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Paul de Man as Allergen

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WHY READING DE MAN MAKES YOU SNEEZE

It is easy to see why the institution of literary study in the United States, or, in a different way, in Europe, including journalistic reviewing in both regions, is antipathetical to de Man and needs to suppress him in order to get on with its business. De Man's work is a violent allergen that provokes fits of coughing, sneezing, and burning eyes, perhaps even worse symptoms, unless it can be neutralized or expelled. "Allergen": a substance that causes an allergy. The word *allergy*, oddly enough, comes from the German *Allergie*, meaning "altered reaction," a Teutonic formation from the Greek *allo*, other, plus *ergon*, work. The "gen" in *allergen* means generating or causing. De Man's work as allergen is something alien, other, that works to bring about a reaction of resistance to that otherness. The best antihistamine might be to forget his essays altogether and get on with the reproduction of some form or other of aesthetic ideology. The trouble is that once you have read de Man seriously it is difficult to do that without a vague uneasy feeling that you are laying traps for yourself and others, or, to put it more simply, as de Man himself put it in the first paragraphs of "The Resistance to Theory," promulgating something false, perhaps dangerously false.

In a remark near the beginning of the "Kant and Schiller" essay, which, it should be remembered, is the transcription of an oral performance, Paul de Man observes that though his Cornell audience has been "so kind at the beginning and so hospitable and so benevolent," nevertheless, in this case as in others in his experience, "it doesn't take you too long before you feel that you're getting under people's skin, and that there is a certain reaction which is bound to occur, certain

questions that are bound to be asked, which is the interesting moment, when certain issues are bound to come up."¹ My figure of de Man as allergen is a slight transposition of this figure. An allergen causes an allergic reaction. 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. The figure is only a figure. It compares what happens to some people in reading de Man to what happens in a certain material reaction to a foreign substance by a living organic body. The figure is not innocent, however. In comparing something seemingly "abstract," intentional, linguistic, or "spiritual," reading, to something material, automatic, autonomic, and involuntary, something "bound to happen," that is, an allergic reaction, the question of the relation of language to "materiality" is raised. Does any substantial connection justify the figure? This is one of the central questions in de Man's conception of a "material event." How can a linguistic act, such as the formulations reached by Kant's philosophic rigor, intervene in the "material" world and bring about what de Man calls "the materiality of actual history"?² How can writing or reading be a material event? How can speech be an act? As I shall show, de Man's transformation of the usual meaning of "materiality" (the transformation is itself a speech act) goes by way of a new conception of the relation of language to that reconceived materiality.

Almost any page of de Man's work, but especially the beginnings and endings of essays, contains rejections of well-established received ideas about literary study. These rejections can best be characterized as ironically and joyfully insolent or even contemptuous, as well as dismayingly rigorous and plausible.³ Salient examples are the first two pages of "The Resistance to Theory" and the last three pages of "Shelley Disfigured."⁴ De Man's essays have the structure he identifies in "The Concept of Irony" as "the traditional opposition between *eiron* and *alazon*, as they appear in Greek or Hellenic comedy, the smart guy and the dumb guy" (AI 165). De Man is of course the *eiron*, the smart guy, and all the previous experts on whatever topic or text he is discussing are the *alazons*, the dumb guys.⁵ The received ideas he attacks, often fundamental assumptions of our profession, are characteristically called aberrant, deluded, or simply false. The reader can only hope or assume that "This does not, cannot, mean me! Surely I would not make such stupid mistakes." De Man forestalls that defensive move, however, when he asserts, for example, in the "Kant and Schiller" essay in *Aesthetic Ideology*, that everyone, including himself,

however ironically, in a collective “we,” is still bewitched by aesthetic ideology:

Before you either contest this [what he has been saying about Schiller’s distortion of Kant], or before you not contest but agree with it and hold it against Schiller, or think that it is something we are now far beyond and that we would never in our enlightened days do—you would never make this naive confusion between the practical and the pragmatic on the one hand and the philosophical Kantian enterprise on the other—before you decide that, don’t decide too soon that you are beyond Schiller in any sense. I don’t think any of us can lay this claim. Whatever writing we do, whatever way we have of talking about art, whatever way we have of teaching, 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. They come from Schiller, and not from Kant. (AI 142)

De Man goes on to make a warning that certainly applies to what has happened in his own case, in spite of the fact that he was protected by being a Sterling Professor at Yale, which is about as much security as you can get:

And if you ever try to do something in the other direction [in the direction of Kant, that is, rather than Schiller] 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 without really taking many risks” (AI 142).

I have said that de Man’s work is threatening to “us all” because almost any page contains cheerfully taunting rejections, explicit or implicit, of “our” most basic ideological assumptions, the ones “we” most need to get on with our work, the ones the university most needs to get on with its work. His counterintuitive concept (it is not really a concept) of materiality is an example of this.

DE MAN’S MATERIALISM

The “’s” in this subhead is a double genitive, both objective and subjective. It names both de Man’s theory of materiality and the way his own writings may show materiality at work or may be examples of materiality at work. De Man’s materiality is one of the most difficult and obscure parts of his work.

