

Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Peggy Kamuf

Unable to respond to the questions, to all the questions, I will ask myself instead *whether responding is possible* and what that would mean in such a situation. And I will risk in turn several questions *prior to* the definition of a *responsibility*. But is it not an act to assume in theory the concept of a responsibility? Is that not already to take a responsibility? One's own as well as the responsibility to which one believes one ought to summon others?

The title names a war. Which war?

Do not think only of the war that broke out several months ago around some articles signed by a certain Paul de Man, in Belgium between 1940 and 1942. Later you will understand why it is important to situate the beginning of things *public*, that is the publications, early in 1940 at the latest, during the war but before the occupation of Belgium by the Nazis, and not in December 1940, the date of the first article that appeared in *Le Soir*, the major Brussels newspaper that was then controlled, more or less strictly, by the occupiers. For several months, in the United States, the phenomena of this war "around" Paul de Man have been limited to newspaper articles. War, a public act, is by rights something declared. So we will not count in the category of war the private phenomena—meetings, discussions, correspondences, or telephonic conclaves—however intense they may have been in recent days, and already well beyond the American academic milieu.

To my knowledge, at the moment I write, this war presents itself as such, it is *declared* in newspapers, *and nowhere else*, on the subject of arguments made in newspapers, *and nowhere else*, in the course of the last world war, during two years almost a half century ago. That is why my title alludes to the passage from Montherlant quoted by de Man in *Le Soir* in 1941. I will come back to it, but the double edge of its irony already seems cruel: "When I open the newspapers and journals of today, I hear the indifference of the future rolling over them, just as one hears the sound of the sea when one holds certain seashells up to the ear."

The future will not have been indifferent, not for long, just barely a half century, to what de Man wrote one day in the "newspapers and journals of today." One may draw from this many contradictory lessons. But in the several months to follow, the very young journalist that he will have been during less than two years will be read more intensely than the theoretician, the thinker, the writer, the professor, the author of great books that he was during forty years. Is this unfair? Yes, no. But what about later? Here is a prediction and a hope: without ever forgetting the journalist, people will relearn how to read "*all*" of the work (which is to say so many others as well) *toward that which opens itself up there*. People will learn to reread the books, and *once again* the newspapers, and *once again toward that which opens itself up there*. To do so, one will need in the first place, and more than ever *in the future*, the lessons of Paul de Man.

Elsewhere, having more time and more space, one will also analyze from every angle the significance of the press in the modernity of a history like this one, in the course of a war like this one: the one and the other would be impossible and inconceivable without journalism. Yet, whatever one may think of the ignorance, the simplism, the sensationalist flurry full of hatred which certain American newspapers displayed in this case, we will not engage in any negative evaluation of the press *in general*. Such an evaluation belongs to a code that one must always mistrust. It is not far removed from what we are going to talk about. What is more, I think it is only normal that the American press does not remain silent about the emotion aroused by, I quote, the "pro-Nazi articles" or the "anti-Semitic articles" published in a "pro-Nazi newspaper" by a "Yale

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scholar," a "revered" professor, "Sterling Professor of Humanities" who "died in 1983 while chairman of Yale's Comparative Literature Department." Incidentally, what would have happened if Paul de Man had not been a great American professor or if, as a professor, he had not been at Yale? And what if one also did a history of Yale, or of the great Eastern universities, a history of certain of their past (just barely, very recently) ideologico-institutional practices having to do with certain themes that we are going to talk about?¹ Well, after having had to set aside the question "What is the press in the culture and politics of this century?" I will also have to postpone this other question: "What is Yale, for example, in American culture?"

If newspapers have the duty to inform and the right to interpret, would it not have been better if they had done so with caution, rigor, honesty? There was little of that. And the press' most serious lapses from its elementary duties cannot be imputed to the newspapers or to the professional journalists themselves, but to certain academics.

The fact is there: at the point at which I take the risk of writing on this subject, I have the sense of being the first, thus so far the only one to do so, still too quickly to be sure, but without journalistic haste, which is to say without the excuses it sometimes gives the journalist but should never give the academic. It is a formidable privilege, one not designed to alleviate the feeling of my responsibility. For this deadly war (and fear, hatred, which is to say sometimes love, also dream of killing the dead in order to get at the living) has already recruited some combatants, while others are sharpening their weapons in preparation for it. In the evaluations of journalists or of certain professors, one can make out strategies or stratagems, movements of attack or defense, sometimes the two at once. Although this war no doubt began in the newspapers, it will be carried on for a long time elsewhere, in the most diverse forms. There will be many of us who will have to take their responsibilities and who, at the same time, will have to say, in the face of what is happening to us today, what *responding* and taking a *responsibility* can mean. For what is happening with these "revelations" (I am quoting the word from a newspaper) is happening *to us*.

