

Review In Depth

(Un)readability of Paul de Man

TRS Sharma

The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man

by Rodolphe Gasche

Harvard University Press, Cambridge,
1998; vi+309 pp; price not mentioned

Gasche protests far too much, initially. Perhaps more than what de Man asks for.

True, de Man was a maverick critic (who died in 1983), and many think of him as the American version of Derrida, known equally for radical departures in theory, though not as prolific, as well known as the latter. Gasche writes that de Man's 'prose is dense, opaque to the point of obscurity; the sequence of the arguments is unfathomable...' (p. 1). Other caveats follow thick and fast: His principle of negation destroys all positives and positions, and it is 'torture...reading him' (p. 3). Besides, Gasche adds, there are others who find him 'morally wrong,' 'nihilistic' and even 'outlandish.' Moreover, de Man is ultra radical when he analyses language: he denies any vital or meaningful link between the linguistic and the phenomenal. If this were true, if the subtle dissymmetries working within language to which de Man insistently draws our attention through his theories yield no valid knowledge of the external world, then any intervention in the world or its language would be pointless. Gasche almost gives up on de Man in his preface. Take a look at his critical terminology, and you will conclude, Gasche writes, that his is 'a private language...a critical idiolect.' He shifts his terms through a 'strategic transcoding' (a phrase that Gasche borrows from Frederic Jameson) into incompatible domains of discourse.

Yes, de Man is impossible.

But this is only a ruse on Gasche's part. 'Let me not hasten to a conclusion,' he tells us in a seeming act of salvaging after so much savaging! There is surely something ascetic about de Man, something akin to Nietzsche. With an ascetic rigour he probes into the nature of language, especially the literary and philosophical language through what Gasche calls the 'wild card of reading' which de Man plays as his very 'singular' critical act. 'Singular' being a favourite term with Gasche,

he uses it with rapid frequency to make his points. For de Man is at odds with all critical disciplines past and present, and anyone with a sense of certainty about any theory should be worried about such a 'singular' achievement.

Stoical Pursuit

de Man's 'singular' achievement is based upon an almost stoical pursuit of a set of core problems. How do we read, specially the literary and philosophical texts? What is the nature of language in general, and in specific discourses? What is rhetoric, what is literariness? Does reading come up against the principle of negation implicit in language? How do metaphor, allegory, and irony function in it?

First, the question of language. The nature of language is what shapes up our ways of reading. Or is it the other way round: our reading frames, habits determine our perception of the nature of language? Either way one is up against a series of paradoxes. Language is autonomous, has its own internal rules, and its reference structures are immanent. You can't confuse these referrals with phenomenality. The second facet of language is mimesis. 'Mimesis is a discrete trope; language can imitate a nonverbal entity but it makes no identity claims. It is an intralinguistic event which makes possible a mimetic relation and thereby fosters an 'aesthetic mistranslation' (p. 134). de Man, in short, denies language its ability to tell us anything about the world. Language is intrinsically disruptive, and nothing worthwhile can get said in language. Every effort to pursue a reference only returns it to the inquiry about the ontology of language, its nature to be itself, materially, tropologically. But de Man concedes that all is not language, and that outside language there exists the phenomenal world. However, if this world is not amenable to language—for there are resistances to and within language—it

can still be mastered by perception. But the belief that language helps control, understand phenomena is to indulge in 'aesthetic ideology'.

de Man also invokes the classical trivium, grammar, logic and rhetoric, when he contemplates the nature of language. 'Grammar is an isotope of logic,' writes de Man. We know that grammar is closely allied to logic, and is often at odds with rhetoric. The role of rhetoric within language has always been unpredictable, problematic. Seizing hold of rhetoric, de Man makes it his paradigmatic term. The field opens up with the trivium, and language provides manifold options. Grammatically it can assert unities, affirm, totalize. It can, the way Kant propounded aesthetic judgement, unify aesthetic and rational, imaginative and empirical, anthropomorphic and the tropological. At the semantic level, however, it can undo all assertions, upset all systems of thought, coherence, totalization. It can, perhaps, through iterative negation hint or foreshadow affirmation, though this aspect of language does not interest de Man, for he would be content to stop on the near side of negation. Language in, short, is visualized as a field of perpetual tension.