De Man's use of the terms *materiality* and *materialism* poses several special problems, resistances to comprehension. First, one or the other word is most often introduced only briefly and elliptically. If the reader does not keep a sharp eye out for it, it appears in a given essay for an instant, for the blink of an eye, like a meteor, and then vanishes. Moreover, in these passages de Man seems to be saying exceedingly strange things, such as the assertion that materiality is not "phenomenal." Second, unlike "performative" and "irony" (terms not on everyone's lips and concepts that clearly need some explaining), we tend to think we already know what materiality is. It is the property possessed by these hard objects right in front of me now, impassive, impassible, resistant, not dependent on my perception for their continued existence, like that stone Samuel Johnson kicked to refute Berkeley's idealism: "I refute him thus [kicking the stone]." Third, the term *materialism* is extremely difficult to extricate from its associations with modern empirical science or with vulgar understandings of Marxism. Is not Marxism to be defined as "dialectical materialism"? De Man is supposed to be in one way or another a linguistic formalist, someone who believed, as all so-called deconstructionists are supposed to believe, that it is "all language," though the reader might remember that de Man began his higher education as a science, mathematics, and engineering student at the École Polytechnique of the University of Brussels (1936). His professional interest in language came later. Nevertheless, for de Man to call himself a materialist, or for us to call him one, seems as absurd and counterintuitive as for de Man to call Kant and Hegel materialists or to find crucial materialist moments in their work, since everybody knows (without necessarily having read them) that they are "idealists." Equally absurd would be to think one might find any kinship between de Man's thinking and Marxism, though the truth is that a deep kinship exists between de Man's work and Marx's thought in *The German Ideology*, as Andrzej Warminski has been demonstrating in his seminars. To show this it is necessary actually to go back and read Marx, as well as de Man, no easy tasks.

The term *materiality* or its cognates appears at crucial moments in de Man's work as early as a citation from Proust in "Reading (Proust)" in *Allegories of Reading*. What Proust calls the "symbols," in Giotto's *Allegory of the Virtues and Vices* at the Arena in Padua, meaning representations like the Charity that looks like a kitchen maid, are "something real, actually experienced or materially handled."⁶ That this passage was important to de Man is indicated by the way he cites it again

at a crucial moment on the symbol in Hegel just at the end of one of his late essays, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*." This time de Man translates the phrases himself somewhat differently from the Moncrieff translation, and he cites the French original: "the symbol represented as real, as actually inflicted or materially handled [. . . (*le symbole représenté*) *comme réel, comme effectivement subi ou matériellement manié*]" (AI 103). The terms *material*, *materiality*, and the like then appear with increasing frequency in de Man's later work. It is as though de Man had discovered in such words a way to "call" more accurately something he wanted performatively to name, perhaps even to invoke, that is, to "call forth": "The only word that comes to mind is that of a *material* vision . . ." ("Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in AI 82). What Michael Riffaterre misses or evades in Hugo's "Écrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande" is just what the title indicates or names, namely, what de Man calls "the materiality of an inscription" (RT 51). A climactic passage in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* is said to stress "the literal and material aspects of language" (RR 113). "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric" ends, in a phrase I have already cited, with an appeal to "the materiality of actual history" (RR 262). A cascade of such terms punctuates the essays in *Aesthetic Ideology*, not only in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" and in "Kant's Materialism," where "a materialism that Kant's posterity has not yet begun to face up to" (AI 89) is the focus of the argument, but also in "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," where we read that "The idea, in other words, makes its sensory appearance, in Hegel, as the material inscription of names" and also in the way Hegel's "theory of the sign manifests itself materially" (AI 102, 103), and in "Kant and Schiller," where we read of the irreversible progression "from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs" and of "the materiality of the inscribed signifier in Kant" (AI 132, 134).

The reader will have seen that the term *materiality* and its cognates occur in three related, ultimately more or less identical, registers in de Man: the materiality of history, the materiality of inscription, and the materiality of what the eye sees prior to perception and cognition. In all three of these registers, as I shall try to show, materiality is associated with notions of performative power and with what seems materiality's opposite, formalism. In all three modes of materialism, the ultimate paradox, allergenic idea, or unintelligibility is the claim or insinuation

that materiality is not phenomenal, not open to the senses. Just what in the world could that mean?

The phrase “materiality of history” seems the easiest to understand and accept as commonsensical. Of course history is material. It means what really happened, especially as a result of human intervention (though we speak, for example, of the history of the mollusks, or of geological history). History is wars, battles, the building of the pyramids, the invention of the steam engine, migrations of peoples, legislative decisions, diplomatic negotiations, the clearing of forests, global warming, that sort of thing. De Man’s materiality of history, however, is not quite like that. For him the materiality of history, properly speaking, is the result of acts of power that are punctual and momentary, since they are atemporal, noncognitive and noncognizable performative utterances. History is caused by language or other signs that make something materially happen, and such happenings do not happen all that often. The most radical, and allergenic, counterintuitive, scandalous formulation of this is in “Kant and Schiller.” There de Man asserts that Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* was an irreversible historical event brought about by the shift from cognitive to efficaciously performative discourse in Kant’s own words, whereas Schiller’s ideological misreading of Kant and its long progeny in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were nonevents, certainly not irreversible material events. In “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” de Man speaks of the crucial shift to a “formal materialism” in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* as “a shift from trope to performance” that is “a deep, perhaps fatal, break or discontinuity” (AI 83, 89, 79). This is the place, as he puts it in “Kant and Schiller,” at which Kant “found himself by the rigor of his own discourse [the project of aesthetics as articulation of pure reason and practical reason or ethics] to break down under the power of his own critical epistemological discourse” (AI 134). This was an event, strictly speaking an irreversible historical event, “to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs. And there, the thought of material occurrence, something that occurs materially, that leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such—that notion of occurrence is not opposed in any sense to the notion of writing” (AI 132). Since the event of Kant’s materialism is punctual and instantaneous, it is in a curious sense not within time, though it has a permanent and irreversible effect on what we usually (mistakenly) think of as the temporality of history:

history is not thought of as a progression or a regression, but is thought of as an event, as an occurrence. There is history from the moment that words such as 'power' and 'battle' and so on emerge on the scene. At that moment things *happen*, there is *occurrence*, there is *event*. History is therefore not a temporal notion, it has nothing to do with temporality [there's allergenic assertion for you!], but it is the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition. (AI 133)

