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) (‘within such limits’),” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), pp. 277-361. Hereafter cited as “Typewriter Ribbon.”

²⁷³ Tom Cohen, “Political Thrillers: Hitchcock, de Man, and Secret Agency in the ‘Aesthetic State,’” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. 120.

presumably outside the discourse it interrupts. Marks and traces of a passage opened in the mnemonic archive that is to be altered are muted in reading, escaping the referential mapping of their itineraries.

So in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,”²⁷⁴ de Man identifies a passage, “a deep, perhaps fatal, break or discontinuity” (*AI*, 79) in the section on the sublime that disarticulates the aesthetic project of the third *Critique*. “From the phenomenality of the aesthetic (which is always based on an adequacy of the mind to its physical object, based on what is referred to, in the definition of the sublime, as the concrete representation of ideas – *Darstellung der Ideen*) we have moved to the pure materiality of *Augenschein*, of aesthetic vision” (88), where *Augenschein*, in opposition to “*Ideenschein*” is not “supposed to reflect anything, but to stress a flatness devoid of any suggestion of depth... this vision is purely material, devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication... of any semantic depth and reducible to formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics” (83). Aesthetics, instead of articulating the architectonic unity of epistemopolitical orders “ends up, in Kant, in a formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic experience of the beautiful and of the sublime as described by Kant and Hegel themselves” (83). Pure aesthetic vision, that Kant identifies with poetic vision (“one must see the ocean as the poets do,” *AI*, 126), is purely unaesthetic, equivalent to the automaticity of optical spectrum analysis. And, “devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication,” it marks a material site that precedes the

²⁷⁴ Paul de Man, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 1996), pp. 70-91. Cf. earlier note 249 for further reference on the analytic burden of the sublime and the undoing of aesthetics, that is also a centrepiece of de Man’s earlier essay “Kant’s Materialism” published in the same volume.

tropological registers of light or phenomenalization: “Not being part of trope or figuration, the purely aesthetic vision of the natural world is in no way solar” (82), de Man writes. But without light, without phenomenalization, the vision that disrupts aesthetic closure becomes an event or occurrence of sudden blindness that cannot read what it performs. Every reading is only a mock-archive of this blindness, including de Man’s own:

[T]o the extent that Kant is attempting in the passage cited [the passage on the material vision of the poets that defines the sublime while emptying its aesthetic function – cf. note 249] to define a representational modality (“seeing as the poets do it”) and thereby make it available to understanding, what he writes necessarily possesses a conceptual dimension, or else it would not be readable at all. Materiality (that to which Kant refers or that which he posits) may not be conceptual, but *theory* (the mode of Kant’s referring or positing) of the materiality of art, of seeing “as the poets do it,” cannot do without concepts, empty or not.²⁷⁵

Reading then cannot not archive the event that destabilizes all archives. This is reading as the prosthetic repetition of programs that remasters the shock of its blindness. A certain Schillerization of the Kantian event, its ideologico-aesthetic reinscription “in the cognition of tropes” (*AI*, 134), is scripted in advance. We are all Schillerians, as de Man will say in his lecture on “Kant and Schiller:” “Whatever writing we do, whatever way we have of talking about art, whatever way we have of teaching, whatever justification we give ourselves for

²⁷⁵ This is Michael Sprinker’s reply in a footnote to Judith Butler’s question whether what de Man identifies in Kant as materialism could be seen as a concept at all, as it is precisely what derails any conceptuality. Michael Sprinker, “Art and Ideology: Althusser and de Man,” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. 46.

teaching, whatever the standards are and the values by means of which we teach, they are more than ever and profoundly Schillerian. They come from Schiller, and not from Kant” (*AI*, 142). An ideologico-critical reading that would step outside the aesthetico-political regime it presumably sheds would have to step outside the tropes that make possible its mimetic techniques of identification, which is precisely impossible. *Ideologiekritik* would be a form of social epistemology, a “true” hermeneutic that would be justified to legislate the terms for the unfolding of the social, and, in terms of our argument, the closure of the political.

In “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” where de Man’s reading of the enumerative tautological stutter²⁷⁶ in Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” foils the anthropomorphism of nature that the poem and its reception program itself ends in personification, recasting the very figure it disfigures. Barbara Johnson writes: “The subjectivizations performed by lyric upon the unintelligible are here rejected, but by a personification of mourning,”²⁷⁷ she identifies in de Man’s exit where he notes that “true ‘mourning’ [for lost “Correspondances”] is less deluded. The most *it* can do is to allow for non-comprehension, and enumerate non-anthropomorphic, non-elegiac, non-celebratory, non-lyrical, non-poetic, that is to say, prosaic, or, better, *historical* modes of language power (*RR*, 262). What is irreducible once again is the regression of the tropological model, reading

²⁷⁶ Cf. above, note 268 for further reference on the sheer “enumeration which never moves beyond the confines of a set of particulars” (*RR*, 250) restricting itself to a tautological stutter caught up in its own register: perfumes are like... (perfumes) which disrupts the techniques of analogy and anthropomorphism. The very title, “Correspondances,” de Man writes, “is like the anagrammatic condensation of the text’s entire [symbolist] program: ‘corps’ and ‘esprit’ brought together and harmonized by the *ance*...” (245).

²⁷⁷ Barbara Johnson, “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2001), p. 213.

“performing the inescapability of the structures it is casting off.” (*ME*, 213).