Now, how do we read? To read, in rudimentary terms, is to become at once aware of the materiality of the signifier. Since signifiers/words have their own internal rules, the linguistic and the phenomenal do not converge, words and deeds or objects are not continuous. de Man evolves a reading method which he calls 'mere reading,' or 'rhetorical reading.' That is his 'wild card.' This 'mere reading' brings up to the surface the latent tension mentioned above in the classical trivium, especially between grammar and rhetoric. Reading is like negative theology, it reactivates rhetoric, and proceeds to destroy 'via negativa all the sediments of meaning by which grammar covers language.' This kind of reading uncovers language to show how both epistemology and aesthetics intervene to commodify a piece of writing. Reading, for de Man, is a negative process in which the text is restored, as it were, to the bare facticity of language. It is in a sense the unreading of grammar by rhetoric—and what is manifest in this unreading are the raw workings of language.

When it comes to rhetoric, the story gets more complicated. For as one reads, one becomes conscious of two kinds of rhetoric at play in a piece of writing: one is the rhetoric of

grammar wherein rhetoric unread grammar, the other the rhetoric of tropes, and both scarcely coalesce. To get them to coalesce, to totalize is the act of aesthetic ideology. The 'mere reading' that de Man advocates is disruptive of both concepts and aesthetic totalization.

Aesthetic Ideology

What is aesthetic ideology for de Man? Aesthetics has always been the domain of philosophers who theorized on nature and the self rather than language. It is the principle of aesthetics to seek unity amidst disparate elements. And in seeking to unify, metaphor helps and is the clear villain. Metaphor is indeed the 'totalizing instance par excellence.' It treacherously levels all differences, subjugates them, and totalizes power. Metaphor has a strong political implication for de Man. Hence 'it can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent,' writes de Man (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 63). Yes, metaphor erases all difference, presupposes a 'necessary link,' an 'organic link between the poles of exchange' (p. 22). All metaphysical systems are totalities precisely because the positing of resemblance between the terms erases their difference. They further acquire the status of a natural process, hence the alleged superiority of metaphor/symbol over metonymy, of the grammatical over the rhetorical, of the philosophical over the literary (p. 22). de Man is almost obsessively wary of all forms of totalization. For him, therefore, rhetorical criticism raises political awareness, and resistance to all forms of entrenched ideology. de Man retranslates all metaphors/symbols into linguistic facts, totalizations of all kinds into rhetorical potential of the signifier. What he undertakes is a detotalizing operation, 'the detranslation of totalizing translations' (p. 34). Ideology is what confuses reference with phenomenality. And at the heart of aesthetic ideology there is a totalizing drive.

The next question is: what is it about the speech act theory that fascinates literary critics? It is, obviously, the performative aspect of the total speech act which includes as part of itself an act of reference. Here the emphasis is on the performative, not on the referential, the latter being possibly inscribed in the former. This sheer pragmatics of the linguistic act was a real breakthrough in philosophic thinking, thought J. L. Austin. For it

shifts the focus from language as truth to language as action. Though de Man is indebted to the speech act theory, especially to the notion of the performative, he was not very happy with it. The notion squarely rested on the idea of self-positing, an idea trapped in the metaphysics of subjectivity which disturbed de Man. de Man, after a brief spell under the influence of Hegel's emphasis on the notions of subjectivity, selfhood and consciousness, a legacy of German idealist philosophy, wanted to break free of this school of thought—which included other thinkers such as Fichte, Schlegel. When you posit an object, the positing presupposes the self-positing of a self. The self becomes an absolute presupposition in this context, and acquires the status of a transcendental self. For de Man it is not the subject that uses language as a tool, it is language that produces the self. de Man's critique, while interrogating these assumptions behind the performative, tries to reformulate the notion by allegorizing it as a figure. He rejects the concept of positing, of the performative which would constitute the totalizing 'explicating power ... associated with values such as presence and subjectivity.' Therefore the notion of the performative is rewritten in the context of truth as envisaged by Nietzsche and Heidegger as something intrinsically ambiguous. Even as it performs the language act, it undoes its own performance—for it both conceals and unconceals. One can see here how the notion of the performative has moved farther away from Austin! The performative is a figure, is structured like an allegory. And allegory as a figure is what de Man prefers to metaphor, and what motivates his theory of rhetoric.