It is *happening* to all those for whom this event ought to have a meaning, even if that meaning is difficult to decipher and even if, for many, the person and the work of de Man still remain not well known. Let those in this latter category be reassured or still more troubled: even

1. See Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970* (Westport, Conn., 1979), and Nitzza Rosovsky, *The Jewish Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). I remember the indignation with which certain student newspapers at Yale, while I was teaching there, manifested surprise when learning of the antisemitism that had reigned in their university. I do not recall that there was any echo of this in the major press or among the majority of our colleagues.

for his admirers and his friends, especially for them, if I may be allowed to testify to this, the work and the person of Paul de Man were enigmatic. Perhaps they are becoming more enigmatic than ever. Do you believe friendship or admiration ought to reduce everything about this enigma? I believe just the opposite.

Why do I now underscore that expression: "*what is happening?*" Because for me this belongs to the order of the absolutely unforeseeable, which is always the condition of any event. Even when it seems to go back to a buried past, what comes about always comes from the future. And it is especially about the future that I will be talking. Something *happens* only on the condition that one is not expecting it. Here of course I am speaking the language of consciousness. But there would also be no event *identifiable as such* if some repetition did not come along to cushion the surprise by preparing its effect on the basis of some experience of the unconscious. If the word "unconscious" has any meaning, then it stems from this necessity.

With or without a *recognition of the unconscious*, today this is *happening to us*. I name thereby, in utter darkness, many people. But it is also the darkness of a blinding light: *us*, we are still the living and the survivors, however uncertain and incomprehensible such a phrase may remain. The said war, then, could only take place, if that is what certain people want, *among us*. For we must never forget this cold and pitiless light: Paul de Man *himself* is dead. If there are some who want to organize a trial in order to judge him, de Man, they must remember that he, de Man, is dead and will not answer in the present. This thing will always be difficult to think and perhaps it will become more and more difficult. He, *himself*, *he is dead*, and yet, through the specters of memory and of the text, he lives *among us* and, as one says in French, *il nous regarde*—he looks at us, but also he is our concern, we have concerns regarding him more than ever without his being here. He speaks (to) us among us. He makes us or allows us to speak of us, *to speak to us*. *He speaks (to) us* [*Il nous parle*]. The equivocality of the French expression, because it is barely translatable, translates well the murkiness of the question. What do we mean, what do *us* and *among us* mean in this case?

However obscure this may remain, we have to register it: we still have responsibilities toward him, and they are more alive than ever, even as he is dead. That is, we have responsibilities regarding Paul de Man *himself* but *in us and for us*. Yes, it remains difficult to think that he is dead and what that can mean. How are we to know about what or whom one is speaking when there are some who venture to exploit *what is happening* against others and for ends that no longer concern Paul de Man *himself*, that in any case will never reach him, while others will still try to protect *themselves* by pretending to protect Paul de Man against *what is happening?*

Is it possible to assume here one's own responsibility without doing one or the other, without using *what happens to us* in order to attack or

to protect oneself? Without war, therefore? I do not know yet, but I would like to try to get there, to say at least something about it, and, this I do know, no matter what may happen.

So we have to answer [*répondre*] for what is happening to us. It will not be a matter only of the responsibility of a writer, a theoretician, a professor, or an intellectual. The act of responding and the definition of what "responding" means carry our commitment well beyond, no doubt, what may look like a circumscribed example, well beyond the limits of the literary and artistic column that a very young man wrote for a newspaper, almost a half century ago, for less than two years, in very singular private and political circumstances many of which remain unclear to us, before leaving his country and undertaking, in another country and another language, the story that we know, the only one that we knew something about until a few months ago: that of a great professor whose teaching and influence spread well beyond the United States, a fact that no one denies, whose work as a philosopher and as a theoretician of literature is admired or put to work by many scholars and students throughout the world, discussed or attacked by others, but dismissed by no one; that also of a man whose many friends, colleagues, students recognized what they owe to his lucidity, his rigor, his tireless generosity. We will come back to this.