“The least we can say,” Johnson continues, “is that de Man has given the last word in his own text to personification” (214). Ideological unperformances or metaphoric retracements of events are path blockers no reading can escape to stage. Critical or other, it is always a partial retotalization of the interruptions that make it halt in its tracks and rewind; it is, therefore, always ideological.

And yet, at the same time, there is an event. Something has happened, as de Man insists in “Kant and Schiller,” something that rips out and reroutes the familiar tracks of transit. There has been “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*” (*AI*, 132), and this movement or passage, is “irreversible:”

“this passage occurs always, and can only occur, by ways of an epistemological critique of trope... That process, which we have encountered a certain number of times, is irreversible. That goes in that direction and you cannot get back from the one to the one before. But that does not mean... that the performative function of language will then as such be accepted and admitted. It will always be reinscribed within cognitive system, it will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition again. That relapse, however is not the same as reversal. Because this is in its turn open to a critical discourse similar to the one that has taken one from the notion of trope to that of the performative. So it is not a return to the notion of trope and to the notion of cognition; it is equally balanced between both, and equally poised between both, and as such is not a reversal, it’s a relapse. And a relapse in that sense is not the same; it has to be distinguished in a way which I

am only indicating here... the recuperation, the relapse, has to be distinguished from a reversal. (*AI*, 133)

A relapse of the performative is not a reversal in that it does not erase the inscriptive traces of the contingency it carries. Every ideological blockage, in other words, carries the seeds of its own aborted genetics that makes it possible while at the same time tracing its limits. Recuperation is never total but only indicative of anteriority that is always in transit so to speak, “open to a critical discourse similar to the one that has taken one from the notion of trope to that of the performative.” There is thus a persistent assault on and opening of the limit of memory archives in which the collective subject is contained towards the unregistered – inhuman? – histories of its transformation. This is why Cohen, in a footnote, notes not one but a double relapse: “There are now two ‘relapses,’ he writes, “the site of the relapse [as] the mimetic image of the narrative, every logic of knowingly solicited identification, whereas the *other* interrupts that like the *Waltzing Couples*, without reference...” This other is of “the order of mechanical memory, inscription, materiality, evinced in the formalized system of markers... parabases and letteral or pre-letteral repetitions *that recall the narrative to the machinal prosthesis of the visible by such devices...*” (*ME*, 152, emphasis added). What is recalled is the primary rhetoricity, the *tele*-presence, and uprootedness of hermeneutic structures organized round fetishized figures of the literal in order to disappear, like a ghostly state that obliterates the traces of its own inscription. Under the pressure of rhetorical reading, however, these signifying orders self-destruct opening up, among the debris, for new ones to emerge. The constant pressure of de Man’s writing on a mounted mimetic regime that integrates all

dissent is thus a politicized assault, one that opens for a non-contemporaneity of justice, of some other to-come, not messianic but already here, outsourcing virtual presents. This, indeed, undermines, Readings writes, “the possibility of determinant literal criteria, a literally representable law, but proposes a justice without criteria and proposes that justice (the possibility of responsible judgment as opposed to operation) in fact relies upon the absence of criteria” (*RDR*, 231), and, therefore, upon the permanent revolution of what grounds them. “This judgment,” he continues, “is not an undifferentiated pluralism, but is based in the most rigorous respect for difference” (231).

The textual event is thus a politico-strategic archival opening, the exposure of technicity of all archives that blows open a passage charged with emancipatory historical capacities. It is an initiative, an anacoluthic con(tra)-sequence that intervenes in the past and disinvests its authoritative indices *only* “so as to allow for the passage toward the other.” If one is inclined to think that “only” I have emphasized here is not nearly enough, it implies, however, that one wage war on the entire system of valorization and the inherited signifying orders of the social-epistemic machine that redistributes memory losses on a conveyor belt of serialized value production. This “only” is at the same time *more* than everything one *does* and, therefore, *all* one *should* do.²⁷⁸ To let the other come, Derrida writes:

²⁷⁸ In “Kant and Schiller,” de Man speculates precisely on the future of this “only.” We are all Schillerians, he says, “whatever justification we give ourselves for teaching, whatever the standards are and the values by means of which we teach, they are more than ever and profoundly Schillerian... And if you ever try to do something in the other direction and you touch on it you’ll see what will happen to you. Better be very sure, wherever you are, that your tenure is very well established, and that the institution for which you work has a very well-established reputation. Then you can take some risks...” (*AI*, 142).

I am careful to say ‘let it come’ because if the other is precisely what is not invented [in Derrida’s register, the other exceeds invention insofar as invention is calculable and programmatic and the other always escapes and traumatizes the program that would make it possible and foreseeable], the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclosure structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other. But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming. The coming of the other or its coming back is *the only possible arrival*, but it is not invented, even if the most genial inventiveness is needed to prepare to welcome it... (“Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” *RDR*, 60)

One could say that de Man, as the “penultimate technician or engineer” of mnemonic imprints (Cohen, *ME*, 118), the double-head reading machine in his text that traces inscriptive markers of aesthetic regimes closed against incursions of the other without which no history ever arrives, prepares precisely for the coming of history by unblocking regulative structures as soon as they appear reified enough – in all the aesthetico-referential weight of this term – to dictate judgment.²⁷⁹ And the “most genial inventiveness” is required to prepare for its

