

## POLITICS OF IRONY IN PAUL DE MAN

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What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable  
Lightness of Being*

Irony is a major theme in Paul de Man's work, one that cannot be analyzed in a few pages. The same goes for the politics of de Man's theoretical work. At the intersection of irony and politics, an intersection which is already contained in each issue "in isolation," a short demonstration is possible. This would be preliminary to a lengthier discussion that would attempt to historically and politically locate the concept of irony. The notion of irony that is operative in the following discussion is perhaps entirely peculiar to western modernity, in which (as Kristeva, Foucault, and others have pointed out) the particularly vertiginous and violent rites aimed at securing organic selfhood necessarily confront an existential moment of madness.<sup>1</sup> This point has a special significance for the present discussion, in that western irony has political-epistemological roots that are far more individualist than collectivist in orientation—no small problem since I use this irony to argue for a politics more of the latter inclination. As a further preparation for the demonstration that follows, I will subscribe to the view that the politics of a theorist are best read in the theoretical work itself,

## CRASH THEORY

rather than in a theorist's purportedly more "explicit political statements."<sup>2</sup>

As the centerpiece of this demonstration I will take a passage from de Man's well-known essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality":

Irony is unrelieved vertige, dizziness to the point of madness. Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the inherent violence of the actual relationship between human beings. Once this mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily on the verge of madness.<sup>3</sup>

This is obviously a well-loaded group of sentences, one that could be disseminated almost to infinity. Even within the specifically political (a dangerous categorization to make, of course), it is the complexity of the passage which ensures that what follows will be relatively simple.

The passage shows some existentialist, more specifically Sartrean influence. This influence, however, is confined only to certain passages in de Man, and is offset by the total effect of his essays, which display an overall Heideggerian motivation.<sup>4</sup> But such "Sartrean" passages make their presence apparent, with their rhetoric of authenticity and life on the edge. In Sartre, of course, such sublime situations, in which beauty and terror are inextricably intertwined, are moments of truth: both ontological and political.

Paul Fry, in *The Reach of Criticism*, would separate these two moments (here characterized as those of being and history):

the fallacy of misplaced concreteness that in many cases characterizes the currently resurgent emphasis on the priority of history in interpretation. The cry of 'history' seems mistaken only partly because, for the purposes of interpretation, historical discourse seems to be abstract and concrete in just the wrong places; it is also possible to suppose—and admittedly one can do no more than suppose—that the representation of being rather than the representation of social conditions is the primary motivation of all writing.<sup>5</sup>

De Man shows an unresolvable struggle between these two modes of representation, such that there remains no "primary motivation of all writing"; that is, unless the tension itself is the motivation.<sup>6</sup>

Terry Eagleton identifies this ontological edge in de Man as an "early Sartrean horror of 'authenticity' and 'bad faith,' that dismal state in which the *etre-pour-soi* cravenly congeals into the *etre-en-soi*."<sup>7</sup> Eagleton refers to de Man's doctrines of "eternal separation" and "eternal alienation" from nature. Eagleton's point is not that an identification or a full harmony with nature is possible, rather, given that non-identity is a fact, one need not adopt a tragic view of the human situation. At the same time, though, one also need not attribute a "tragic" political program to this view. Another

BILL MARTIN

way to work it out might be through temporal struggle against eternal alienation (indeed, this is more the German and Nordic tragic view—as opposed to the Greek).<sup>8</sup>

De Man is only part-Sartrean at most: as he claims: inauthenticity is unbearable, the intellectual operates under the imperative to unmask. This imperative, without the Sartrean terminology, is as much or more operative in *Allegories of Reading* (especially in the readings of Rousseau) and in the essays concerned with nature (all, certainly, but some more than others) that are found in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. This is not to argue, however, that the intellectual is always faithful to the unmasking imperative: sometimes the imperative is carried out as a ruse, that is, as an ideological remasking that *only* hides. Ironically, however, authenticity is also unbearable. What evolves then is a kind of strategy of progressive unmasking, the peeling of an onion with an infinity of layers and no center, no final substance underneath.