Which war, then? Paul de Man's war, in another sense, is also the Second World War. He began to publish during the war. As far as I know, none of the incriminated articles was written after 1942, that is, well before the end of the war and of the German occupation. The reconstitution and the analysis of what his experience was of that war and that occupation will require patient, careful, minute, and difficult research. Any conclusion that does not rely on such research would be unjust, abusive, and irresponsible—I would even say, given the gravity of these things, indecent. And will it ever be necessary to conclude? Is that what this is about? Is a measure, a fair measure, possible? We will come back to this.

Which war, then? Paul de Man's war is finally, in a third sense, the one that this man must have lived and endured *in himself*. He *was* this war. And for almost a half century, this ordeal was a war because it could not remain a merely private torment. It has to have marked his public gestures, his teaching and writing. It remains a secret, a hive of secrets, but no one can seriously imagine, today, that in the course of such a history, this man would not have been torn apart by the tragedies, ruptures, dissociations, "disjunctions" (here I am using one of his favorite words and a concept that plays a major role in his thought). How did he undergo or assume on the outside these internal conflicts? How did he live this unlivable discord between worlds, histories, memories, discourses, languages? Do we have the means to testify to this? Who has the right to judge it, to condemn or to absolve? We will come back to this as well.

If it is now a matter of *responding* and of taking *responsibilities*, then we do so necessarily, as always, in situations we neither choose nor control, by responding to *unforeseeable* appeals, that is, to appeals *from/of the other* that are addressed to us even before we decide on them. Permit me to say a few words about certain recent appeals to which I thought I ought to respond and without which I would not be writing what you are reading here.

Two of them took the allegorical form of the telephone call. One took me by surprise in August, the other in December.

So this time I will have to tell. "Have I anything *to tell*?" is a question I have often asked myself in English during these last months. Do I have anything to tell that those interested in these things do not already know, those who discovered these "early writings," as the newspapers put it, at the same time I did? Do I have anything to analyze in a pertinent fashion, to discern, to distinguish (to tell) in the tangled fabric of this enigma, in order to account for it? I am not sure, I still cannot tell. At least I will have been obliged to recall the first words of the *Mémoires* that I dedicated four years ago to the one who was and remains my friend. (May I be forgiven these "self-centered" references; I will not overdo them.) "I have never known how to tell a story"; those were its first words.² How could I then have imagined that it would be from the friend, from him alone, singularly from him, that would one day come the obligation to tell a story? And that this injunction would come to me from the one who always associated narrative structure with allegory, that discourse of the other that always says something still other than what it says?

Mémoires speak especially, and often, of the future, that is, of that which cannot be anticipated and which always marks the memory of the past as experience of the promise. I claimed to know what a future should be *in general*: the unforeseeable itself. But without foreseeing as yet, and precisely for that reason, *what* it would be, I named in effect a future that it was absolutely impossible for me to see coming. And what a future! And the future of what a past! A future and a past about which I have at least, consciously, this absolute certainty: I never shared them and will never share them with Paul de Man, *himself*, whether one is talking about what *he* might have written a long time before I knew him, or about what is happening *to us* after his death.

I have just quoted the first words of a book. I believed I was chancing them in utter darkness. The last words of the same book resonate no less strangely, uncannily for me today. Forgive me once again this last and long quotation:

A promise has meaning and gravity only with the death of the other. When the friend is no longer *there*, the promise is still not

2. Derrida, *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava (New York, 1986), p. 150; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

tenable, it will not have been made, but as a trace of the future it can still be *renewed*. You could call this an act of memory or a given word, even an act of faith; I prefer to take the risk of a singular and more equivocal word. I prefer to call this an *act*, only an act, quite simply an act. An impossible act, therefore the only one worthy of its name, or rather which, in order to be worthy of its name, must be worthy of the name of the other, made in the name of the other. Try and translate, in all of its syntactical equivocality, a syntagm such as “donner au nom de l'autre” or “une parole donnée au nom de l'autre.” In a single sentence, it could mean in French, or rather in English: “to give to the name of the other” and “to give in the name of the other.” Who knows what we are doing when we *donnons au nom de l'autre*? [M, p. 150]