²⁷⁹ History, for de Man, is not strictly speaking temporal but that which will have derailed temporality, an event or occurrence temporality does not see coming. It is worth quoting a passage from de Man’s lecture on “Kant and Schiller” here, as it ties history to its *unregister* of performativity: “History, the sense of the notion of history as the historicity a priori of this type of textual model which I have been suggesting here, there history is not thought of as a progression or a regression, but is thought of as an event, as an occurrence... History is therefore not a temporal notion, it has nothing to do with temporality, but it is the emergence of a language power out of a language of cognition [that is, the irreversible passage discussed earlier]. An emergence, which is, however, not itself either a dialectical movement or any kind of continuum... that would be accessible to a cognition... it is not susceptible of being represented as a temporal process. That is historical, and it doesn’t allow for any reinscription of history into any kind of cognition. The apparent regression which we talked about... the regression from the event, from the materiality of the inscribed signifier in Kant, or from any of those disruptions... within the cognitive discourse of trope – this regression is no longer historical, because that regression takes place in temporal mode and it is as such not history. One could say, for example, that in the reception of Kant, in the way Kant has been read, since the third *Critique* – and that was an occurrence, something happened there, something occurred – that in the whole reception of Kant... nothing has happened, only regression, nothing has happened at all. Which is another way of saying there is no history, which is another way of saying... that reception is not

coming.²⁸⁰ Insofar as justice is a sleepless wake for the unforeseeable, de Man must be heavy-eyed, precisely because tireless, wide awake.

This destabilising of closed structures, of certain “realisms” in Lyotard’s terms that “attempt to reconstitute symbolic systems,”²⁸¹ is what turns de Man’s writing along its course of textual derailments. But it is what turns reading in general for de Man against its own cognitive retraction of disturbances it traces. It becomes an inscriptive event of the “it happens” on the body of history unable

historical, that between reception and history there is an absolute separation, and that to take reception as a model for historical event is an error, is a mistake... *One thing, however, is certain. The event, the occurrence, is resisted by reinscribing it in the cognition of tropes, and that is itself a tropological, cognitive, and not a historical move*” (AI, 133-34, emphasis added). The disarticulative event cannot be accounted for because it suspends all accounts, there can be no reception ready to accommodate it. This is also why in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” de Man writes that generic typology and continuity of “pseudo-historical period terms such as ‘romanticism’ or ‘classicism’ are always terms of resistance and nostalgia, *at the furthest remove from the materiality of actual history*” (RR, 262, emphasis added) and should be taken “for what they are: rather crude metaphors for figural patterns rather than historical events or acts” (254). As Derrida notes, however, in “Typewriter Ribbon,” commanded by prudence here rather than critique, this notion of history or rather its historicity may be a de Manian “hyperbolic provocation... [that] certainly does not negate all temporality of history; it merely recalls that time, temporal unfolding, is not the essential predicate of the concept of history: time is not enough to make history” (ME, 319-20). And it certainly intersects on all points Derrida’s general thinking of decision and responsibility, of the event, he continues a few pages later, as “the real, undeniable, inscribed, singular event, of an always essentially traumatic type, even when it is a happy event, inasmuch as its singularity interrupts an order and rips apart, like every decision worthy of the name, the normal tissue of temporality or history” (336).

²⁸⁰ In “Typewriter Ribbon,” for instance, Derrida writes of materiality in de Man as a strategic “invention:” “It is a sort of invention by de Man... produced in the movement of a strategy” (ME, 353), a paleonymic that reads materialism backwards, as a radical formalism.

²⁸¹ In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, discussing the political stakes of the avant-garde in the post-industrial world, Lyotard writes: “In the techno-scientific industrial world, there can be no stable symbols of the good, the just, the true, the infinite, etc. Certain ‘realisms’ (which in fact are academicisms: bourgeois at the end of the nineteenth Century, socialist and national-socialist during the twentieth) attempt to reconstitute symbolic systems, to offer the public work it can enjoy and on the occasion of which it can identify with Images (race, socialism, nation, etc.) We know that this effort always demanded the elimination of the avant-gardes” (125). The avant-gardes, for Lyotard, carry out what for de Man is the programmatic questioning of reading, a “secret questioning of the... presuppositions... which leads them to a complete neglect of the ‘cultural’ function of stabilization of taste and identification of a community by means of visible symbols” (125-26). Hence, the public distaste, the always monstrous shock-event of the avant-garde art, presentable as unrepresentable, citing, through inevitable misquotations, “the invisible in the visible” (126), just like the unread in reading that opens the world to the noise of its others. This, Lyotard will say, “has nothing edifying about it, but... is *inscribed in the infinity of the transformation of ‘realities’*” (128, emphasis added). Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). Hereafter cited as *The Inhuman*.

to register the shock. De Man's mutilations of texts, as Gasché would see them,²⁸² his reading of Kant for instance, would then be a paramnesic index of material occurrences that escape historical regimes of receptivity, freeing up unassimilable textual energies that contain the potential to disrupt them. This is why Gasché sees de Man's reading as all but pathological, "idiosyncratic," it "defies all comprehensibility," he writes ("In-Difference," 90). But "[n]o degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness," says de Man, "for it is the madness of words" ("Shelley Disfigured," 122). This "madness of words," de Man will later call irony,²⁸³ is what elbows enough room for the "it happens" that is not destined, that allows for the impossible to take place. And it is this madness that Lyotard in *The Inhuman* will call for to disarm thought. If there is

a matter of thought, a nuance, a grain, a timbre which makes an event for thought and unsettles it... [p]erhaps here we have to invoke words. Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its

²⁸² Cf. pp. 245 through to 251, especially 247-50, in the previous chapter, for Gasché's reaction to de Man's textual mutilations.

