Paul de Man and Art History

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At the moment of his death in 1983, Paul de Man’s writings enjoyed an almost scriptural prestige within American literary studies. Today one hardly ever hears his name. This rude fall from grace began with the posthumous publication of a body of wartime journalistic writings in which de Man had espoused anti-Semitic and extreme right-wing views on politics and culture. The young de Man, it turned out, had at least intellectually collaborated with Belgium’s Nazi occupiers. He managed to keep the secret throughout his American years.

The sudden illumination of this biographical grotto, for journalists and even some intellectuals, discredited de Man’s critical achievement, indeed the project of literary deconstruction as a whole. The revelation of de Man’s uneasy relationship with the truth appeared to confirm the worst suspicion of deconstruction’s opponents, namely that radical skepticism about the reliability of linguistic utterances would lead to moral paralysis, and could be used to justify political disengagement. It is true that de Man doubted even the most modest referential claims of literary and critical texts. His criticism brutally flattened meaning and value to a frieze of rhetorical figures. De Man defended this extreme attentiveness to linguistic at the expense of phenomenal reality as a responsible preliminary stage, a kind of philological chastisement of the text. And yet somehow, from the inside of de Man’s dramatic, elegant, and relentlessly ironic essays, one is never quite able to see beyond the analytic stage. There is truly no escape from figuration.

At any rate, de Man’s star fell well before the discipline of art history took any notice of his teachings. Deconstruction eventually seeped into art history by way of popular poststructuralist analytic practices like New Historicism and Cultural Studies. But these ready-to-wear de-mythifying strategies lacked the authentic de Manian flavor: the pessimism, the existentialist lassitude, the perverse, effete, even Wildean aestheticism.

Odds, the outpost de Man has now found an advocate — or at least an attentive reader — within the politically responsible wing of the art historical profession: T.J. Clark, the influential historian of nineteenth-century French painting, and for some time now the dominant intellectual personality of the Anglo-American social history of art. At a recent meeting of the College Art Association in New York, Clark chaired a session he titled “A de Manian Art History?” This was a spectacle of complementary figures, almost a drama of conscience: the historian troubled by the unreliability of reference that complicates any attempt to explain literary or visual texts, and the critic who we imagine was haunted by a single historical fact that, if ever made public, would have violently intruded into and silenced, his critical conversation — prefigured his actual death, in effect.

What is one to make of this strange encounter? Clark more than anyone ought to be repelled by de Man’s effete distaste for politics, and his fastidious respect for the frame that separates the text from the world. Is Clark’s rereading of de Man symptomatic of some latent doubt or irresolution within the larger contextualist project? Or is it merely a sign that Clark himself has never succeeded in liberating himself from hermeneutic models that preserve the integrity of the aesthetic frame?

De Man can hardly be of much use to the ordinary social historian of art. It is true that Ideologiekritik and deconstruction are equally wary of mistaking linguistic for natural reality. But such lucidity is politically useful only when one is sure of one’s enemies in advance, before the process of analysis has even begun. De Manian deconstruction refuses even this negative certainty.

Indeed, the failure of reading was peculiarly linked, for de Man, to the failure of utopian thought. The English poet and critic William Empson — one of the subllest readers of this century and in many ways a forebear of de Man — wrote a book on pastoral whose first chapter dealt with Marxist and proletarian fiction. De Man read Empson’s book as a commentary on poetic language itself: pastoral is “the movement of consciousness as it contemplates the natural entity and finds itself integrally reflected down to the most peculiar aspects of physis.” But consciousness is in turn suspicious of this smooth saturation of nature with the self. Thus the true subject of pastoral becomes “the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural.”! Irony and allegory — de Man’s master tropes — will coldly disperse any imagined organic world built of analogical correspondences. A de Manian historical materialism had better not indulge in any naive optimism.

But the potential bearing of de Man’s work on the writing of art history is more general than this. De Man was interested in the way texts mean. His criticism addressed not the logic of signs (i.e., the adequacy of their reference to the world, their truth content), nor the grammar of signs (i.e., the roles and codes of sign formation). De Man focused instead on rhetoric: the sign’s tendency to swerve unpredictably out of the code and generate still further signs, all demanding further interpretation. The analysis of rhetorical figures and tropes reveals in any text an unstable residue of meaning not reducible to grammar. Such a residue cannot simply be decoded: it must be read. De Manian criticism thus endlessly postpones the historian’s natural (and entirely legitimate) concern with the social or psychological production of texts.

There is no obstacle to extending this rhetorical criticism to images. The very term “figure” is a visual metaphor. And de Man’s thinking about language derives from Peirce’s semiotics, which unlike Saussure’s is not grounded in linguistics.