I do not think de Man meant that the words *power* and *battle* are in themselves always historical events in the sense de Man is defining such events, but that he means the uses of such words in effective performative utterances are historical events. As opposed to the moment of Kant's self-undoing materialism in the third *Critique*, Schiller's recuperation of Kant within aesthetic ideology and its long progeny, the procedures of which are identified in the main body of "Kant and Schiller," did not happen, were not historical events:

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 [de Man's stuttering iterations here mime the punctualities of historical events; the reader will remember that this is the transcript of an oral presentation that was not written down as such]—that in the whole reception of Kant from then until now, nothing has happened, only regression, nothing has happened at all. Which is another way of saying there is no history . . . that reception is not historical. . . . 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 134)⁷

These sternly recalcitrant statements may be more understandable and perhaps even more acceptable if we remember that Althusser, and de Man in his own way, following Marx, define ideology as having no history, as being outside history, as having no purchase on history, since ideology is precisely an illusory misunderstanding of the "real conditions of existence," as Althusser put it in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,"⁸ or, as de Man puts this in "The Resistance to Theory": "What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism" (RT 11).⁹ The reception of Kant by Schiller and his followers, including you and me as inheritors of aesthetic ideology, is ideological, therefore not historical.

We are (I am) now in a position to answer the puzzling assertions de Man makes in "The Concept of Irony." "Irony," he says, "also very clearly has a performative function. Irony consoles and it promises and it excuses" (AI 165). What could de Man mean by saying that irony is performatively efficacious, that it promises, consoles, or excuses? If we take seriously de Man's claim later in the essay that irony is a permanent parabasis that radically suspends meaning by the incursion of chaos, madness, and stupidity (Friedrich Schlegel's terms) into language, then it would seem radically counterintuitive to say that irony has a successful performative function. A statement at the end of the essay is equally baffling: "Irony and history seem to be curiously linked to one another" (AI 184). If irony is permanent parabasis it would seem to have little to do with history, but to be rather the withdrawal from effective historical action. The analogy between the noncognitive aspect of irony and the noncognitive aspect of performative utterances gives the clue. Irony is perhaps the most radical example of the rupture between cognitive and performative discourses. Insofar as an utterance is performative, it is unknowable. Irony suspends cognition. It is just because irony is error, madness, and stupidity that it can be performatively felicitous. Promises, excuses, consolations can be performed by irony, or can be especially done by ironic utterance, just because irony is the radical suspension of cognition. Another way to put this is to say that even the most solemn performative utterances are contaminated by being possibly ironic. Jacques Derrida includes irony along with literature among the parasitical presences that are possibly incorporated within any performative as a result of its intrinsic iterability.

What I have just said will also indicate the surprising and "curious" connection of irony with history. Since the materiality of history as event is generated by acts of linguistic power, that is, performative speech acts, though by no means necessarily intentional ones, irony as a form of such power or as an ingredient of any such act of power, against all our instinctive assumptions, can be said not only to promise, console, and excuse, but also to generate the events that make up the materiality of history. Just as, for Derrida, the possibility of felicitous speech acts depends on the possibility that they may be "literature," so for de Man the efficacy of performative utterances, including those that generate history, depends on the possibility that they may be ironical. They may be. You cannot tell for sure.

If speech acts generating history are, strangely enough, one form of materiality or are the place where language touches materiality, leaves

a mark on it, materially handles it, the materiality of what the eye sees appears more obvious but turns out to be more difficult to grasp. Of course, we say, what the eye sees is material. That received opinion or doxa turns out, however, once again not to be quite what de Man means. What he does mean is the central argument of the two essays on Kant, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" and "Kant's Materialism." For received opinion, what we take for granted, phenomenality and materiality are the same thing or are two aspects of the same thing. Because something is material it is phenomenal, open to the senses. For de Man, following Kant, phenomenality and materiality are not conjoined but opposed. How can this be? De Man sees in Kant's theory of the dynamic sublime two radically contradictory notions. On the one hand, the sublime is the moment when the imagination triumphs over fear and puts all the elements of the sublime scene together, articulates them in a grand aesthetic synthesis, as tropes articulate, or as the body's limbs are articulated: "The imagination overcomes suffering, becomes apathetic, and sheds the pain of natural shock. It reconciles pleasure with pain and in so doing it articulates, as mediator, the movement of the affects with the legal, codified, formalized, and stable order of reason" (AI 86). In so doing, the imagination of the sublime or the sublime itself accomplishes the goal of the third *Critique*, which was to find a "bridge" between the first and second *Critiques*, between pure reason and the practical reason of moral obligation and choice. On the other hand, Kant's analysis of the dynamic sublime contains a moment that radically disrupts, interrupts, and suspends this happy articulation. Kant reaches this moment through the very rigor of his critical thinking. He proposes that the paradigmatic example of the dynamic sublime is when the overarching vault of the sky and the outstretched mirror of the sea are seen just as the eye sees them, or as the poets see them, without thought for their meaning. Seeing them as meaningful would occur, for example, when we view the sea as a reservoir of edible fish, or the sky as a producer of life-giving rain. De Man quotes section 28 of Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*: "we must regard it [the starry heaven], just as we see it [*wie man ihn sieht*], as a distant, all-embracing vault [*ein weites Gewölbe*]. . . . To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do [*wie die Dichter es tun*], merely by what the eye reveals [*was der Augeschein zeigt*]" (AI 80). De Man goes on to argue that this way of seeing is radically nonphenomenal. It does not involve the mind that in its activity of perception would make sense of what is seen. It just sees what it