²⁸³ Already in 1967, at the first of six lectures given at the Gauss Seminar at Princeton, de Man mentioned this "madness" as "the privilege" and "the curse of all language," that he would later reiterate in the opening essay of *Blindness and Insight* (cf. "Criticism and Crisis," p. 11): "The same discrepancy," says de Man, "exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies. It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to conceal meaning behind a misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile. But it is the distinctive curse of all language... that it is forced to act this way." Paul de Man, "The Contemporary Criticism of Romanticism," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 12. Hereafter cited as *RCC*. In "The Concept of Irony," ten years later, de Man will write of the same madness, but this time identified as irony and its permanent assault on cognition. It "is tied with the impossibility of understanding," he writes. And "if irony is of understanding, [then] no understanding of irony will ever be able to control and stop it... what is at stake in irony is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the readability of texts, the possibility of deciding on a meaning or on a multiple set of meanings or on a controlled polysemy of meanings... There would be in irony something very threatening... (*AI*, 166-67). It is "a permanent parabasis," not an interruption, "not just at one point but at all points... at all points the narrative can be interrupted" (179). Irony, being always of understanding, may "venture deals that cannot be closed," as Ronell writes, but, *and in that it does*, it also "leaves room for futurity" (*Stupidity*, 126).

matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think. Words ‘say’, sound, touch, always ‘before’ thought. And they always ‘say’ something other than what thought signifies, and what it wants to signify by putting them into form. Words want nothing. They are the ‘un-will’ [precisely the machine then, irreducible to desire or any psychology of the subject], the ‘non-sense’ of thought, its mass. They are innumerable... always older than thought. But like timbers and nuances, they are always being born. Thought tries to tidy them up, arrange them, control them and manipulate them. But as they are old people and children, words are not obedient... From this point of view, theory, aesthetic theory, seems... to be the attempt by which the mind tries to get rid itself of words, of the matter that they are, and finally of matter itself. Happily, this attempt has no chance of success. One cannot get rid of the Thing [that is, the unrepresentable]. Always forgotten, it is unforgettable. (142-43)

As much as reading wants to have done with this madness, this indeterminacy that, Lyotard says elsewhere, “exercises a gentle violence over the determinate, so as to make it give up its QUOD” (*The Inhuman*, 184), it is also sustained by it, by the unaccountability of the to-come this madness keeps.²⁸⁴ And if there is a pathos of reading, it is this suffering from a memory of what is yet to be inscribed. This is the *duty* of reading. The movement in reading the gaze will not have read but one that perhaps reads the eye, placing its scanning

²⁸⁴ “*And it is not I*,” Lyotard continues, “*nor anyone, who begets this non-place*” (184, emphasis added). What is important to note here is that for Lyotard and for de Man, the human, the subject, does not have the last word, *is not a definitional closure of all politics* and remains accessible to mnemonic reengineering and displacements of its centrality. This is what de Man says in his lecture on “Kant and Schiller:” “To say that the human is a principle of closure, and that the ultimate word, the last word, belongs to man, to the human, is to assume a continuity between language and man, is to assume a control of man over language... [but] there is entirely ignored the possibility of a language that would not be definable in human terms, and that would not be accessible to the human will at all – none – of a language that would to some extent not be – in a very radical sense, not be human. So that we would at least have a complication... in which the principle of closure is not the human – because language can always undo that principle of closure...” (*AI*, 152).

techniques in question by disconnecting the power grids. And it “is older than thought,” Lyotard says. In fact, one only ever thinks due to this madness. And it occurs in reading de Man says, as a movement “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.” And “the thought of material occurrence,” or rather the unthought, Lyotard would say, “of something that occurs materially, that leaves a trace on the world... is not opposed in any sense to the notion of writing. But it is opposed to some extent to the notion of cognition” (*AI*, 132). What “happens” is only when cognitive programs are stalled and set to reboot by a reading that will have made them give up their “quod.” This reading that would be rhetorical – insofar as it remembers the traces of its inscription, of its own dismemberment – is a reading itself deciding to be indecisive, placing its bet on patience, on not wanting to say, for to say is already to have said too much. And this indecisiveness is a commitment to a responsibility that is always yet to be named. A response that perhaps is not a debt to anyone, not a politics of guilt or forgiveness, but just a making-room for the impossible, for what *cannot* (to) occur.