Nevertheless there are some special problems associated with the rhetorical analysis of images. De Man’s basic maneuver was to expose differences disguised as resemblances. This debunking of the pretense to “natural” representation meets stiffer intuitive resistance when images are involved. The image figures the phenomenal world. But the image’s representation of the world is at least partially nonconventional, i.e., it is based on an actual resemblance of the image to the world, and does not depend on the interpretation of a beholder. This physical resemblance — what Peirce called “iconic” signification — works a strong psychological effect on the viewer. The charisma of iconic resemblance can blind the beholder to the distortions perpetrated by the image. Because the opacity and autonomy of the visual sign is harder to recognize, its beholder is liable to confuse its reference to the phenomenal world with natural cognition. Finally, the beholder under the iconic spell tends to underrate the tenacity of pictorial convention. Textual
criticism, by contrast, instinctively “knows” that texts are about other texts. Literary criticism, after all, descends from ancient traditions of scriptural and juridical commentary. The problematic status of the text’s reference to the world is taken for granted.

A “rhetorical” analysis of the image would trace the deflections and scramblings of meaning occasioned by these figurations. In the Western tradition, such deflections are typically (and grandly) named by terms like style, beauty, or aura — the very terms that are used to justify the exalted status and value of the work of art. It is easy to see how quickly a rhetorical approach exceeds in critical power and acuity an art history built, for example, on Gombrich’s scientific breakdown of the creative process into succeeding episodes of “making” (grammar) and “matching” (logic).

The image tradition that derives from the Christian icon practically begs for such a rhetorical analysis. Christian theology was generally eager to submit images to epistemological tests: it was important to distinguish true representations of the divine from false. Now scripture clearly warned that no material image could ever adequately represent the truth. Nevertheless the temptation of a verisimilar image of the deity legitimated by a theological loophole, the doctrine of Incarnation — proved irresistible. The Christian image tradition masked any doubts behind the doctrine and technology of mimesis, and under a legible, dyadic code of symbols. Symbolism, like mimesis, is a sign system that pretends to a natural and successful absorption of meaning. The symbol, like the mimetic image, is in principle saturated with meaning, without a remainder. A de Manian reading would reveal such an interstice between meaning and image — both the failure of the image to say what it claims to say, and the way the image generates inadvertent and unexpected meanings in the very process of trying and failing to signify.

Such a reading, at least within the Western tradition, would inevitably arrive at the problem of color. Color serves as an irritant to any orderly theory of painterly signification. For color does not refer conventionally to the phenomenal world. Indeed, there is a sense in which color is not a sign at all: blue paint does not merely represent the color blue, it is blue. The effect of painting this defendant’s case from a consensual representational code, a socially and institutionally regulable grammar, nor from some independent stylistic contribution of the individual artist. Instead, the art of painting sheepishly capitalizes on the brute physical properties of raw material. Early theorists of painting tried to overcome this indignity by drawing a dubious distinction between color, or raw pigment, and colorito, or the artist’s skilled application of pigment. Yet in both cases it is still the material properties of color that produce those fleeting, unnamable impressions, so intense and unverifiable that they were literally compared to erotic sensations. When it casts a spell with color, painting abandons its re-presentational function, and instead presents something entirely unprecedented. This presentation is not a proposition that can be evaluated for truth content, but a performance that inescapably raises the issue of the performer’s intentions or sincerity. It is at this point that moralists take interest and the metaphysicians panic. A work’s capacity to disarm a beholder with sensory effects is in no way logically coordinated with that work’s capacity to advance a proposition about the world. This observation is the basis for the widespread but secondary sense of “rhetoric” as the art of persuasion, and the ensuing mistrust of rhetoric.

There is a long tradition of ahistorical writing that tries to take account these unruly properties of the painted image. It begins with the letters, dialogues, and connoisseurial judgments of the Cinquecento, themselves reflections of vanished conversations. This was art criticism in its most literal aspect: the close reading of pictures, judgments of authenticity and quality, a capacity to look through subject matter to the level of style and structure. This tradition attained a first climax in the eighteenth century, the great epoch of connoisseurship (Mariette) and criticism (Diderot). But this was equally the epoch that gave birth to the modern historiist study of art (Winkelman). And from then on critical writing and art history went separate ways. By the second half of our century, the art historian had become thoroughly embarrassed by his own experiential encounter with the work. It was this judgment that contrived to efface the traces of that encounter from his historical account.

By contrast, evaluative criticism never entirely lost its foothold within the academic discipline of literary studies. Close and even uncomfortably intimate readings of texts always remained close to the heart of academic practice. Paul de Man belonged to a dense tradition linking Russian Formalism, Anglo-American New Criticism, Heideggerian neo-Romantic exegesis, and Derriadean deconstruction. This tradition’s obsessive, philological scrutiny of the text, of inexpressible pursuits of meanings through infinite nestings of rhetorical figures, is perhaps the most important contribution that literary studies could make to a new art history. Close reading offers a corrective to any impulsive, impatient positivism. Encouraging recent signs of such a turn in art history, at least on the American scene, are the ingenious, neo-formalist readings of Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss.

There is another tradition closer to the core of twentieth-century academic art history against which a de Manian art history could resonate. Iconography has its roots in ancient hermeneutic practices of topological readings of texts. The iconographer or emblem-reader, classically, interprets images according to the appearance, the surface evidence. Aby Warburg, no less than the formalist Alois Riegl, scorned all literal or “illustrational” readings of images. And it was this generative, allegorizing aspect of iconography that attracted Walter Benjamin to the work of Warburg and Benjamin. A good contemporary example of this proposed, and rather paradoxical, continuity between the allegorical tradition and post-structuralist interpretative strategies (although in this case not especially de Manian) is Mieke Bal’s remarkable recent book on Rembrandt.