sees, in an activity of the eye operating by itself, enclosed in itself, wholly detached, disarticulated, from thinking and interpreting: "No mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven. . . . That is how things are to the eye, in the redundancy of their appearance to the eye and not to the mind, as in the redundant word *Augenschein*, . . . in which the eye, tautologically, is named twice, as eye itself and as what appears to the eye" (AI 82). De Man's name for this way of seeing is "material vision": "The only word that comes to mind is that of a *material* vision" (AI 82), which is another way of saying, in a paradigmatic performative speech act, "I call this '*material* vision.'" The word *material* then appears in a cascade of phrases in the subsequent pages: "the vision is purely material"; "what we call the material aspect"; "a materialism that, in the tradition of the reception of the third *Critique*, is seldom or never perceived"; "If the architectonic then appears, very near the end of the analytics of the aesthetic, at the conclusion of the section on the sublime, as the material disarticulation not only of nature but of the body [traditional examples of the beautiful or the sublime], then this moment marks the undoing of the aesthetic as a valid category. The critical power of a transcendental philosophy undoes the very project of such a philosophy leaving us, certainly not with an ideology—for transcendental and ideological (metaphysical) principles are part of the same system—but with a materialism that Kant's posterity has not yet begun to face up to" (AI 83, 88, 89).

How could we "face up to" something that we can see but not face up to in the sense of clearly confronting it and making it intelligible to ourselves? The idea of a way of seeing that is performed by the eye alone, wholly dissociated from the mind, is, strictly speaking, unintelligible, since any sense we give to this *Augenschein* is an illicit, ideological imposition: "To the extent that any mind, that any judgment, intervenes, it is in error" (AI 82). That is what I mean by saying that de Man's materiality is nonphenomenal, since phenomenality always involves, instantly, making sense or trying to make sense of what we see. This "material vision" would be pure seeing prior to any seeing as the sort of understanding that we name when we say, "I see it all now." It would be a pre-seeing seeing, that is, something unthinkable, unknowable, unintelligible, a tautological eye eyeing: "Realism postulates a phenomenalism of experience which is here being denied or ignored. Kant's looking at the world just as one sees it ('wie man ihn sieht') is an absolute, radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis" (AI 128).

The idea of a materiality that would not be phenomenal does not make sense. Nevertheless, that is just what de Man affirms, most overtly and in so many words at the end of the essay on Riffaterre, "Hypogram and Inscription." There he speaks of "the materiality (as distinct from the phenomenality) that is thus revealed [when we remember that Hugo's poem was supposed to have been written on a window pane], the unseen 'cristal' whose existence thus becomes a certain *there* and a certain *then* which can become a *here* and a *now* in the reading 'now' taking place" (RT 51). The paradox is that the window glass, figure here for the materiality of inscription, is not what the eye sees but what the eye sees through. In the Kant essays, as in "Hypogram and Inscription," the rigor of de Man's own critical thinking brings him repeatedly, by different routes, across the border of the intelligible and into the realm of the allergenic, in this case the recognition of a materialism in Kant that has seldom or never been recognized in the whole distinguished tradition of Kant scholarship and so is anathema to it, just as de Man's reading of somewhat similar material moments in Hegel was anathema to the distinguished Hegel specialist Raymond Geuss.¹⁰

The final version of materiality in de Man is the "prosaic materiality of the letter" (AI 90). Just what does de Man mean by that? No one doubts that writing (and speaking too) have a material base, marks on paper or modulated waves in the air. This materiality is the benign base of the meaning, permanence, and transmissibility of language. No problem. De Man of course does not mean anything so in agreement with common sense and received opinion. When de Man calls Kant's sublime *Augenschein* of sky and sea a "material vision" he goes on to raise a further question that is not answered until the end of the essay: "how this materiality is then to be understood in linguistic terms is not, as yet, clearly intelligible" (AI 82). The answer is the materiality of the letter, but just what does that mean? The essay ends with an explanation that if not clearly intelligible, at least indicates why these "linguistic terms" must be unintelligible. The reader is given intelligence of unintelligibility, new news of the unknowable.

The prosaic materiality of the letter, linguistic "equivalent" of a materialism of vision, has two main features. One is a disarticulation of language equaling the disarticulations of nature and the human body de Man has found in Kant's dynamic sublime: "To the dismemberment of the body corresponds a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and

propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters" (AI 89). Strictly speaking, as linguists, not to speak of language philosophers like Wittgenstein, have shown, words do not have meaning by themselves. They have meaning only when they are used, incorporated into sentences. To detach them from their sentences and leave them hanging there in the air or on the page, surrounded by blank paper, is the first stage in a progressive disarticulation of meaning that goes then to syllables and finally to letters. It is extremely difficult to see words, syllables, or letters, for example on a printed page, in this way, just as it is extremely hard to see as the eye sees. One has to be a poet, as Kant says, to do it. The mind instantly interprets what the eye sees, "perceives it," and gives meaning to it, just as the mind projects meaning into those mute letters on the page. It is almost impossible to see letters as just the material marks they are. Even words in a language we do not know are seen as language and not as sheer materiality. We tend to see random marks on a rock as possibly writing in an unknown language.

The other feature of the materiality of the letter stressed by de Man makes that materiality more likely to be glimpsed, in the wink of the eye, before the mind starts "reading." This is repetition of words and word parts that calls attention to the absurd and unmotivated echoes among them at the level of syllable and letter: puns, rhymes, alliterations, assonances, and so on, that is, precisely those linguistic features poets especially use, "the play of the letter and of the syllable, the way of saying . . . as opposed to what is being said" (AI 89). The "persuasiveness" of the passage in Kant about the recovery of the imagination's tranquillity through material vision depends, de Man says, "on the proximity between the German words for surprise and admiration, *Verwunderung* and *Bewunderung*" (AI 89). The reader, de Man continues, is led to assent to the incompatibility or aporia between the imagination's failure and its success by "a constant, and finally bewildering alternation of the two terms, *Angemessen(heit)* and *Unangemessen(heit)*, to the point where one can no longer tell them apart" (AI 90). One additional example of this in de Man's essays is the cascade of words in "fall" that he finds in a passage by Kleist: *Fall*, *Beifall*, *Sündenfall*, *Rückfall*, *Einfall*, *Zurückfall*, *Fälle*: "As we know from another narrative text of Kleist ["On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts while Speaking"], the memorable tropes that have the most success (*Beifall*) occur as mere random improvisation (*Einfall*) at the moment when the author has completely relinquished control over his meaning and has