Disfigured Metaphor

Now, what is allegory, and why does de Man prefer it to metaphor? Even though allegory happens to be 'the most general version' of metaphor, its stress on details, its use of literal signs entail no resemblance to the meaning intended by allegory. Often the allegorical meaning becomes secondary, to put it somewhat crudely, because the details could always assert their own meanings. The allegorical meaning and the literal meaning enjoy 'a relation of non-coincidence.' de Man envisages here a repetitive struggle between the two segments of meaning which turns the allegory into an open figure, 'into a figure of nonclosure' (p. 31). Since it nullifies any process of identification between the two segments, it 'is a

disfigured metaphor whose totalizing potential is metonymically laid out...in an endless process of narrative. The allegory is what permanently disrupts the totality specific of the figure of metaphor' (p. 31). de Man calls it 'ironic allegory' which is essentially deconstructive, and which eventually leads him to propound his theory of unreadability. Derrida endorses this view of allegory in his *Memoirs: For Paul de Man* when he says that the figure 'represents one of language's essential possibilities; the possibility that permits language to say the other and to speak of itself while speaking of something else...' Allegory and metonymy both are de Man's deconstructive tools which hold out in texts (literary and philosophical) against the powers of aestheticization.

With these new formulations, de Man looks upon text, textuality, as an agonistic field wherein a referent generated by the text subverts its grammar to which it owes its construction. But why subvert? one may ask. This is not so much a subversion as an activation of the principle of negation which de Man increasingly uses in his later writings, the principle emphasizing the irreducible asceticism characterizing his thought. Isn't de Man trapped in his own binaries? Can't contradictory forces, and their directionalities of meaning, coexist in the same text? It is surely the condition of an aporia, an unresolvable dilemma, but this condition need not necessarily promote the unreadability thesis of de Man. As he allegorized the performative, he also allegorizes the text: for a text enacts 'the narrative of its impossible closure ... its impossibility to become a whole' (p. 44).

Rhetoric and Difference

How about philosophical texts? Tradition establishes difference among disciplines such as philosophy, literature and rhetoric. Gasche states quite unambiguously that philosophy is a discourse of difference. However, in de Man's 'rhetorical reading', the principle of difference becomes the first casualty. If metaphor erases all difference, then isn't de Man negating the very principle of difference here? Gasche is obviously not very happy with what he calls de Man's 'highly disturbing practice of reading,' (p. 74). de Man reads Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche in a manner which foregrounds the literary, and the

sheer materiality of language. For him the literary is not something specific to literature. It is at work in all verbal events. Literature, rather flamboyantly, displays its figural character and thereby its instabilities of meaning, while philosophy hides its 'figural praxis' behind a facade of 'laboured constructs of meaning.' For instance, Nietzsche's critique of philosophy in de Manian terms is 'literary.' The philosophical claim to truth is literary. Literature even becomes 'the model for the kind of truth to which philosophy aspires' (p. 88). And de Man finally, as a kind of *coup de grace*, pronounces that 'philosophy turns out to be an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature' (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 115).

Now comes a sudden rupture by way of an appendix to the book wherein Gasche tries to come to terms with de Man's early wartime writings. It is a disruption brought about by time and history, which impedes Gasche's text from closing upon itself. Was de Man pro-Nazi, a 'collaborationist'? Yes and no. His anti-semitism at any rate is 'undeniably unpardonable.' But Gasche goes through a series of torsions in order to defend, condemn, yet extenuate, reprieve his protagonist. Finally, he admonishes that the early wartime journalism needs to be situated in the proper context—the spirit of which would put into question Derrida's theory of 'citational drift'. However—Gasche even moots the point—wasn't de Man also talking about the German 'national singularity,' not, as many would imagine, the German hegemonic culture? It is indeed a discursive tight-rope walk for Gasche.