We can speak, then, of the deployment of irony. An alternative political strategy to both reformism and Leninism is perhaps best characterized by the phrase “coup upon coup”:

These *coups*, disseminated in other texts, produce a vertiginous effect. They challenge the concept by their unstable and iterative play of forms, their textual duplication and semantic drift, which renders us powerless to fix or seize hold of it.<sup>9</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacusbund had a similar strategy, which they called the “continuous offensive.” As in politics, so in theory, there are problems. After three momentous and heroic insurrections, the *Spartacusbund* became exhausted and defeated. The time/space of theory is much different, of course, but a similar problem is encountered in Nietzsche, Adorno, and Horkheimer, and now some of the poststructuralists—who focus solely on a strategy of “determinate negation.” The continuous offensive itself seems inauthentic, if it has as its purpose to simply continue *without winning* (Lenin, we should note, was interested in *winning*, while the inauthentic permanent negativity strategy is more a “living on borderlines,” a more comfortable, less dangerous type).<sup>10</sup>

The question may arise, all the same, regarding a theoretical practice that is incommensurate with practice per se—that is, a terrain of theory differing sufficiently from practice such that the creation of a continuous dizziness in theory does not necessarily translate directly onto a similar unrelieved vertigo in practice. In de Man, the productive tension relies on a more slow-burn process than unrelieved irony, but this slow-burn in theory does not necessarily have its practical corollary—if indeed there are such—in reform. (I am somewhat suspicious, incidentally, of the idea that theory, per se, has practical corollaries, because no particular theory has a directly analogous practice. But why have analogies if you can draw a “direct” connection? It may seem, however, that the kind of theory/practice

## CRASH THEORY

separation I am positing revalorizes the theory/practice distinction that keeps intellectuals apart from “practical” struggles. In what follows I hope to make it apparent that this separation is exactly the opposite of what I hope for.)

Irony disrupts *organicism*, the latter being perhaps the number one target in all of de Man’s work. In “Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*,” de Man explains irony as the discontinuous and heterogenous balancing force that stands over and against a totality that strives for continuity and organic wholeness. Both Lukács and de Man are moxie enough to recognize the interdependence of continuity and discontinuity (contrary to much current opinion, the dialectic has not been ruled completely out of order by all recent critical theorists—it is still an operative category in de Man)<sup>11</sup> The difference is in the stress. Lukács’s problem is to make irony, the bearer of discontinuity, serve the higher goal of determination and organization. As de Man argues, however, this comes at a price which Lukács would be unwilling to pay:

Irony steadily determines [the] claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance which separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience. The ironic language of the novel mediates between experience and desire, and unites ideal and real within the complex paradox of the form. This form can have nothing in common with the homogenous organic form of nature: it is founded on an act of consciousness, not on the imitation of a natural object.<sup>12</sup>

Lukács, however, is somewhat aware of the consequences of his view, as de Man reports. The totality is *conceptual*, and therefore not the result of a truly organic relationship of ideal and real. For de Man, though, even the conceptual totality is not and cannot be organic (incidentally, de Man’s critique on this point would disrupt the models of ethical action in analytic philosophy that depend on organic conceptions of mental events).<sup>13</sup> Consciousness itself already contains the seeds of its disharmony.

This assertion leads us to recapitulate the major difference between de Man and Fry—this difference is, from the opposite position, the difference between de Man and Lukács. Fry quests for the representation of being, which is typically associated with the schools of phenomenology, existentialism, and hermeneutics (and attendant critical schools such as the reception aesthetic). Lukács wants the representation of history and social conditions, typically associated with historical materialism (as well as non-Marxist sociological approaches to literature). De Man agrees more with Fry, although de Man, as a far better Heideggerian (this is no disgrace for Fry, to be sure, as there are few readers of Heidegger in de Man’s class), has a much keener grasp of the idea that being has a history (and a future).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one way to state the tension in de Man is by acknowledging the “opposition” between Heidegger’s “historicity” (more akin to the

BILL MARTIN

process by which being is represented) and Marx's "history." This tension is without a true "center;" however, it forever exploits its own imbalance. Derrida describes this tense knot of history and historicity in *Memoires for Paul de Man*:

Despite all his suspicions of historicism or historical rhetorics blind to their own rhetoricity, Paul de Man constantly contended with the irreducibility of a certain history.... The materiality of actual history is... that which resists historical, historicizing resistance.<sup>15</sup>