“Who knows . . . ?” Who can tell? Not only did I not know it myself, neither this nor the ordeal the future held in store for my bereaved friendship, for that promise that friendship always is—a promise and a grief which are never over. I also did not know *what* I was promising. Yet, what was I saying about this nonknowledge? That it is the very thing that makes of the promise to the other a true promise, the only true promise, if there is any, an excessive and unconditional promise, an impossible promise. One can never promise in a halfway fashion, one always has to promise too much, more than one can fulfill. I could not know that one day, the experience of such a wound would have to include responding for Paul de Man: not responding *in his place* or in his name, that will always be impossible and unjustifiable (the promise of friendship even supposes the respect of this impossibility or the irreplaceable singularity of the other). Nor do I mean judging, and certainly not approving of everything he did, but speaking once again, of-him-for-him, at a moment when his memory or his legacy risk being accused and he is no longer there to speak in his own name. To speak in one's own name, moreover, is that ever possible? Would he have done it, would he have been able to do it if he were alive? What would have happened? Would all this have happened if he were still alive today? What does that mean “to be alive today”? These are just so many questions that I will also have to leave unanswered, like that of a responsibility which would never be cancelled, but on the contrary provoked by the experience of prosopopeia, such as de Man seems to understand it.

Well, when I received, in December, the telephone call from *Critical Inquiry* which proposed, singular generosity, that I be the first to speak, when a friendly voice said to me: “it has to be you, we thought that it was up to you to do this before anyone else,” I believed I had to accept a warm invitation that also resonated like a summons. Unable not to accept, I nevertheless wondered: why me? why me first? Why me who, by birth, history, inclination, philosophical, political, or ideological choice, have never had anything but a mistrustful relation to everything that is

being incriminated with such haste about these texts? Why me, who did not even know of their existence until a few months ago? Why me, who knew nothing about the dark time spent between 1940–42 by the Paul de Man I later read, knew, admired, loved? I will have to try to explain the reasons for which I nevertheless accepted to respond *yes* to this appeal and thus to take such a responsibility.

But my account will begin with an earlier telephone call. In August, Samuel Weber calls me upon his return from Belgium. During a conference, he has met a young Belgian researcher, Ortwin de Graef, who informed him of a disturbing discovery: articles written by Paul de Man under the German Occupation, between 1941 and 1942, in two newspapers, the French language *Le Soir* and the Flemish language *Het Vlaamsche Land*. This research assistant of the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is preparing a doctoral dissertation on Paul de Man. Sam Weber describes him over the phone: an intelligent young man who admires and knows well the work of Paul de Man. He can also foresee, therefore, what effects will result, especially in the United States, from the publication of his discovery. That is why he talked to Sam Weber about it and also hopes, the latter tells me, to get my advice. But—to an extent, under conditions, and in a form that I still today do not know—he has already communicated, by that time, his research and discovery, as well as his desire to make them public, to several persons in the United States, notably at Yale. Likewise, he has already sent to the British journal *Textual Practice*, along with the translation of four Flemish texts published by Paul de Man in 1942,³ an introduction⁴ that, he will subsequently tell me in a letter, “is not really to his satisfaction” but “he does not have the time” to write another text as he is about to begin his military service. All of this gives me the sense that this young man, whom I have yet to meet, is as worried about handling a dangerous and spectacular explosive as he is careful, for this very reason of course, not to let it get out of his hands (analysis interrupted).

After discussing it on the phone, we decide, Sam Weber and myself, to ask Ortwin de Graef to send us, if possible, copies of the articles published in French, which were the more numerous. Then we could advise him from a more informed position. Sam Weber writes to him to this effect on our behalf. A short while later, we receive copies of twenty-five articles in French, accompanied by a bibliographical notice concerning

3. The four articles in *Het Vlaamsche Land* translated by Ortwin de Graef are: “Art as Mirror of the Essence of Nations: Considerations on *Geist der Nationen*, by A. E. Brinckmann,” 29–30 Mar. 1942; “Content of the European Idea,” 31 May–1 June 1942; “Criticism and Literary History,” 7–8 June 1942; “Literature and Sociology,” 27–28 Sept. 1942; hereafter abbreviated by title followed by *HVL*.

4. De Graef, “Paul de Man’s Proleptic ‘Nachlass’: Bio-bibliographical Additions and Translations,” unpub. ms.

ninety-two articles published in *Le Soir* between February 1941 and June 1942. In a handwritten note, de Graef adds: "plus probably another 20–30 in the period July–December 1942."