relapsed (*Zurückfall*) into the extreme formalization, the mechanical predictability of grammatical declensions (*Fälle*)” (RR 290). By the time the reader gets to the end of this the root “fall” is fast becoming a mere surd, a sound emptied of meaning: “fall, fall, fall, fall.” The reader will see that “formalism” of “formalization” names for de Man not the beautiful aesthetic formalization of the artwork, but a principle of mechanical senselessness in language that he associates with the arbitrariness of grammar, of declensions, *Fälle*. De Man goes on to make a pun of his own. Since *Falle* also means trap in German, he can say that everyone falls into “the trap of an aesthetic education which inevitably confuses dismemberment of language by the power of the letter with the gracefulness of a dance.” That trap, however, is not a benign aestheticizing of the random formalizations of language in grammar and paronomasia such as poets are known to play with. It is a mortal danger, a *pericolo de morte*, according to the last words of the last essay in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, “the ultimate trap, as unavoidable as it is deadly” (RR 290). The reader will note that this aspect of the materiality of the letter tends to disappear in translation. It depends on the unique idiom, idiolect, or even “idiocy,” in the etymological sense, of a certain language. Ultimately, this repetition of words and bits of words empties language of meaning and makes it mere unintelligible sound, as when the poet Tennyson, as a child, used to repeat his own name over and over, “Alfred, Alfred, Alfred,” until it ceased to mean anything at all and he melted into a kind of oceanic trance. Try it with your own name, as I do here with mine: “Hillis, Hillis, Hillis, Hillis.”

De Man’s formulation of this in one notable place is more prosaic. As he shows, Hegel’s theory of memory as *Gedächtnis*, in opposition to *Erinnerung*, is that it memorizes by emptying words of meaning and repeating them by rote, as pure arbitrary signs that might be in a foreign language or in no language at all:

“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.” [I suppose Hegel means that one repeats the words mindlessly, like a schoolchild or a robot—JHM.] . . . The idea, in other words, makes its sensory appearance, in Hegel, as the material inscription of names. (AI 101–2)

Speaking in “Hegel on the Sublime” of Hegel’s “Gesetz der Äußerlichkeit (law of exteriority),” de Man says, “Like a stutterer, or a broken record,

it makes what it keeps repeating worthless and meaningless" (AI 116). This had already been exemplified in a truly vertiginous couple of paragraphs in "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*." There de Man takes two at first innocent-enough-looking, but in fact "quite astonishing," sentences in Hegel's *Encyclopedia*: "Since language states only what is general, I cannot say what is only my opinion [*so kann ich nicht sagen was ich nur meine*]," and "When I say 'I,' I mean myself as *this* I to the exclusion of all others; but what I say, I, is precisely anyone; any I, as that which excludes all others from itself [*ebenso, wenn ich sage: 'Ich,' meine ich mich als diesen alle anderen Ausschließenden; aber was ich sage, Ich, ist eben jeder*]" (AI 97, 98). The sentences themselves are bad enough in English, though worse in German (e.g., *wenn Ich sage, Ich, meine ich mich*"), but by the time de Man gets through with these sentences the reader is dizzied by the repetitions, like Tennyson repeating his own first name, or as if he had been caught in a revolving door.¹¹ Through this dizziness the reader reaches in the emptying out of meaning a glimpse of the materiality of the letter. In commenting on the first sentence de Man plays with *mein* and *meinen* as *mine* and *mean* and generates a sentence in which the cascade of "sinces," and sines within sines, produces its own stuttering repetition, like a broken record:

"Ich kann nicht sagen was ich (nur) meine" then means "I cannot say what I make mine" or, since to think is to make mine, "I cannot say what I think," and, since to think is fully contained in and defined by the I, since Hegel's *ego cogito* defines itself as mere *ego*, what the sentence actually says is "I cannot say I"—a disturbing proposition in Hegel's own terms since the very possibility of thought depends on the possibility of saying "I." (AI 98)

The other sentence, with its repetitions of *ich* and *ich* in *nich*, is already "astonishing" enough itself, as de Man says, in the sense of numbing the mind, turning it to stone (to play on a false etymology; the word really means, etymologically, "to strike with thunder"). The sentence shows the impossibility not only of the deictics "here," "now," "this," as when I say, "This sentence which I am here and now writing on my computer at 8:51 A.M. on November 4, 1997," or, in Hegel's example, this piece of paper on which I am now writing, but also of the deictic use of "I" to point to me myself alone as a unique I. These words are "shifters," placeholders. Instantly, as soon as they are uttered, the words assume the utmost generality and can be shifted to any I, any

here, now, and this.¹² However hard you try, you cannot say this I here and now or this keyboard, processor, and computer screen at this moment that are prostheses of my body and by means of which I think. "I cannot say I." "Aber was ich sage, Ich, ist eben jeder (but what I say, I, is precisely anyone)." De Man takes the otherness of "jeder" not to refer to another I, "the mirror image of the I," but to name "*n'importe qui* or even *n'importe quoi*" (AR 98); that is, anybody at all or even anything at all, just as the name Marion, in de Man's reading of the "purloined ribbon" episode in Rousseau's *Julie*, is ultimately just a random sound, not even a proper name: "Rousseau was making whatever noise happened to come into his head; he was saying nothing at all, least of all someone's name" (AR 292).