Now we can consider politicizing synthesis. Irony, far from conceptually organizing a text into a unified totality, disrupts that unity because irony marks the intrusion of consciousness, namely that of an author. As Stephen Melville explains, "ironic intrusions, overt markers of fictionality, work to disrupt any promise of realism or of totality, sundering the narrative from itself..."<sup>16</sup> This "parabasis" is "nearly a paradigm for de Man." Further,

we can think of the radical ironization de Man describes as "permanent parabasis" as if it were, in effect, the placing of every word of a given text in quotation marks, marking each word with an ironic "I say;" "Marking" "each" "word" "with" "an" "ironic" "I" "say": a palpably suspicious proceeding uncannily reminiscent of much recent criticism.... Its effects, beyond parody, are various: the quotation marks can be said to ironize the words they bracket but also to attribute to them or enforce upon them an appearance of deeper intentionality; they work as well to level out the emphasis given in the usual and casual reading of the phrase, offering the possibility that each word could become emblematic of, could organize, the whole. Overall, we might say that the quotation marks "aerate" the sentence and open it to critical occupation.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the import for a political project based on this understanding of irony in de Man is readily understood. I only wish to bring out one small point: if sentences were to be restructured by taking different words to organize their total structures, they could and would then become different sentences (this is a "margin to center" activity which redefines the whole). Thus, the sentences "critically occupied" would be transformed by that occupation. They would not, however, at that stage, be "wholly other." This result could only be the product of multiple transformations.

By all rights, some understanding, if not all (by which I mean, probably not all, but some), should be transferable to dealings with the social text. What has to be considered in seizing such opportunities is whether the price can be paid for the possible consequences of such transference. By these I do not mean the practical problems associated with unrelieved vertigo, problems which are perhaps best illustrated, in terms of radical political practice, by certain stages of the Cultural Revolution in China (although

## CRASH THEORY

here we have a case of problems well worth generating). As I hinted earlier, a strategic map could deal with the need for different ratios of irony in theory and practice. This is necessary for any transformation, otherwise, theory would simply remain in its own unrestrainedly vertiginous realm, which would forsake real intertextuality and maintain irony as a plaything for intellectuals. If our text, however, is a fiction—and it is—then our transformations of the text will be fictions also, which could present a greater problem.

This possibility represents a politics that is repulsive to certain social theories, some associated with Marxism, others with liberalism. Relativism, one of the repulsive aspects of intertextual transformative politics, if it must be accepted philosophically, need not be politically vicious or politically lame (as with Richard Rorty). Granted, there is a danger of volunteerism and decisionism, but this is not specific to relativism. Furthermore, there are different sorts of relativism (a point lost on many commentators in the objectivity/relativism debate). The sort that falls out from de Man's conception of irony cannot simply call for the exposure of the fictionality of texts; deconstructive irony further entails a recoding, though one that is no less fictional. If applied in this way to the social text, de Man is very much like Foucault. And, as for Foucault, the question that is repeatedly raised, justifiably so, is Why is the transformed fictional society any better than the status quo fictional society?

Before gesturing toward the resolution of this question, however, there is a need to say something about madness.

In "De Man and the Dialectic of Being," Allan Stoekl writes,

Unlike natural objects, entities engendered in consciousness, in their very beginning, imply death. This death, in the context of language, means nothing other than the failure of the word to become "entirely literal" and to originate as an "incarnation of a transcendental principle." Much as the poet might like to grant the word a status as natural object, and therefore to appropriate for himself, through his word, a transcendental principle, the way is barred. Failing to be literal, the poetic word, and poetic language, are thus condemned to be metaphorical, to be figurative.<sup>18</sup>

Life occurs between the object of "nostalgia for the object" (that is, unmediated touch with reality) and death. The squeeze play is further complicated by the fact that the space between the past (object) and the future (death) is not simply to be defined in terms of the static present or "moment"—this definition smuggles in the transcendental. Rather, the present is moving, it is movement, and it is often volatile. Nostalgia and looking toward the future (at least in the form of prophecy, a name for the theoretical resistance to theory), then, often takes the form of a dream of non-movement. The dream is utopian in the derisive sense of the term used by Marx. One cannot say that the dream is absent from de Man, but

then one cannot also say that the dream is absent from Marx either.<sup>19</sup> But de Man knows that the cessation of movement, and thus of certain forms of alienation, is impossible. Too many reminders of this fact, though, in the form of ironic-vertiginous interventions, bring us close to madness: one can only live with so much inauthenticity. The constant temptation then is to give in to "the voice of emptiness below," the voice of death-relief.