I specify this point for two reasons. (1) First of all, I have still not understood why and how this selection of twenty-five articles was made from a set of about 125. But I have no reason to suspect the intention of he who wrote the following to me, in a letter accompanying the package and in order to forestall my anxiety: "Yesterday I received a letter from Mr. Samuel Weber in which he tells me that you are prepared to give me your opinion on the texts of Paul de Man that I have found. In this envelope, you will find a bibliographical list as well as a not altogether arbitrary selection of these texts (it is difficult, for practical reasons, to send you all the articles now, but if you wish to see them, I will try to find a way—in any case, the present selection can give an impression of the general content of the first writings of Paul de Man as concerns the events of the war)."⁵ However neutral and honest the principle of this selection, however indispensable it may have seemed for technical reasons I know nothing about, it has perhaps privileged the texts that are politically and ideologically significant. Thus perhaps it has distorted a general configuration that would be better respected by an integral reading. It is for this reason, and I will come to this point later, that we decided to pursue systematically the research—which de Graef by that time had to abandon for reasons of military service—and to publish *all* the accessible articles. (2) For the same reason, at the moment of this writing, I have still been able to read, besides the twenty-five articles from *Le Soir*, only the four articles translated from Flemish into English and introduced by the translator. I cannot even evaluate the effects of this limitation on what I may say here, but I do not want to exclude them. The important thing is not only the limitation on my reading at the moment in which I must write, whatever meaning that may have, but the fact that all the sensationalist "information" delivered in great haste by the newspapers and by those who fed them their information remains marked by this same limitation that was generally *undeclared*, just as there was no mention made of the as yet very insufficient state of our most elementary knowledge concerning the essentials of this affair. I insist on heavily underscoring this point. To be sure, in the course of the research and debates that will undoubtedly continue, I will perhaps be led to complete or correct the first impressions that I am delivering here as such. I would have waited to do a more systematic job if the press had not pressed us to hurry.

What were these impressions after a first reading toward the end of August? As I said to Sam Weber, during the first phone call (and one may easily imagine this), I had first hoped to read less profoundly marked

5. De Graef, letter to Derrida, 21 Aug. 1987.

articles. I had hoped that the concessions to the occupier or the ideological contagion (which I already expected: one did not accept to publish in that context without paying the price, that is, without accepting what we know today to be unacceptable) would take minimal and some sort of negative forms: more those of omission or of abstention. This hope disappointed, I had to give in to this first appearance at least: things seemed serious and complicated. Paul de Man's discourse appeared to me right off to be clearly more engaged than I had hoped, but also more differentiated and no doubt more heterogeneous. The form of the engagement was even rather disconcerting. One could recognize very quickly in the writing, along with the traits of a certain juvenility, those of an extraordinary culture—a culture that was especially literary or artistic, already very international (French and German, especially, but also Anglo-American and Flemish), open to the great politico-philosophical problems that everything then made more dramatic and more pressing: the destiny of Europe, the essence and future of nations, the individual and democracy, war, science and technology, and most particularly the political meanings and importance of literature.

Rightly or wrongly, I believed I had to accept what could be in itself *contradictory* about this double impression. On the one hand, I perceived an intellectual maturity and a cultivation which were uncommon at that age, and thus an exceptional sense of historical, philosophical, political responsibilities. There can be no doubt about this; it forms, rather, the theme, so to speak, of all these texts. To a very great extent, Paul de Man knew what he was doing, as they say, and he constantly posed questions of responsibility, which does not mean that his response to his questions was ever simple. Nonetheless, on the other hand, this impressive precociousness was sometimes paid for (it is not so surprising) by some confusion, perhaps as well a certain haste. Especially when they go together, youth and journalism are not the best protections against such confusion. No doubt flattered to see himself entrusted with the literary and artistic column of a major newspaper, even if he owed this fortune (or misfortune) to his uncle Henri de Man, a young man of twenty-two did not resist the temptation. All the more so since, as we now know, this former student of the sciences dreamed of nothing but literature. I will also come back to what was no doubt the determining role of that uncommon man, Henri de Man, and to the question of age in this story.

I believed I could acknowledge something right away: the relative heterogeneity of these writings, due in part to the often careful articulation of the argument, to the skill, indeed the cunning of the ideologico-political rhetoric, was also to be explained, to an extent that I still cannot measure, by other factors. On the one hand, it was no doubt necessary to take into consideration a personal inability to give to the argument all its coherence, but there was also the structural impossibility that prevented this argument from attaining coherence. (I am talking about the

fund of coded and stereotyped arguments from which Paul de Man had to draw.) On the other hand, how can one avoid taking into account the mobility of a situation that, during this beginning of the occupation and however brief may be the period we are talking about, must have made things evolve quickly from one day to the next? The diachronic overdetermination of the context demanded that one proceed carefully in the reading of this series of articles. I will later spell out other necessary precautions, but first of all I want to go on with a story.