What retains the possibility of event, of anacoluthic dis-course held in the limit reserves of the system, is the disobedience of words. It is the sheer exteriority of inscription, words that “want nothing,” that retains the power to wreck desire. “The bottom line, in Kant as well as in Hegel,” as de Man writes, “is *the prosaic materiality of the letter* and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment” (*AI*, 90, emphasis added). This is the radical “un-will,” in Lyotard’s

idiom, of their texts, but also of aesthetico-epistemic memory regulation of their receptivity, the mnemonic trace of its rhetoricity it cannot get rid, and one that is permanently active precisely insofar as its mimetic regimes propagate through and by the printing techniques of machine writing. It is its own inscriptive machine, or delay, a certain tele-techno-*poesis*, that aesthetic ideology obfuscates in referential erasures. Ideological “signature,” Cohen writes, “occurs when a model of reference is imposed upon the same conceptual space whose impulse is to fabricate an organizing ground or immediacy (the subject, experience, history) that effaces the problematic of inscription” (*ME*, ix). And it is the confusion of an inscriptive effect and phenomenality or perception that de Man calls ideology (“What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism.” *RT*, 11). Referential erasure of inscriptive traces, of historiography that programs perception is what becomes systematized in aesthetic politics. An “occlusion of the order of inscription,” as Cohen continues, “(on this a certain definitional closure of the ‘human’ depends) in favour of tropes guarding the claims of human immediacy and perception. This, suggests de Man, renders imperceptible the mistaking for perception or phenomenality of a linguistic and mnemonically programmed effect” (*ME*, xii), that is reference. The scenography of this erasure leads directly to the mythogeny of body, birth, identity, origin, nation etc. as quasi-political limits or irreducibles rhetorical reading disinvests by exposing their graphic nature, the *mise-en-scène* of their writtenness. “One can see,” then, to reiterate de Man,

why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating correspondence between sign and meaning, since

they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness. On the other hand, theories of language that put into question the subservience, resemblance, or potential identity between sign and meaning are always subversive, even if they remain strictly confined to linguistic phenomena. (*RCC*, 170)²⁸⁵

The disinscription of rhetorical reading, its retracing of the figurativity of identities, would not be “subversive,” if identity were not removable already. In other words, it is not the trauma of its loss, it is rather the inadmissibility of its ever being there, the more radical exposure of its primary unlocatability. It is this trauma aesthetic ideology blocks by serializing erasures that rhetorical reading reinscribes, making visible hegemonic strategies of erasure. We can see then why “irony,” as the master trope of this disarticulation of identities, at a certain point, Cohen writes, “ceases to be a rhetorical trope and operates as a *technē* of suspension preparatory to the possibility of an event... a *technē* for rendering virtual all that a given historical arrangement of marks encodes as real, or ‘fact’” (*ME*, xii). But this could be said of rhetoric in general, that always points out the possibility of ironic investments, the disobedience of words that *holds us* hostage and the ghosts of always having meant other that remain inscribed in virtual

²⁸⁵ Ideology is most at work, as we have said, precisely when the traces of its inscription are effaced, when *anti-physis*, in structuralist terms, operates as *pseudo-physis* (cf. above, note 33). Structuralist critique, however, in all its rigour, fails to account for the positivist implications of its own discourse: “Sooner or later, any literary study must face the problem of the truth value of its own interpretations, no longer with the naive conviction of a priority of content over form, but as a consequence of the much more unsettling experience of *being unable to cleanse its own discourse of aberrantly referential implications*” (*RCC*, 174, emphasis added). What de Man targets here is the scientific claim of structuralism to objectivity and the quantifiability of its method that remains blind to the aesthetic relapse of its own conclusions. It is thus “unable to read itself” (174): “Barthes’s social criticism and the means used in accomplishing its highly laudable aim engender their own mystification, this time at the level of method rather than of substance. The very power of the instrument creates an assurance that generates its own set of counterquestions. In this case, the questions have to do with the claim of having grounded the study of literature on foundations epistemologically strong enough to be called scientific” (171). The relapse is systemic and irreducible. Even the most nonphenomenal, rigorous reading “plots” a narrative of its own disinscription.

states keeping all work undone – rhetoric would be this notification that the work remains undone. It offers thought a “suspension,” that is precisely the blank sheet of the paper ready for inscription, the always new white where resistance to programs and received codes is kept.

As we have seen, tropes both make possible and disrupt semantic regimes. The sense is always carried off elsewhere, and with it, identities and analogical closures become admissible for retests. This admissibility is the duty of reading. In “Art and Ideology,” however, Michael Sprinker overlooks precisely this point at which rhetoric becomes a disruptive *technê* of its own relapse, that we have been tracing throughout this chapter. “Tropes,” he writes,

are perforce meaningful, but their meanings can never be equated with that which is true, in the sense of being rationally demonstrable or justifiable; “they posit a meaning whose existence cannot be verified.” And yet the tropological imperative is “unavoidable”... It would not be stretching a point to say that [de Man’s] account of the operation of tropes... contains *in nuce* the de Manian conception of ideology, which is a property of language, or more precisely, of the figural or tropological aspects of language... (*ME*, 34)

However, he continues, “de Man stops just here, where the most interesting question arises: to wit, what effects are to be achieved by this rigorously antihumanist aesthetic practice?” (41).²⁸⁶ These effects do not only