Another death is achieved by simply ignoring all movement (i.e., "zoning out"). This is typical of western societies, in particular the U.S., where this death simply comes in a package like everything else. In the midst of such "sanity," a bit of craziness is certainly called for. Being constantly involved with activities of the mind and consciousness, intellectuals are perhaps most sensitive to the tension between complacent sanity and utter madness born of frustration (that is, intellectuals conceptualize the tension, and this "enlightenment," necessary as it is, exacts its toll, in part because intellectuals are not and cannot be the principle agents of the social transformations that are demanded by this tension between the two static spaces). Against the generated vertigo the intellectual possesses some tools of analysis, which doesn't relieve the spinning (which isn't the point anyway), but makes it bearable most of the time. For non-intellectuals there is less a chance of the necessary craziness (in the sense in which a popular song has it: "Let's go crazy") spilling over into madness, and therefore a need and a responsibility for intellectuals to *ironize* society.

What has just been said somewhat duplicates the theory/practice disjuncture in terms of intellectuals and non-intellectuals. There is no exact replication such that, when the theory/practice division is invoked (perhaps implicitly), the discussion is already focussed largely on (the terrain of) the relation between *radical* theory and *radical practice*, while the second distinction, even if it applies mainly to radical intellectuals, also intends application more to the public rather than only to the radical activists. Admittedly, both distinctions are not only artificially created by a social form that still depends on an obsolete division of mental and manual labor, rather, the distinctions are capable, in an overly-rigid form at least, of being put to quite reactionary uses. In other words, certain kinds of recognition given to these distinctions can encourage their further reification. Nevertheless, all the discussion about theoretical practice in "high-crit" circles for the last fifteen years or so has perhaps led to its own kind of reification and pacification. There has most recently been an alarming "new age" aura to this "theoretical practice," as though spreading "good vibes," in the most sophisticated fashion of course, is all the practice we theorists need worry about. The kind of practice that coheres with the theory engaged in here is not indicated in a concrete, programmatic sense, which of course is a serious problem that I have dealt with elsewhere, and indeed in ways other than in "theory" per se.<sup>20</sup> In terms of the way intellectual activity is conducted in Western countries, however, it is clear that the only way to proceed toward *ironizing* society, or toward any other attempt to break down

## CRASH THEORY

the artificial and obsolete distinction between theory and practice, is to "occupy" that distinction from, as Derrida puts it, "a certain inside." This is not just a prescription for reform, but a very important strategic question that asks exactly what and where this "inside" is.

The result could be a *literal* social order that self-consciously constructs and transforms its fictions. On an individual level, limited in a specifically individualistic way, this is the constant theme of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*: that is, to write one's life like a book. Naturally, one would want to write a *good* book. Social writing, a question of extremely complex intertextual politics, would then require the intersection of aesthetics and "practical reason," a theme on which de Man wrote in several later essays.<sup>21</sup> As de Man has shown, the intersection is always already there: deconstructively reading the intersection is the act of reading what is already deconstructed, two discourses (or "two" discourses) which are thoroughly inter-implicated.

Gayatri Spivak recommends "reading the world."<sup>22</sup> Agreed: nevertheless, this is a transitional stage to a shift to a writerly mode, to writing the world, living literally. What we have now is obviously quite the opposite of a writerly politics.<sup>23</sup>

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### Notes

1. See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez; ed. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
2. One cannot assume that a theorist necessarily knows the language of such statements, involving as it does a close relation to programmatic—which can also be called political moxie. It is exceedingly difficult to participate in this language game without practical involvement on some level. The reverse is just as true: understanding of politics in a programmatic sense does not necessarily entail a grasp of the ontological and epistemological claims made by political discourse. This point is amply demonstrated by de Man in his readings of Rousseau in de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).
3. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed., rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215-16.
4. Another paper would be needed to deal with the way Sartre battles Heidegger in de Man's essays. It is true that the Sartrean influence in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and earlier essays may be largely due to the time frame (fifties and sixties; "Rhetoric" was first published in 1969). De Man discusses the "influence" of Sartre in Stefana Rosso, "An Interview with Paul de Man." See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 118-19.
5. Paul Fry, *The Reach of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 3.