From the first reading, I thought I recognized, alas, what I will call roughly an *ideological configuration*, discursive schemas, a logic and a stock of highly marked arguments. By my situation and by training, I had learned from childhood to detect them easily. A strange coincidence: it so happens, on top of it all, that these themes are the subject of seminars I have been giving for four years as well as of my last book, on Heidegger and Nazism.⁶ My feelings were first of all that of a wound, a stupor, and a sadness that I want neither to dissimulate nor exhibit. They have not altogether gone away since, even if they are joined now by others, which I will talk about as well. To begin, a few words about what I thought I was able to identify at first glance but a glance that right away gave me to see, as one should always suspect, that a single glance will never suffice—nor even a brief series of glances.

And already, when I speak of a painful surprise, I must right away differentiate things.

A painful surprise, yes, of course, for *three reasons* at least: (1) some of these articles or certain phrases in them seemed to manifest, in a certain way, an alliance with what has always been for me the very worst; (2) for almost twenty years, I had never had the least reason to suspect my friend could be the author of such articles (I will come back again to this fact); (3) I had read, a short while earlier, the only text that was accessible to me up until then and that was written and signed by Paul de Man in Belgium during the war. Thomas Keenan, a young researcher and a friend from Yale who was preparing, among other things, a bibliography of de Man, had in fact communicated to me, as soon as he had found it in Belgium, the table of contents and the editorial of an issue from the fourth volume of a Brussels journal in which de Man had published his first writings. He had been a member of the editorial committee, then director of this journal, *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen, Revue du cercle d'étude de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles*, founded in 1937. Now, what did this editorial say in February 1940, at the point at which de Man had just taken over the editorship, *in the middle of the war but right before the defeat*? Without equivocation, it took sides *against* Germany

6. Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question* (Paris, 1987); forthcoming in a translation by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago).

and *for* democracy, for “the victory of the democracies” in a war defined as a “struggle . . . against barbarity.” This journal, moreover, had always presented itself as “democratic, anticlerical, antidogmatic, and antifascist.”⁷ Here then are three reasons to be surprised by the texts dating from the following year and that I discovered with consternation.

But I said that right away I had to complicate and differentiate things, as I will have to do regularly. My surprise did not come all at once. Even as I reassured myself (“good, during his Belgian youth that I know nothing about, Paul was, in any case, on the ‘right side’ during the war!”), what I had quickly read of this editorial left me with an uneasy feeling and an aftertaste. In passing, but in a clearly thematic fashion, I was able to identify their source. And here we approach the heart of the problems we have to talk about. They are not only Paul de Man’s problems, but those of the equivocal structure of all the politico-philosophical discourses at play in this story, the discourses from all sides. Today, yesterday, and tomorrow—let the dispensers of justice not forget that!

What, then, had already disturbed me in this editorial, in its opting so resolutely for democracy, and in its call for a struggle against barbarity in 1940?

1. First of all, an insistent reference to the West and to “Western civilization,” a theme or lexicon whose careless manipulation has often slid over into rather undemocratic theses, as we know now from experience, especially when it is a question of a “decadence” of the said Western civilization. As soon as anyone talks about “decadence of Western civilization,” I am on my guard. We know that this kind of talk can sometimes (not always) lead to restorations or installations of an authoritarian, even totalitarian *order*. Now, the decadence of Western civilization was indeed the central theme of the editorial. It spoke vigorously of the necessity of lucidly going beyond a “commonplace,” not in order to overturn it but to clarify its presuppositions, to “render account” of it and “to take account,” with “lucidity,” thus *to answer for it [en répondre]*—not only as a “theoretician,” but in practical, ethical, political terms.

But since it has become a *commonplace* to say that Western civilization is in a state of decadence and that it is crumbling everywhere, it is indispensable to take account of what exactly these values are that are being so directly threatened. And if one wishes to present oneself as champion ready to defend them, this lucidity no longer remains a pointless theoretician’s game, but becomes a truly tactical necessity. (My emphasis; on which side is the *commonplace* to be found?)⁸

7. “Editorial,” *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* 1 (Apr. 1937), as cited by de Graef in his introduction.