Because deconstruction concerns itself with what is leftover after clearly legible meaning has been subtracted from the image — with that quantum of unstable signification that supposedly distinguishes “works of art” from mere indexical marks or diagrams — it offers an avenue into the unsolved problem of the aesthetic. Modern historical scholarship of art has not notably succeeded in fitting the refractory and persuasive remainder into its simple explanatory models. Indeed, the social history of art, which rightly tries to distinguish one historical epoch’s construction of the aesthetic from another’s, has often gone so far as to relativize the remainder out of existence. The historian affects invulnerability to the friction generated by his own physical encounter with the artifact under study. The temptation to reduce is powerful: an aesthetic remainder severed from any epistemological burden is highly vulnerable to ideological manipulation. The social history of art certainly performs a crucial prophylactic task if it inculcates skepticism towards aesthetic pretensions. And there is a secondary temptation: the work of art trimmed of its remainder is a more trustworthy historical document.

It must be admitted that de Man’s own criticism, in the end, does very little to discourage the reader’s appetite for aesthetic experience. De Man did try to ward off this accusation. “The foregrounding of material, phenomenal aspects of the signifier,” he wrote in “The Resistance to Theory,” “is the illusion of aesthetic seduction at the very moment when the actual aesthetic function has been suspended.” But this is disingenuous, for there can’t be an “illusion” of seduction; either one is seduced, or not. By introducing the idea of illusion, de Man pushes the work of art back into the realm of epistemology, at the very moment when the work eludes the criterion of truth. This is what de Man himself would call a critical blind spot.

De Man’s lapsus points to a deep contradiction within the contextualist project. Good art history, everyone will agree, is grounded in close reading of images. But this attentiveness to the particularity and materiality of the artifacts will yield not one reading but many — for each
historian’s separate encounter with the work is singular and unrepeatable. This semantic multiplicity in turn calls attention to an ahistorical dimension of the work.

The fiercest enemies of the work of art are perhaps those who most resent its charm. Criticism, de Man wrote, “is the reduction to the rigors of grammar of rhetorical mystifications.” But “this apparent glorification of the critic-philosopher in the name of truth is in fact a glorification of the poet as the primary source of this truth; if truth is the recognition of the systematic character of a certain kind of error, then it would be fully dependent on the prior existence of this error.” Here is where Clark and de Man resemble each other most — and where they both resemble Adorno, another troubled, puritanical, self-denying aesthete. All three of these mournful philosophers, connoisseurs of negativ-ity, seem to bear their disillusionment as a poignant burden.

De Man’s criticism could never generate a positive history, a narrative. Whitney Davis, in a paper presented at Clark’s session and published in this volume [Texte zur Kunst, June 1994], argues correctly that in de Man’s system exterior materiality never does entirely connect with interior meaning. The world, perceived metonymically as “formal” is ill-served by our incomplete, metaphorical comprehension of those forms as “figures.” Figurality, after all, entails a reduction in dimensions from three to two. Thus it is certainly true that the pure “criticism of figurality remains partly unhistorical,” and indeed may well produce a cartoon version of history. But de Man never accepted the writing of history as his brief; it was never his ambition to account fully for the world through a critique of rhetorical figures, even though the ingredients for such an irresponsible project are all present in his writing. de Man’s deconstruction was essentially a skeptical impulse, oppositional and critical in the original, Socratic sense.

De Man’s current disfavor, one might add, is founded on a fallacious analogy between the aporia or cognitive paralysis of the reader and political apathy or disengagement, an analogy that de Man himself never drew. In other words, de Man’s critics have enthusiastically extended the notion of “literariness,” or textuality that resists simple reading, to life itself — whereas political situations are precisely distinguished from textual situations by being real and not linguistic.

De Man, like Derrida, always appealed most to Americans. There were many reasons for this: the tradition of close reading; the pervasive appetite of American intellectuals for negativity, doubt, the pathos of the lost center; the luxury of political disengagement. Most professors of the humanities in the United States are emotionally and even geographically much more detached from real power than their European counterparts. They are more likely to indulge in a taste for a languid, fatalistic, rather fin-de-siècle aestheticism like de Man’s. It is certainly not obvious that such a radically idealist and skeptical critical project could be translated to, say, a German context. There is really no living tradition of the close reading of texts in Germany; and the study of art history has long since been severed from any ambitious critical practice. The contextual history of art, finally, firmly rooted in two generations of Frankfurt School theory, is many ways even better established and more sure of itself than in America. Second-generation materialists, like so many of Clark’s Anglo-American disciples, are generally less incompelled by the insurrection of the sign.

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Notes:
1 “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism,” in Blindness and Insight (Minneapolis, 1983), p. 239.
2 Allegories of Reading (New Haven, 1979), p. 17.