²⁸⁶ Indeed, what Sprinker then proceeds to find in Althusser, “another type of history,” we have already located in de Man as the event or the unaccountable to which reading is committed and that, in suspending all historical accounts, will have made history possible. This is Sprinker quoting Althusser, “concerning the possibility of conceiving ‘another type of history,’” he does not see de Man making – although it is precisely what is constantly made (as we have seen in his readings of Kant and Hegel that are found irruptive and baffling). It is constantly made in his reactivating of half-erased inscriptive traces that always exceed the aesthetic policing of hermeneutic programs calling for their interruption. This is what makes history re-testable,

resist aesthetic retotalizations, making visible the unensurability and constitutive incompleteness of all forms of epistemo-political structuration, but are interventionist insofar as new histories are contracted and virtual futures opened up by an alteration in the memory archive – the scripted event. Such an alteration is not only to be traced in *Aesthetic Ideology* but also in de Man's effective reformatting of Romanticism in general. In *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, for instance, the prevalent reintegrative metaphors of recovery and restoration of lost unity with the natural world through the romantic image and poetics of symbolism is repeatedly found to be the "Schillerized" relapse, so to speak, of what in Romanticism will have resisted aesthetic investments and that de Man shows to be founded precisely on the repeated failures of any such attempt. "The existence of poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence" (*RR*, 6), its most affirmative recognition. Wordsworth and Hölderlin, rather than being exponents of integrated consciousness, are found to have a privileged access to such negative self-insights. In "Time and History in Wordsworth," the fourth Gauss lecture, this structure is evident, although given in temporal and ontological concerns of finitude, more distinctive of de Man's earlier writing: "History, like childhood, is what allows recollection to originate in a truly temporal

subject to constant retakes reading effects – history as anterior future. So, Althusser, in Sprinker's translation, about the possibility of another history not bound by the tropological imperative of aesthetic relapse: "Yet, the German language presents us with another term: *Geschichte*, which does not designate a history completed *at present*, doubtless determined to a large extent by an already completed past, but only in part, since present, living history [*l'histoire*] is also open to an uncertain, unforeseen future, not yet completed and consequently *aleatory*. Living history only obeys... 'tendential law'... which means that [it] does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the effect of an encounter with another tendency and so forth to infinity. At each intersection, the tendency can take an unforeseeable form, just because it is *aleatory*" (*ME*, 42).

perspective, not as a memory of a unity that never existed, but as the awareness, the remembrance of a precarious condition of falling that has never ceased to prevail" (*RCC*, 88). What is significant here, in terms of our argument, is that Romanticism, in this case, is disarticulated as a stable category in the diachronic grid of literary history, precisely to the extent that it is pregnant with capacities that put this very history in question. It contains, in other words, the possibility of its own disruption as aesthetic category. Romanticism then becomes an inscriptive opening, a body of writing shown to leak on all sides. Hermeneutic programs are always set up in a relay of *differends*,²⁸⁷ violations one does not see, insofar as they both determine the limits of perception – they affect the *iris* itself, that becomes their messenger – and are in force as *generative* sites. The effects Sprinker calls for in de Man are, in fact, reactivations of *differends* that have always been the very burden of de Man's reading, and that remain lethal to any generative logic of politico-referential systems, a "rendering *virtual* of what is taken as fixed, as reified, as immediate, as 'experience' from within an operation of *disinscription*" (Cohen, *ME*, xii).²⁸⁸ And, for de Man, they are irreversible as they are *automatic*.

²⁸⁷ *Differend* that for Lyotard is a silence in discourse or the impossibility of bearing witness. It is a marker of injustice, a privation that, moreover, is deprived of voice. "This is what a wrong [*tort*] would be: a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage." The *differend* marks a wrong for which no idiom yet exists and "[w]hat is at stake," he writes, "in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (part of *Theory and History of Literature* series, vol. 46, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988), pp. 5, 13.

²⁸⁸ So, in an interview with Stefano Rosso, when asked about "the frequent recurrence of the terms 'ideology' and 'politics' ... noticed recently" in his writing, de Man replies: "I don't think I ever was away from these problems, they were always uppermost in my mind. I have always maintained that one could approach the problems of ideology and by extension the problems of politics only on the basis of critical-linguistic analysis, which had to be done in its own terms, in the medium of language, and I felt I could approach those problems only after having achieved a certain control over those questions." Questions that, indeed, "are really already of a political and

The inscriptive event, in Derrida's words, is "a machine-like deconstruction of the body proper... as organic totality. This machine-like deconstruction is also a deconstruction of metaphor, of the totalizing metaphorical model, by dissociative metonymic structure... there where 'the attribute of naturalness shifts from the metaphorical totality to the metonymic aggregate'" (*ME*, 353-54). In de Man's reading of Proust, metaphor that is always "powerful enough to transform a temporal contiguity into an infinite duration" (*Allegories*, 63) is found to be structured by metonymy that is a contiguous and successive rather than unifying process.²⁸⁹ Proustian metaphor, de Man writes further down, "fails to lead to the totalising stability of metaphorical processes. If metonymy is distinguished from metaphor in terms of necessity and contingency (an interpretation of the term that is not illegitimate), then metonymy is per definition unable to create genuine [that is to say, generative] links." Metaphor that thus creates "an illusion of a synthesis by totalisation" (63) is shown to be dependent on purely relational metonymic structures that keep breaking open "the necessary link" (62). What de Man shows here is precisely the originary virtuality, the tele-technics, of any generative linkage, the link of necessity is found to be contingent. Insofar as ideology is precisely what provides an "illusion of a synthesis by totalisation," deconstruction of metaphor is also what reveals ideological structures as a dance round the void or *a-void-dance* of difference. "And we see why metonymy," Laclau writes, "is, in some sense, more 'primordial' than metaphor (or as in other

ideological nature." From "An Interview with Paul de Man," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), p. 121.