As de Man says of Rousseau's excuse in *Julie* for what he had done to Marion, "When everything fails, one can always plead insanity" (AR 289). A certain madness, the madness of words, the reader can see, often infects de Man's own language. He mimes in what he says the materiality of the letter he is naming. At this point his own work becomes a performative utterance working to lead the reader to the edge of unintelligibility, this time by the route of the materiality of the letter, and once more in a way that is counterintuitive, since it is another materiality that is nonphenomenal, unable to be seen, like the "cristal invisible" of that Flemish windowpane on which Hugo's poem was scratched.

The back cover of de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology* speaks of the "ironic good humor that is unique to him." I find de Man's irony, especially when it expresses itself in wordplay, much more threatening than this phrase implies, and so have many of de Man's readers or listeners. Such passages as I have been discussing, where the madness of words has crossed over into de Man's own language, are places that readers or auditors have found especially allergenic, that they have especially resisted. The audience of de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric," for example, when the essay was presented as a sort of inaugural lecture after de Man took up his professorship at Yale, was more than a little scandalized or even offended by the elaborate pun de Man develops based on the Archie Bunker television show. This pun depends on the difference between lacing your shoes over or under. ("What's the difference?" asks Archie Bunker.) This leads to the punch line of calling Jacques Derrida an "archie Debunker" (AR 10). The audience did not find that wholly appropriate for such a solemn occasion. The complex double talk that de Man, in an exuberant reading, finds in Proust's

phrase "torrent d'activité" (AR 64) has seemed to some readers just going too far. Raymond Geuss especially resisted what de Man says about "mein" and "meinen" in Hegel. De Man's "Reply to Raymond Geuss" patiently laces over and under, that is, explains what he meant and why he is right and Geuss wrong, guilty of "misplaced timidity" (AI 190), an unwillingness to face up to what is truly wild in Hegel's text.

The resistance to de Man, what I have called an allergic reaction to his writings, is not a resistance to theory in the etymological sense of the word *theory*, a resistance to a generalizable "clear-seeing," but rather a resistance to what in his work precisely cannot be seen clearly, the penumbra of the unknowable, the unintelligible, the nonphenomenal that is everywhere in his work. This is perhaps most threateningly present not in the radical incompatibility of the cognitive and performative dimensions of language, and not even in what Friedrich Schlegel called the madness and stupidity reached by irony as permanent parabasis, nor even in Kant's materiality of vision, but in the prosaic materiality of the letter. The latter is present at every moment, though for the most part it is invisible, suppressed, covered over, in all those words that surround us all the time and that generate the reassuring ideologies in terms of which we live our lives. What is most threatening, most allergic, most truly frightening about de Man's writings, is the way they force their readers to confront a darkness of unknowability that is not just out there somewhere, beyond the circle of light cast by the desk's reading lamp. That would be bad enough, but this darkness has woven itself into the light of reason itself and into the "instrument" by which it expresses itself, language. "No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words" (RR 122).

PAUL DE MAN'S AUTHORITY

Another double genitive there: the authority Paul de Man exerts and the authority in whose name he speaks. This essay began by identifying what is insolent or outrageous about de Man's writings, namely, his calm, laconic assertions that all the basic assumptions of literary studies as a discipline, along with all the greatest authorities in that discipline, are often just plain wrong. Where does de Man get his authority to say such things? In the light of my investigation of his materialism I propose now in conclusion three braided answers to the question of what justifies de Man to say what he says. All these may be inferred from de Man's own writing.

First, he might be imagined as replying that what he says, allergic

as it is, is not his own willful desire to cause trouble, but something that just happens, through reading. De Man's work is all reading of some text or other, primarily canonical texts that are among the most revered and cherished in our tradition. Therefore all these outrageous statements are not de Man speaking, but him speaking in indirect discourse for what his authors say. It is Shelley, not de Man, who says that nothing is connected to anything else. Hegel or Kleist, not de Man, who repeats the same words or syllables until they become senseless. It is not I, Paul de Man, speaking, but I speaking in the name of, with the authority, of my authors. As Chaucer says, "My auctor wol I folwen if I konne."¹³ In the "Reply to Raymond Geuss," de Man says,

The move from the theory of the sign to the theory of the subject has nothing to do with my being overconcerned with the Romantic tradition, or narcissistic, or ("c'est la même chose") too influenced by the French. It has, in fact, nothing to do with me at all but corresponds to an inexorable and altogether Hegelian move of the text. (AI 189)

Or, second appeal to authority, what I, Paul de Man, say happens through the rigor of critical reading. This rigor is something that produces the generalizations of theory, something that is wholly rational, logical, transmissible, the product of rigorous thinking that might have been done by anyone with de Man's intelligence and learning. Theory grows out of reading and is authorized by it, though it is in a different register and even though theory and reading, as "The Resistance to Theory" shows, are not symmetrical. Although "the resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading," nevertheless "rhetorical readings, like the other kinds, still avoid and resist the reading they advocate. Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance" (RT 15, 19). In the "Reply to Raymond Geuss," de Man asserts that the commentator should accept the "canonical reading" up to the point where something is encountered in the text that makes it impossible to go on accepting the canonical interpretation. De Man's formulations are couched in the language of ethical obligation and inevitability: "should," "could," and "necessity." The necessity arises from the reader's encounter with the text. What happens in reading happens, and it imposes implacable obligations on the reader that exceed the pre-suppositions both of the canonical reading and of "theory":

The commentator 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. (AI 186)

Third source of de Man's authority, deepest and most serious: the scandalous, counterintuitive things de Man says come into language through the encounter, at the limits of the most exigent theoretical rigor and obedient close reading, of the unintelligible. De Man takes the rational to the edge of irrationality, or identifies the unintelligible as that which has always already infected the pursuit of rational knowledge: "after Nietzsche (and, indeed, after any 'text'), we can no longer hope ever 'to know' in peace" (AR 126). Wherever de Man starts, whatever texts he reads, whatever vocabulary he uses leads ultimately beyond itself to its limits at the border of a dark unintelligibility, what Friedrich Schlegel called "der Schein des Verkehrten und Verrückten oder des Einfältigen und Dummen" ("the appearance of error and madness, or simplemindedness and stupidity").¹⁴ Three names de Man gives this unintelligibility are performative language, irony, and materiality. Kant may be taken as the paradigmatic model here. Kant's rigor of critical thinking led him to what undid his enterprise of architectonic articulation, disarticulated it. The same thing can be said of de Man's writing, except that de Man's writing is throughout a long meditation on what happens when thinking encounters that momentary event when the unintelligible, error, madness, stupidity, undoes the rational enterprise of critical thinking, or turns out to have been undoing it all along.