BILL MARTIN

6. This is a tension notably lacking in *The Reach of Criticism*. It would be interesting to show how this tension, including its political associations, is already embedded in the "pure" representation of being. This would be a key task in any articulation of a deconstructive politics.
7. Terry Eagleton, "The Critic as Clown," in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso Books, 1986), 156; also see 157-62.
8. I explore this theme further in "Return to the land of weird theologies," *Social Epistemology*, 1:2 (1987): 203-209.
9. Stéfan Agosti, "Coup upon *coup*: An Introduction to *Spurs*," in Jacques Derrida, *Spurs*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 9.
10. This is essentially Habermas's critique of the aforementioned theorists. See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). Also see my "Nomad and empire: Nietzsche, guerilla theatre, guerilla war," in *Arena*, no. 77 (1986): 88-95. The politics of "living on borderlines" have more contemporary references in works such as Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1984), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988).
11. Interesting and recent work that deals with the fate of dialectic in deconstruction, and in thinkers who take a similarly ambivalent attitude toward dialectic (perhaps not rejecting it altogether, but often making the dialectic come apart at the seams, as with Bataille, Levinas, Kristeva, etc.), is Mark Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
12. Paul de Man, "Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*," in *Blindness and Insight*, 51-59; quotation from p.56.
13. Nevertheless, Donald Davidson (one of the best-known and certainly one of the best in recent analytic philosophy) has recently challenged this kind of organicism, arguing for an analytic version of Freud's theory of the divided self. See "Deception and Division," in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, eds. Ernest LePore and Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 138-48; and "Paradoxes of irrationality," in *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, eds. Richard Wollheim and James Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
14. The comparison by Paul Fry, of Heidegger's "historicity," de Man's "temporality," and Derrida's *differance* is not appropriate, as de Man does not think that historicity—or history, for that matter—has the same sort of "effect" as temporality. See *The Reach of Criticism*, 202-203.
15. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Jonathan Culler (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 52-53. The project de Man was working on at the time of his death involved a comparison of Marx and Kierkegaard as readers of Hegel, a project that certainly would have gone deeper into the interpenetrations and antinomies of historicity and history. See "Interview," 120-21; also, Wlad Godzich's "Foreword" to the same volume, pp.x-xi.
16. Stephen Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 151.
17. *Ibid*, 151-52.

## CRASH THEORY

18. Allan Stoekl, "De Man and the Dialectic of Being," *Diacritics* (Fall 1985): 37-38.
19. See, for example, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 6; cited in Stoekl, p.38. Consider, also, the well-known pastoral scene in *The German Ideology*, in which Marx and Engels speak of hunting and fishing in the morning, painting in the afternoon, and criticizing after dinner. Naturally, it is better to criticize on a full stomach, and who doesn't know that an intellectual's best thoughts usually come at night, when she or he should be in bed? Some interesting comments on Marxism and pastoral are found in de Man, "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," in *Blindness and Insight*.
20. Three basic avenues have not been explored much by radical intellectuals lately. This is in part because these avenues don't seem suave to some of today's deconstructionists, who seem to think that all we need is another reading of some canonical poet and perhaps a trip to the polling booth every four years to vote for the liberal candidate (which, in the present political atmosphere, is the liberal end of conservatism). The three avenues I have in mind are: 1) work in popular culture (i.e., using popular culture to popularize critical/oppositional ideas); 2) political activism; 3) donating money to radical causes. It seems odd that I must mention this last point, but under the notion of 'theoretical practice' many intellectuals have come to conceive of themselves as the only "class" that they can really discuss. To my mind there may be some problems with Sartre's model of the "engaged intellectual," but there are many aspects of the practice that are still worthy of emulation, though perhaps under a different model. Undoubtedly there are some good reasons why radical intellectuals find it hard to work with radical activist groups, but some of the recent trends toward disengagement are not the right way to go (and admittedly I cannot offer Paul de Man as a very good model—though that of course is not the point of this essay). Interestingly, but also unfortunately, many of today's academic feminists, Marxists, Foucauldians, etc., show the same unwillingness to sully their hands. This is one reason for stressing the programmatic dimension of politics and social theory as needing to be dealt with as thoroughly as the theoretical dimensions per se. For the most part, deconstructionists, or whoever, who have not considered the programmatic dimension in its own terms (that is, as a practical engagement which too many intellectuals in the deconstructionist camp, especially in the U.S. either sneer at or assume is fully present in their writing), almost always turn out to have some quite naive preconceptions about the larger social arena. Please understand that I say these things as someone who is devoted to Derrida's work and who has tried to incorporate that work into social theory.
21. See, for example, de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime," in Mark Krupnick, ed., *Displacement: Derrida and after* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1983), 139-53; "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory*, 73-105; "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica, eds., *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 121-44.
22. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Reading the World: Literary Studies in the 1980s," in G. Douglas Atkins and Michael L. Johnson, eds., *Reading and Writing Differently* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1985), 27-37.
23. I would like to thank the reviewers at the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* for their valuable and interesting comments; I tried to do these comments some justice in the rewrite, though I think only a fully-articulated encounter between de Man and social theory would answer the many questions that can and should be raised concerning the very brief engagement I offer here.