²⁸⁹ Cf. pp. 189 through to 192 as well as note 197, in the previous chapter, for further reference on disintegrative disturbances of analogic metaphorical patterns in Proust.

of de Man's analyses, why allegory takes precedence over the symbol): because in a situation of radical contingency *no criterion of analogy is stable*; it is always governed by changing relations of contiguity that no metaphorical totalization can control." (*ME*, 247, emphasis added).²⁹⁰ This "process of general rhetorization" is not without political effects. Metaphor itself becomes a figure of a "partial stabilization," an ideologico-aesthetic arrest of radically disruptive agencies: "Metaphor – and analogy – is at most a 'superstructural' effect of a partial stabilization in relations of contiguity that are not submitted to any literal principle of a priori determination" (247). For Laclau, it is "the metonymic game [that] occupies center stage, and [with it] politics takes upper hand" (244), one that no foundational or generative logic can govern.

The process is demetaphorization by rote, it is "machine-like," as Derrida writes. A "machine-like dis-figuration" of the body, automatic in its "independence in relation to any subject, any subject of desire and its unconscious, and therefore, de Man doubtless thinks, any psychology or psychoanalysis as such" (*ME*, 355). The machine mutilates the body. It is an irreparable undoing of any system that relies on organic links. Hence, the frequent thematic of mutilation and dismemberment in de Man's writing.²⁹¹ This, however, is not an evidence of pathos but comes precisely from this automaticity of language, its arbitrary power that performs irrespectively of any desire. "De Man associates this feeling of arbitrariness with the experience of threat, cruelty,

²⁹⁰ For Laclau, this rendering virtual of politico-referential structures is enough: "If hegemony means the representation, by a particular social sector, of an impossible totality with which it is incommensurable, then it is enough that we make the space of tropological substitutions fully visible, to enable hegemonic logic to operate freely" (*ME*, 244). It is "accepting as inevitable the metonymic terrain" (244) that necessarily leads to interventions.

²⁹¹ *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, in particular, abounds in references of defaced bodies, and "mutilated textual models" ("Shelley Disfigured," 120).

suffering in dismemberment, decapitation, disfiguration...” (357). But, in that it escapes the subject, it is also what politicises desire because it opens it onto the unexpected – that which is always undesired – onto what is beyond the economy of psychoanalysis, beyond the intractable agencies of primary narcissism kept in reserve by displacement, or by tropological substitution, as de Man would say.

“Cruelty” is not of desire, it is what wrecks desire. It is not that there is a linguistic unconscious, in other words, but that the unconscious is linguistic.²⁹²

And there is something “irrefutable about it,” Derrida writes:

It is a logic that has something irrefutable about it. If, on the one hand, the event supposes surprise, contingency or the arbitrary... it also supposes, on the other hand, this exteriority or this irreducibility to desire. And therefore it supposes that which makes it radically inappropriable, nonreappropriable, radically resistant to the logic of the proper. Moreover, what elsewhere I have called *exappropriation* concerns this work of the inappropriable in the process of

²⁹² This would be what traces the edge of difference between de Man and Lyotard here (cf. also note 293 below). In Lyotard, “the inhuman” is still very much human, still in the possibility of the human, of what one “can.” Lyotard has never given up on the psychoanalytic categories that, to a large extent, govern his writing on the sublime as well as the essays collected in *The Inhuman* (cf. “Rewriting Modernity” and “*Logos and Techne*, or Telegraphy,” for instance). In the “Introduction: About the Human,” he writes of “two sorts of inhuman” and it “is indispensable to keep them dissociated. The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage.” The first one “has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think – if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn’t give it an outlet, one aggravates it. Discontent grows with this civilization, foreclosure along with information” (*The Inhuman*, 2) – Freud is ineffaceable here. It is, of course, the reactivation of the other inhuman, through the anamnestic strategies of working through or “rewriting” in Lyotard’s terminology, the stir of the one active in its displacement, and “so threatening that the reasonable mind cannot fail to fear in it, and rightly, an inhuman power of deregulation” (5), that is the very burden of Lyotard’s writing. But this other inhuman is still “eminently the human,” he writes (Lyotard uses analogy with the child here, that is “the hostage of the adult community”), because its indeterminateness, “its distress heralds and promises things possible” (4). For Lyotard, the question of politics becomes then the possibility of resistance to the first inhuman, and what else is there “to resist with,” he continues, if not that “other inhuman” (7). De Man, however, as we have seen, finds “the inhuman” in technicity that goes beyond any reappropriative categories of the subject – which makes him more inhuman(e), alien, inexcusable.

appropriation... I would draw another consequence that no doubt goes beyond what de Man says... It is this: By reason of this unforeseeability, this irreducible and inappropriable exteriority for the subject of experience, every event as such is *traumatic*. Even an event experienced as a ‘happy’ one... An event is traumatic or it does not happen. *It injures desire, whether or not desire desires or does not desire what happens*. It is that which, within desire, constitutes it as possible and insists there while resisting it, as the impossible: some outside, irreducibly, *as some nondesire, some death, and something inorganic...*” (ME, 358, emphasis added).