In the final analysis, however,

there are perhaps excesses of theorizing in de Man's notion of resistance to theory. If, for instance, his unreadability principle is the result of such a resistance, a resistance immanent in language or in phenomenality, then doesn't this principle affect his own writing? That Gasche is able to come up with a fairly coherent account of de Man seems to prove the contrary! However, even his extreme positions are based upon an unassailable logic, a logic which no notion of the literary can disfigure. To sum up, de Man surely provides us with a counterforce against which one needs to test one's own theories.

Gasche's work is remarkable in many ways. His through-going interventions into philosophy, into all the intricacies of logic involved in de Man's structure of argumentation, and the conclusion that he comes up with, with strong reservations which occasionally get sidelined in his attempt to represent de Man—these would certainly remind the reader of the critic's dilemma, his being 'willing to wound but afraid to strike!' Gasche can hardly resist a paradox, nor can he those contingent moments of obfuscation whose allure characterizes one aspect of postmodernism. He instead belabours them all into submission in his rather laboured prose and cumbrous philosophical itinerary. It is to the credit of Gasche, however, that he enables the reader to learn to use his 'blindness' to get 'insight' into de Man's very 'singular', even, to use Gasche's other term, 'idiosyncratic' achievement.

TRS Sharma is a fellow of K. K. Birla Foundation.

DECLARATION

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Review In Depth

The lexical thing

SHIVA KUMAR SRINIVASAN

An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

by Dylan Evans

Routledge, London and New York,
1996; 239 pp; 14.99 pounds

Psychoanalyzing:

On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter

by Serge Leclaire

(Translated by Peggy Kamuf)
Stanford University Press, Stanford
1998; 154 pp; \$12

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was fond of ruminating on Michel de Montaigne's axiom on style. For both, style is the very essence of Man. Their preoccupation with the 'rise of the human subject' in the early modern period did not preclude an investigation into the problem of style. It may even be argued that it is precisely the problem of style—the so-called 'self-fashioning' of Renaissance Man—that drives their inquiries into the nature of the human subject. If Lacan desubstantivizes the humanist notion of the subject, it is in the service of stylistics. The Lacanian unconscious does not cater to 'the romantic divinities of night'. It is not the font of creation that the romantic poets valorized. With his theory of the signifier and, later, that of the letter, Lacan (unlike Carl Jung) *depopulated the unconscious* at one stroke. The analyst takes on the more humble role of an editor. It is his task to punctuate the analysand's discourse, his or her chain of signification.

The analytic editor is first of all a reader. It is to the ethical necessity of *reading* Freud that Lacan dedicated his psychoanalytic project. For Lacan, psychoanalysis was not reducible to a set of axioms that are external to the 'poetics of the Freudian corpus'. The doctrinal meaning of psychoanalysis is to be sought in the insistence of the Freudian text. Freud's metaphorical vehicles are not external to the tenor of his conceptual schemas. It is not surprising therefore that when it was his turn to formulate a supplement to Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan should write in a style that prevents easy access. Lacan does not address those who are in a hurry to do

psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic insights cannot be formalized once and for all. As the Yale critic Shoshana Felman puts it in another context: they have to be recuperated again and again in the act of reading. This is precisely what the intrepid Dylan Evans has attempted in his highly readable reference book.

The Letter

Evans sets out his theory of lexicography in a theoretically informed preface to the dictionary. He begins with Lacan's contention that psychoanalytic terms can only be understood in a topological relation with others. The common stock of words used by different psychoanalytic schools might give the impression that they are all 'dialects of the same language'. But this, according to the author, is far from being the truth. Each psychoanalytic language has its own lexis and syntax and must be understood in its specificity.