De Man speaks in the name of, on the grounds of, these three quite incompatible but nevertheless inextricably intertwined justifications for the allergens that he generates in words. This authority is, however, no authority in the ordinary sense. It is an authority without authority, or the authority that undoes all grounds for speaking with authority. How can one speak intelligibly on the grounds of the unintelligible? At the limit, and indeed all along the way, de Man's writings are allergenic because they pass on to the reader an allergen, an otherness, with which they have been infected and that is quite other to the calm, implacable, rational, maddeningly difficult to refute,¹⁵ rigor of de Man's

argumentation. Or rather, the latter turns out to be the same as the former, reason to be other to itself.

NOTES

1. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 131–32; hereafter *AI*.

2. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 262; hereafter *RR*.

3. I use the word *joyfully* as an allusion to Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom" or "fröhliche Wissenschaft." Anyone who fails to see the exuberant or even comic joy in de Man's writings, anyone who sees him as a "gloomy existentialist," as one commentator calls him, simply lacks an ear. The ironic comedy sometimes surfaces openly, as when he says, apropos of Kant's assertion that the Dutch are all phlegmatic, "interested only in money and totally devoid of any feeling for beauty or sublimity whatsoever": "I have never felt more grateful for the hundred or so kilometers that separate Antwerp [de Man's home city] from Rotterdam" (*AI* 124–25). Another example is what he says as part of an assertion that the self-undoing of Kant's critical enterprise through "the rigor of his own discourse" was not felt as a subjective, affective shudder: "I don't think that Kant, when he wrote about the heavens and the sea there, that he was shuddering in mind. Any literalism there would not be called for. It is terrifying in a way which we don't know. What do we know about the nightmares of Immanuel Kant? I'm sure they were . . . very interesting . . . Königsberg there in the winter—I shudder to think (*AI* 134). This joy is no doubt one of the things that is held against de Man, as Derrida's exuberant hijinks—in format, for example—are held against him. Both make ironic jokes about deadly serious matters. There is no room for comedy or for joy either in philosophy and theory. They are solemn matters for which you should, if you are a man, always wear a shirt and tie.

4. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3–4; hereafter *RT*; and *RR* 121–23.

5. De Man goes on to recognize that the final twist of irony in Greek or Hellenic comedy is that the smart guy is "always being set up by the person he thinks of as being the dumb guy, the *alazon*. In this case the *alazon* (and I recognize that this makes me the real *alazon* of this discourse) is American criticism of irony, and the smart guy is going to be German criticism of irony, which I of course understand" (*AI* 165). This seems to be a rare example of an overt admission by de Man that he is bound to be caught in the traps he sets for others, that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. In the rest of "The Concept of Irony," however, de Man allows precious little in the way of smart-guy attributes either to American criticism of irony, exemplified by Wayne Booth, presented as a dumb guy through and through, or to German and Danish criticism of irony either, with the exception of Friedrich Schlegel. Hegel, Kierkegaard, Benjamin, Szondi, and so on, are all as dumb as Booth, though in different ways. In the vibrating irony of the passage I have quoted from de Man, it is ironic for de Man to claim that he represents American criticism of irony, though of course he is not German either. In any case, for him to say he is "the real *alazon* of this discourse" is at the same time to say that

he is the real *iron*, since the *alazon* always turns out to be the disguised *iron*, the smartest smart guy, or the only smart guy around.

6. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 78; hereafter *AR*.

7. The anonymous reader of this essay for the University of Minnesota Press strongly resisted this account of de Man's concept of historical events in their materiality. "Miller's idea of history, moreover," the reader said, "is of little merit and has, as far as I can tell, very little to do with de Man." This is a good example of what I mean by an allergic reaction. My own idea of history is not expressed anywhere here, only de Man's, although in the sentence beginning "History is wars, battles . . ." I am miming ironically what history is conventionally assumed to be. Can the reader have taken my irony straight? After a careful rereading of my essay, I claim that the citations from de Man I make support what I say about de Man's concept of history. It is de Man's concept, not mine, that scandalizes the reader, makes him (or her) sneeze and cough. I have, however, altered one phrase that apparently misled the reader into thinking I understand de Man to be saying that history is caused by "intentional" uses of language and that might therefore mislead you, dear reader. As any careful reader of de Man knows, his theory of the performative "use" of language (as opposed to its mention) is detached from any conscious intention in the user. Language works performatively, on its own, most often against the intentions or knowledge of the speaker or writer. As he says, in the conclusion to "Promises (*Social Contract*)," "The error is not within the reader; language itself dissociates the cognition from the act. *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*" (*AR* 277), which means "Language promises" and also "Language makes a slip of the tongue." I have thought it worthwhile to refer directly to the comments of the Minnesota reader in order to try to forestall similar errors on the part of readers of the published essay.

8. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 162. See page 159, where Althusser says, "ideology has no history," and goes on to remark: "As we know, this formulation appears in so many words in a passage from *The German Ideology*."