The inhuman, for de Man, is radically inhuman, “some nondesire, some death, and something inorganic,” not a nameless possibility of the human, but a sheer performative that is constitutive of language.²⁹³ It is what wrecks every possible desire – conscious, or one more radical that annexes disruptive energies through blockage, anticathexis or resistance. The inhuman, for de Man, “the machine,” does not operate within the binary psychoanalytic grids or any other reappropriative economy, but on the more primitive – more emancipatory? – level, one of sheer expenditure inherent in language that disrupts, or rather unties, all cognitive structure. It is a “place of prosaic resistance... to every

²⁹³ After his lecture on Benjamin in *The Resistance to Theory*, de Man will say: “‘the inhuman,’ however, is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language – independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have. So that, more than nature, toward which one can have, toward which one sets up, a human rapport – which is illegitimate... in the final run, the interpersonal rapport, which is illegitimate too, since there is in a very radical sense, no such thing as the human. *If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such*, since the word human doesn’t correspond to anything like that. So by extension... [w]hat in language does not pertain to the human, what in language is unlike nature and *is not assimilable*, or doesn’t resemble, what in language does not resemble the human in any way, is totally indifferent in relation to the human, is not therefore mysterious; *it is eminently prosaic...*” (96, emphasis added).

possible reappropriation” (Derrida, *ME*, 350) and, in that it is, what keeps open the im-possible, the “*it happens*” as possible.²⁹⁴

It is precisely this radical resistance of the inhuman in de Man that for Barbara Johnson, as David Lehman notes, vectors all the heat of critical response denouncing deconstruction either as a “nihilistic” bug that disables agency or as “a terrorist weapon.”²⁹⁵ De Man’s writing, “‘is viewed, both from the left and from the right, not just as misguided or useless, but somehow almost as evil. Radicals see in his writing a conservative plot to talk literary critics out of participating in social change. Conservatives see in it a nihilistic desire to cancel out human meaning altogether.’” And it is “de Man’s ‘central insight’: that language ‘cannot itself be entirely human,’” that animates both positions.

“Beyond its surface meaning there are hidden messages, and even beyond these,

²⁹⁴ Cf. “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman*, where the possibility of the event is given in terms of negative presentation as the task of the avant-garde. What is important, however, is that the task is not to be identified with mere “innovation,” “the cheap thrill,” that sustains the addictive energies of the capital: “The occurrence, the *Ereignis*,” Lyotard writes, “has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies an innovation. Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is certainly the despair that nothing further will happen... Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time... The question mark of the ‘*Is it happening?*’ stops. *With the occurrence, the will is defeated*. The avant-gardist task remains *that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time*. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation” (107, emphasis added).

²⁹⁵ It is not just a question of “metaphoric” affinity here for Lehman, as he writes elsewhere in *Signs of The Times*. “Of the various metaphors in currency for deconstruction, surely the most disturbing is ‘critical terrorism.’” The analogy, he continues, “appears to be based on several considerations besides the casual fact that both are features of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Both are, by temperament or by instinct, extremist. Deconstructionists have a reputation for ruthlessness and intransigence in pursuit of their agenda... They would like to blow up – metaphorically, of course – the legitimacy of institutions, and traditions, canons of taste and judgment, and received values of any kind. And like terrorists, deconstructionists steel themselves to toss their bombs without regard for the comfort of bystanders – in this case, the authors and readers of literature.” However, the metaphor is soon worn out and shades into “grounds” and “real affinities,” as Lehman continues: “The ideas that deconstructionists articulate... do provide grounds for the terrorist analogy. There is for one thing, the relentlessly nihilistic drive of deconstruction. It asks how we can know anything and answers that we can’t – nothing can be known. And there is its real or metaphorical affinity with the projects of destruction and demolition, decentring and demystifying...” (76-77, 78). “Critical terrorism,” “a terrorist weapon,” in de Man’s own words (*Allegories*, x), or in Derrida’s “a militant and interminable political critique” (*Rogues*, 86), are all what others may call *responsibility*.

Johnson writes, there is ‘a residue of functioning – which produces effects – that is not a *sign* of anything, but merely the outcome of linguistic rules, or even of the absolute randomness of language. Not that language is always absolutely random, but that we can never be sure that it isn’t’” (qtd. in *Signs of the Times*, 150-51). It is in the traces of this indeterminacy that the inhuman persists, holding all possibility infinitely accountable. Undecidable blocks of writing that resist all political programs. True then, it is not radical, nor is it conservative, but it is *radically* political. And like politics, it implies a power of contestation alone, remove it and the political retreats. The inhuman is what always remains subtracted from the systematicity it destabilizes. It is what makes invention ineluctable. And “it is ineluctable to invent a world, instead of being subjected to one,” as Nancy insists. This, and this alone, is the political imperative. Invention, however, being “without model and without warranty,” always “implies facing up to turmoil, anxiety, even disarray.”²⁹⁶ This is the burden of de Man’s reading. But it ups the urgency of the task.

The possibility of the im-possible is what protects us from political positivism. The aesthetic totalizations of politico-referential systems, as we have seen, are irreducible. The rudderless effects of reading are always reintegrated within a referential structure. But the traces of disarray, as de Man maintains, cannot be erased. Erasure itself leaves traces that reading reactivates. For de Man, reading is suicidal or it is not at all. It will always and everywhere double

²⁹⁶ For, “[w]hat will become of our world is something we cannot know, and we can no longer believe in being able to predict or command it. But we can act in such a way that this world is a world able to open itself up to its own uncertainty as such.” Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 158.

back on itself, coming to reflect on its own formal process that opens the possibility of always reading otherwise. No reading then except by virtue of its own undoing. This is the rhetorical fiat of reading and its irreversibly allegorical structure. But the subversive politico-critical energies of reading are contained precisely in its autoimmunity that is also an impetus of interminable critique. Undecidability is essentially the idea of permanent revolution.

——— *Where certainties come apart,
there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match.*

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