This claim, as we will discover in reading Serge Leclaire, is not just a feature of Lacan's style of writing but is essential to the ethics of the Lacanian clinic. The Lacanians will take the notion of the 'letter' quite literally. It is both a principle of clinical psychoanalysis and the very trajectory of the unconscious. The unconscious will always have its way. Punning on the double meaning of the term 'letter', Lacan had argued in his famous reading of Poe's *The Purloined Letter* that 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. Hence, as Serge Leclaire's subtitle points out, psychoanalysis is 'the practice of the letter'.

Evans' dictionary too is a contribution in this direction. He is fully conscious of the accusations that are

routinely made about the psychotic closure of the Lacanian system. The dictionary is a way of opening up the system to those who are not yet insiders. An interesting way of using Evans' dictionary is to explore terms like code, communication, interpretation, language, letter, sign, signifier, signification, speech, symbol, etc.

Interpretation

Lacanian interpretation is not an attempt to fit the facts of a case to a preexisting hermeneutic grid. And again, though Freud himself resisted the temptation to interpret through symbols, such interpretations had become fairly commonplace when Lacan began his career. Not only were these interpretations therapeutically useless, they also promoted bad habits of mind in both the patient and the analyst. This is the so-called 'wild analysis' that Freud had warned against. Intelligent patients could often interpret their own symptoms with minimal assistance from the analyst. In fact, patients often went into analysis to merely have the analyst authenticate their symptoms.

It became increasingly difficult for the analyst to keep up with their patients. Hence Lacan argued that psychoanalysis should move away from a classical notion of interpretation where the analyst sought to bring out the hidden meaning of the patient's discourse. The linear movement of interpretation from the signifier to the signified was inverted by Lacan. He wanted to move from the signified to the signifier. Interpretation ceased to be about generating sense. It was an attempt to frame that part of the patient's discourse which resisted signification. It was this quest for the kernel of nonsense that would keep the patient's chain of associations in motion. The psychoanalyst was not to remain obsessed with the reality of the facts proffered by the patient but to explore the real of desire and *jouissance* (enjoyment). The analyst must resist the temptation to empathize with the patient. The focus was not on the Good of the patient but precisely on his Eros. Otherwise, psychoanalysis would lose its identity and become a form of counselling. That is why Lacan argued that the task of the analyst was not to understand the patient but to *listen*, and, when necessary, to interrupt.

The duration of the Lacanian psychoanalytic session was not the 50-minute hour mandated by the International Psychoanalytic Association but the so-called short or

variable session. A patient who was waiting in Lacan's clinic would not know exactly when he would be called in or when the session—once begun—would end. The main work of analysis was not in the session but *in between* the sessions. This makes it almost impossible for the patient to 'prepare' for a session.

By cutting a session short or extending it longer than the patient's expectation, the analyst forces the patient to come to terms with the significance of the session. Why was he unable to hold the analyst's attention? Both the duration and the point of 'cutting' the session take on an interpretative significance. To cut the session correctly, the analyst needs to be quick on his feet. The desire to understand will therefore actually impede the task that the analyst sets himself. Hence, the analyst must think with his ears and not with his heart or mind.

On the Ear

But what does it mean to listen? Freud had argued that the analyst must listen with 'free floating attention'. In other words, the analyst must not preempt the patient with oedipal clichés. But is such listening possible? Can the analyst suspend the hermeneutic fruits of his knowledge and training and *really listen*?

Leclaire begins his book with an account of the kind of ear that the analyst must develop in order to facilitate such a form of psychoanalysis. He calls it 'the practice of the letter'. Leclaire's ethics of listening is not unlike the Lacanian ethics of reading. If the analyst resists the 'lure' of the signified and follows the trail of the letter—wherever it might lead—it opens up psychoanalysis to the exhilarating path of *singularity*. Psychoanalysis ceases to merely verify its discoveries: it takes on the more challenging task of falsification.