## POSTSCRIPT: BLINDNESS AND HINDSIGHT

Of the critical responses to the “de Man” *affair*, I find Derrida’s article, “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War”<sup>1</sup> appropriate in every respect. In fact, it is refreshing to find Derrida, especially in the last several pages of his essay, finally calling out those journalists and academics who are all too ready to speak but haven’t found the time or wherewithal to read, study, investigate, and think. As Derrida points out, it is the latter group, the professors who for the moment would be journalists, who are the most infuriating. In a period in which students have been encouraged to only want that “education” that has an immediate cash payoff, these professors also readily call “incomprehensible” that which they cannot be bothered to read. (And it is very often that one encounters academics who dismiss de Man, Derrida, etc., out of hand, who have read *absolutely nothing*.) This is a triple abdication of responsibility: to those who are attempting to seriously pursue the questions that are raised by recent developments in critical theory and philosophy; to those students who see more than dollar signs behind learning; and, not least, to those people who, through various modes of marginalization, have been denied access to what is ordinarily called “literacy.” I don’t think that there is any question but that it is time to enter upon a counter-offensive against *this kind* of anti-intellectualism that infects the ranks of intellectuals themselves. And this is true, I think, despite the fact that some intellectuals associated with recent critical theories sometimes play a wishy-washy game concerning the political implications of such theories.<sup>2</sup> The view, however, that thinkers such as Derrida have only recently become “political” is belied by even a cursory look at earlier works. Part of the effort in recent theories is to “reinvent politics,” in part through raising and reinventing the problem of language. Given some of the longstanding problems of radical politics thus far, this attempt at reinvention sounds to me like a good thing. And the fact is that, even when some intellectuals, including some associated with recent critical trends, justifiably incur anti-intellectual sentiment on the part of people outside of ordinary intellectual circles (and it is silly to pretend that there are such circles, in the United States anyway, that are somehow distinct from the academy), none of that cancels the need for thinking. The real point of criticism of intellectuals for “intellectualism” has to be that there needs to be a reconnection of thought and practice—and a rethinking and a new practice around what the connection might be. None of the conservative criticism of de Man, and even little of the progressive or radical criticism, seems to center around this point.