9. In an equally important, though much less well known, definition of ideologies near the beginning of "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" de Man asserted that ideologies are on the side of what Kant called "metaphysics," that is, in Kant's use of the term, precritical empirical knowledge of the world. Only critical analysis of ideologies will keep ideologies from becoming mere illusion and critical philosophy from becoming idealism cut off from the empirical world (*AI* 72). The anonymous reader for the University of Minnesota Press sternly challenged my understanding in this footnote of Kant's use of the term *metaphysics*. This is another allergic reaction, one that demonstrates just the point I am making about de Man. Surely Kant cannot have meant something so strange as this by "metaphysics"! At the risk of making this footnote tediously long for those who have read Kant and de Man's commentary on Kant, here is the relevant passage from Kant, followed by de Man's comment on it. I think my reader is mystified through having accepted received opinion about what Kant must be saying because everyone knows that is what he says. That received opinion is, precisely, a species of "ideology," even of

"aesthetic ideology." Kant says: "A transcendental principle is one through which we represent *a priori* the universal condition under which alone things can become Objects of our cognition generally. A principle, on the other hand, is called metaphysical [Dagegen heißt ein Prinzip metaphysisch], where it represents *a priori* the condition under which alone Objects whose concept has to be given empirically [empirisch], may become further determined [bestimmt] *a priori*. Thus the principle of the cognition of bodies [der Erkenntnis der Körper] as substances, and as changeable substances, is transcendental where the statement is that their change must have a cause [Ursache]; but it is metaphysical where it asserts that their change must have an *external* cause [eine *äußere* Ursache]. For in the first case bodies need only be thought through ontological predicates (pure concepts of understanding [reine Verstandesbegriffe]), e.g. as substance, to enable the proposition to be cognized *a priori*; whereas, in the second case, the empirical concept of a body (as a movable thing in space) must be introduced to support the proposition [diesem Satze zum Grunde gelegt werden muß], although, once this is done, it may be seen [eingesehen] quite *a priori* that the latter predicate (movement only by means of an external cause) applies to body" (Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Wieschedel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979], 90; *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982], 20–21). De Man comments, in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant": "The condition of existence of bodies is called substance; to state that substance is the cause of the motion of bodies (as Kant does in the passage quoted) is to examine critically the possibility of their existence. Metaphysical principles, on the other hand, take the existence of their object for granted as empirical fact. They contain knowledge of the world, but this knowledge is precritical. Transcendental principles contain no knowledge of the world or anything else, except for the knowledge that metaphysical principles that take them for their object are themselves in need of critical analysis, since they take for granted an objectivity that, for the transcendental principles, is not *a priori* available. Thus the objects of transcendental principles are always critical *judgments* that take metaphysical knowledge for their target. Transcendental philosophy is always the critical philosophy of metaphysics" (A1 71). De Man goes on to associate ideology with metaphysics as Kant defines it. The passage is an important gloss on de Man's definition, or, more properly, "calling," of ideology in "The Resistance to Theory," just cited. In the sentences that follow just after the ones already quoted from "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" de Man associates ideology with Kantian "metaphysics" and argues for an intricate interdependence of critical thought on ideology and of ideology, if it is to other than "mere error," on critical thought. If metaphysics or ideology needs critical thought, critical thought also needs ideology, as its link to epistemological questions. The link is "causal." The "passage" is a good example of that almost imperceptible crossing, in de Man's formulations, of the border between rigorous reading of passages in the author being discussed and statements that are de Man's own, authorized by his own rigor of thought, as it extrapolates from what the author in question says: "Ideologies, to the extent that they necessarily contain empirical moments and are directed toward what lies outside the realm of pure concepts, are on the side of metaphysics rather than critical philosophy. The conditions and modalities of their occurrence are determined by critical analyses to which they have no

access. The object of these analyses, on the other hand, can only be ideologies. Ideological and critical thought are interdependent and any attempt to separate them collapses ideology into mere error and critical thought into idealism. The possibility of maintaining the causal link between them is the controlling principle of rigorous philosophical discourse: philosophies that succumb to ideology lose their epistemological sense, whereas philosophies that try to by-pass or repress ideology lose all critical thrust and risk being repossessed by what they foreclose" (AI 72). The only responsible way to challenge de Man's reading of Kant would be to go back to Kant for oneself and read him with scrupulous care, trying not to be misled by ideological presuppositions about what Kant must be saying. This is extremely difficult, not just because Kant is difficult, but because those ideological presuppositions are so powerful and are unconscious to boot, as Althusser says, that is, a taken for granted assumption that something really linguistic is phenomenal.

10. See de Man's "Reply to Raymond Geuss" (AI 185-92), first published in *Critical Inquiry* 10:2 (December 1983), a rejoinder to Geuss's "A Response to Paul de Man," in the same issue of *Critical Inquiry*.

11. Speaking in "Autobiography as De-Facement," of what Gérard Genette says about the undecidable alternation between fiction and autobiography in Proust's *Recherche*, de Man says: "As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous" (RR 70).

12. Jacques Derrida approaches this problematic from another direction in his second essay on Levinas, "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici," in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 159-202.

13. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Cressida*, 2:49.

14. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1964), 501-2.

15. I do not mean that it is impossible to disagree with what de Man says or to challenge his positions, as I have done elsewhere (by way of calling attention to the way de Man cannot expunge one trope, prosopopoeia, from his own language, though he rejects prosopopoeia as a false projection), or as I am doing here in stressing what is "unintelligible" in what de Man says, or as Jacques Derrida does with exemplary care and delicacy in his essay in this volume apropos of de Man's sense of the relation of Rousseau's *Confessions* to literary history. I mean that challenging de Man persuasively and responsibly is not all that easy, and that de Man will most often have foreseen and effectively forestalled the objections that it occurs to a skeptical or antagonistic reader to make.