Jacques-Alain Miller has argued in a different context that the contemporary patient—unlike the type that the early Freudians encountered—is a Popperian. He is always trying to falsify the analyst's interpretation. To use a classical model of interpretation with its battery of myths, plots and symbols would only inspire the ridicule of such a patient who may well be an expert on James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. The analyst must seek to frame the real of the symptom, its modalities of *jouissance*, and not its supposed reference to a trauma that may well not have happened in the

historical (mimetic) sense of the term. Hence, the analyst must attend to the style or form of the patient's speech.

The patient's speech is all that the analyst has to go by. Whether or not psychoanalysis can effect a cure, both the method and the ethics of psychoanalysis revolve around the problem of speech. The only demand made of the patient is to be true to the rule of free association, which is to say whatever comes to his or her mind no matter how ridiculous it might be in the patient's own estimation.

For Lacan, speech is endowed with associations that are not reducible to the Saussurean notion of *parole*. It is imbued with anthropological, theological and metaphysical implications. In his early work, he believed that psychoanalysis should facilitate 'full speech' in opposition to the 'idle speech' of the neurotic. Though this position is amended later, speech remains the quintessence of the human subject for Lacan.

What is the analyst supposed to do with speech? For Leclaire—who builds on the work of Lacan—the simplest formulation of the analyst's task is 'to listen to something *other* than the mere meaning of the words pronounced and to bring into the open the libidinal order they manifest' (my emphasis). What is this *other* that insists on being heard? Why is it so discomfiting to listen to this *other*? What should the analyst do to prevent his own desire from interfering with the analysis?

Leclaire discusses at length Freud's own recommendations on the art of listening in his paper on technique. Much as the analyst would like to attain the 'evenly-suspended attention' that Freud sets up as an ideal, he finds himself falling short. The temptations of 'deliberate attention' are overwhelming. And, again, the analyst must not make a fetish of an ideal. Just as there are patients who free-associate without saying anything, there must be analysts who do not listen despite their free-floating attention. As Leclaire points out, 'this neutrality of the analyst aims only to describe a certain affective or libidinal position, since, as everyone knows who has ever been around a psychoanalyst, your average Freudian is anything but the totally unprejudiced scholar'. The analyst must learn to avoid both the dangers of excessive systematization and anarchy in his attempt to punctuate the discourse of the patient.

Pleasure/Desire

Leclaire tries to provide examples of what such an interpretation might look like. These examples are derived both from Freud's case histories and his own practice. The most celebrated example is the case of the Wolf Man in which Freud discovered an obsession with the letter 'V' that haunts the patient's discourse in various permutations and combinations. This 'V' is a letter that denotes in turn the shape of a butterfly's wing, a woman with her legs open, the significance of the fifth hour, the ears of a wolf, and, in a process of doubling and inversion, the letters 'W' and 'M'. The point of the analysis was to trace the trajectory of this letter as it provides the unconscious foundations of the 'combinations' in the Wolf Man's psyche. The letter then becomes the 'stigmata of pleasure' with the ability to become detached like an object from the body of the subject. What then is the difference between the letter of desire and the object of *jouissance*? Though the same bodily zone may take the form of a letter or an object, their difference lies in the fact that the letter serves athetic function while the object serves a stable function. The object of *jouissance* comes in place of the lost letter of desire. Leclaire derives the elementary structure of the unconscious by deploying just three terms: subject, object and letter. 'In sum', he writes, '*three correlative functions make up the elementary structure of the unconscious: the object as stable function, the subject as function of alternating commutation, and finally the letter as thetic function*'.

What will the analysis finally uncover about the subject, the letter and the object? For Leclaire, the analysis will seek to bring to light the particular set of letters to which the subject is subjected. What are these letters from a set of all possible letters to which the subject is knotted in its moment of trauma? What sort of an object will console the subject in place of the repressed letter of desire? In what way will the subject use speech to wrestle with the intractable problem of its *jouissance*? Leclaire concludes by arguing that the end of analysis will spell out the particular formula of letters on which the subject is fixated thereby framing the singular manner in which the subject *suffers its lack*.

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