Radical politics has to learn once again, in this post-Stalin period, how

## CRASH THEORY

to integrate insights from diverse sources. It is a foolish remnant of Stalin's compression of Marxism to simply look for some one-to-one correspondence between theory and theorist. That is why I haven't thought it very important to speak to the "question" of someone called "Paul de Man himself." To the extent that that question needs speaking to, however, I find Derrida's essay by far the most insightful—and the most engaged with history, for that matter.<sup>3</sup> In closing, of the many issues raised in Derrida's essay, I would simply like to comment on two, closely interrelated themes: *confession* and *morality*. In much of what has been written concerning the *affair*, there seems to lurk (at least implicitly, but sometimes quite explicitly) the idea that de Man should have *confessed* his activities. Two sorts of inquiry can be addressed to this lurking demand. First, in practical terms, *who* should de Man have confessed to? Before what forum? In what form? Even from a purely formal standpoint, this business of confessing is a strange thing. But that is by far the lesser question. What is more interesting is the structure of "confession" itself. This of course is a question that de Man has written about, especially in the chapter in *Allegories of Reading* titled "Excuses." The analysis, which centers on Rousseau's *Confessions*, has been quoted in several of the attacks on de Man. Here is the passage most often alluded to, as if quoting these lines constitutes some sort of *prima facie* indictment:

... it is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence.<sup>4</sup>

There the citation typically begins and ends,<sup>5</sup> which is of course a way of disarming the theoretical enterprise of which this passage is a part: the sentences immediately after this citation make it clear that acting *literally* by no means absolves one of responsibility.

On the other hand, it makes it equally possible to accuse fiction-making which, in Holderlin's words, is "the most innocent of all activities," of being the most cruel. The knowledge of radical innocence also performs the harshest mutilations. Excuses not only excuse but they carry out the verdict of their accusations. [293]

A little further on in the same essay, de Man claims: "Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default" [299]. In other words, de Man's analysis aims to show what a disingenuous thing a confession can be.

At several places in his essay, Derrida maintains that we must remain "on guard against morality." In the place of morality, Derrida appeals (and this is a theme in many of Derrida's writings) to *responsibility* and to what he

BILL MARTIN

calls the "ethico-political." It is within the horizon of the latter that the problematics of the former have to be worked out—and, to my mind, it is the problematics of responsibility that de Man not only worked out in the essay on Rousseau's *Confessions*, but in all his work as a philosopher-literary critic and as a professor and mentor as well<sup>6</sup> De Man's *response* to the things he mistakenly thought and wrote in 1941-42 was to pursue a course that questioned the kind of foundationalist claims—of a national, "racial," or metaphysical sort—that held him in their sway in those years. Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and Christopher Norris, among others, demonstrate this quite clearly.<sup>7</sup> No "personal accounting" could be worth nearly as much as this activity of questioning. But, those who would make yet another morality play out of this *affair*, this non-controversy, of course do not want to touch that side of things. In "Autobiography as De-Facement," de Man makes a claim that is not unusual in deconstructive and other forms of recent criticism: that personal identity is a kind of "legal fiction," the product of—and perpetually caught up in—a particular system of political/legal designations<sup>8</sup> What pleasure the morality players would take in this passage! Except that, if actually *read*, the passage points to what is exactly wrong about the morality play: guilt and *complicity*, especially complicity, are not such simple matters. Perhaps the article in the *New York Times*, the one that "broke" the de Man "story," was "right next to," or at any rate, "in the same paper with," articles defending the *Contras* or the Strategic Defense Initiative, or attacking the legal team of Tawana Brawley for "politicizing" her case. After all, a good bit of the morality play around de Man concerns articles that were right next to or in the same paper with his. And some of these were admittedly politically-awful articles in a collaborationist newspaper—a bit like the *New York Times*. The point is that, especially after the hypocritical and shrill moralizing of the Reagan years (a bleat which shows little sign of abating), people who are actually concerned with ethical-political questions ought to just cut out the morality play, and think about *responsible* ways to make the future unlike certain aspects of the past. I think that is the course Paul de Man pursued.<sup>9</sup>

Bill Martin

## CRASH THEORY

### Notes

1. *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988), pp.590-652.
2. It is unfortunate, too, that many of the articles that have taken up the defense of de Man's work, and of deconstruction generally, have also exemplified this same wishy-washy, apolitical (though in a moralising way- approach. I think this is partly because of the *defensive* posture many such critics have assumed; the exciting thing about the Derrida piece is that he assumes a quite different posture, a posture that I hope the rest of the deconstructive critics are ready for.
3. I do not want to give the impression that there has not been any other insightful writing on this subject. The articles by Hartman, Miller, Norris, and Culler all have their strong points. See, in that order: "Blindness and Insight," *The New Republic*, March 7, 1988; J. Hillis Miller in *Times Literary Supplement*, June 17-23, 1988; the final chapter to Christopher Norris's *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*, "Postscript: On de Man's Early Writings in *Le Soir*" (London: Routledge, 1988-; and, "It's Time to Set the Record Straight About Paul de Man and His Wartime Articles for a Pro-Fascist Newspaper," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 1988. The article by Walter Kendrick in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (April 1988), "De Man That Got Away," suggests that the defense offered especially by Norris and Hartman, that de Man refuted his earlier rhetoric of authority with his later work, means that we have to read all the later work as exemplary of one man's neurosis. Why just one man? Why not read the later work as the neuroses of a lot of people? It seems to me that if we have neuroses in later life that are the result of having chauvinist attitudes earlier in life, then these are not the worst sorts of neuroses to have. If Hartman and Norris erred in making this judgment, they only did so in not showing that there are larger lessons to be learned from the development of de Man's later work, especially as seen against the background of the *Le Soir* articles. That is, I would like to see the better-known deconstructionists take to the political offensive around the questions raised by the de Man affair, though admittedly this means expanding the deconstructionist arsenal somewhat beyond the boundaries it has largely worked in in the U.S. and England.
4. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), p.293.
5. As in "Deconstructing de Man" by Jon Wiener, in *The Nation*, January 9, 1988. I hope that I will not be too presumptuous in saying that *The Nation* usually does far better than this. Wiener's article, or at least its appearance in a progressive magazine, is one more instance of how some progressives and radicals have opted for a smug illiteracy inasmuch as recent theory is involved.
6. See J. Hillis Miller, "Reading Unreadability," in *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987), pp.43-59.
7. Perhaps the one foundationalism that de Man did not interrogate so fully concerns gender. Though de Man does take up this question in *Allegories of Reading*, his reading of the question of nature, and humanity's estrangement from it, leads one to wonder if there might be a gender question lurking there as well. Klaus Theweleit argues that the idea of a "whole, organic nature" is nothing but a *male fantasy* (the title of his book: trans. Stephen Conway [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987]) "fueled by the metaphysical trajectories of Plato, Augustine, Newton, etc." But "why privilege nature as a whole that we aren't"—i.e., that we are estranged from? "Why privilege us as aliens to nature as opposed to beings perversely within nature interacting as we do partially, mythically, specifically?" These questions were suggested to me by a reader at *CJPST*, who further argued that "this portioning of nature as essentially something other to us (whose cons-

*BILL MARTIN*

sciousness condemns us to the tense borderlines as perpetual prisoners in a prison house of language) seems to go against the ironic grains of both a radical practice of deconstruction and the non) essentialist tendencies of physics the other side of quantum theorizing." Though I find these questions very helpful to think about (and I can't pretend to really think very extensively about them here), I think the reference to quantum theory is revealing, for much of the philosophizing done recently on the basis of this theory assumes an essentialism of meaning. I think I would stay with de Man in thinking that it is the attempted creation and ascription of meaning that really does separate humanity from nature. Donald Davidson's thesis of "anomolous monism" indicates something similar: it is one thing to be "of" nature, another thing to be a "natural entity." Perhaps the reader had in mind the same sort of point made by Eagleton, that de Man's view of human separation from nature seems tragic and informed by a certain kind of nostalgia. De Man's deconstruction might seem, then, like a kind of existentialism turned upside-down. I think there is that element in de Man, though "The Rhetoric of Temporality" was a turning-point in terms of how predominant that element was. Theweleit, however, reads the metaphysical trajectories and attendant male fantasies of Plato, etc., as essential to the formation of fascist ideology. Whether this is an unexplored aporia in de Man's work is a question that is worth pursuing, though the discussion will have to be carried on at length elsewhere. I would simply suggest that, though I find anti-essentialist views toward what it means to be "human," or what it means to be a "gendered person," superior to essentialist views, it is never simply determined from the outset that what is to be made politically out of anti-essentialism will in any given instance be superior to some of the political products of essentialist thought. (On this point, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, forthcoming from Methuen.)

8. In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984-) pp.67-81.
9. Thanks to Clayton Koelb (Comparative Literature, University of Chicago) for suggesting the title for this "Postscript." And thanks to the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* for allowing me to append the "Postscript" to "Politics of irony in Paul de Man."