8. “Editorial,” *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* 4 (Feb. 1940), p. 1.

2. I was disturbed as well by a discreetly marked suspicion on the subject of the "individual" and the idea of the "liberation of the individual." We also know the constraints that this suspicion sometimes (not always) exercises whenever the program to which it belongs is not carefully engaged. Presenting the unity of this issue of *Les Cahiers*, the editorial of this resolutely democratic journal in effect said: "Western ethical principles seem, for almost all the authors, to come down in the final analysis to the idea of the liberation of the individual, thanks to which we are differentiated from neighboring civilizations. And if we think we are superior to them, we owe the belief to this concept." This was a way once again of problematizing a "commonplace" at the same time as one seemed to be assuming it. The strategy of this brief editorial is thus already overdetermined, distanced, gravely ironic. It sets out at once positions of value (democracy, individual, Western civilization that must be saved from decadence) and the necessity of not simplifying, of not giving in to *doxa*, to orthodox and conformist opinion, to the "commonplace," to the feeling of superiority, at least as long as it remains unjustified or unanalyzed: "if we think we are superior to them [neighboring civilizations], we owe the belief to this concept," that is, to this concept of the individual which must be analyzed and of which an account must be rendered, an account taken. The author of this editorial, then, has no taste for simplification or received ideas, for commonplaces and easy consensus. Good democratic conscience and the ideology of the "liberation of the individual" can sometimes give in to such facileness. Nothing permits us to imagine that the editorial was written by anyone other than the journal's editor, that is, by Paul de Man who, as editor, would in any case have to be the first to answer for it.

3. But that was not all. Aware of the manner in which, discreetly but surely (perhaps not yet surely enough), it desimplified consensus and good conscience, I clearly saw already that, in order to avoid "simplifying dangerously," this calmly insolent editorial ran the risk of other dangers. It called for a new "order." This word is perhaps not diabolical in itself. No word means anything by itself, out of all context, and the same word appears sometimes in discourses that many, perhaps, would never think of suspecting today. But it was then, in 1940, known to be too often, too regularly associated with antidemocratic ideologies. An order to come, a new order is not necessarily the extreme right that we know under the name of "Ordre nouveau"⁹ (an expression which, more-

9. *L'Ordre nouveau* was the title of a journal founded in 1933 by Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu. From the first, it proclaimed a broad sympathy with the National Socialist regime in Germany and was considered a principal forum of extreme right wing thought. Subsequently the phrase "ordre nouveau" became a favored means for certain political discourse in the occupied countries to indicate sympathy for the goal of a unified Europe under German rule without, however, naming Nazism. (Trans.)

over, appears elsewhere), but the resemblance ought to have been cause for more vigilance. On the other hand, the paragraph that I am going to cite refuses, precisely in order not to “simplify dangerously,” to draw a simple line there where the war was, nonetheless, simplifying it in fact. It is as if it were causing the fronts to proliferate and asking the reader not to forget that war could cross over “to the inside” onto other fronts. And that finally there were always several wars going on at once. The editorial suggests that decadence is not only on the side of the enemy, and that the expression “struggle of the West against barbarity” comes down precisely to “dangerously simplifying the question.” Here then is the passage that left me perplexed and that explains why, a little while later, my surprise may have been painful, as I said a moment ago, but was not an absolute surprise. Up to a certain point, it had been prepared or cushioned; let us say rather it was divided by a kind of internal partition:

It has not been explicitly a question of the war in this issue. One senses, however, that its presence guides the thinking of all our contributors and it is certainly not by chance that two of them have chosen France as a symbol of Western culture. But one could not say, *without dangerously simplifying the question*, that the present war is a *struggle of the West against barbarity*. *Factors of decadence are to be found in all nations, all individuals, and the victory of the democracies will be a victory of the West only to the extent it succeeds in establishing an order in which a civilization like the one we cherish can live again.* (My emphasis)¹⁰

We can glimpse a certain “logic.” It lies in wait for the calculation or the political consequence of political or rather any discourse. It is as if the possibility of its own overturning were ventriloquizing the discourse in advance, as if that possibility installed in it a quasi-internal war, or still more serious, an endless war, that is, both infinite and without boundaries, a war that can never be totally internalized nor externalized. It consists, in effect, of multiple fronts and frontiers. A finite strategy can never formalize them totally, still less master them. Whence the effect produced by the incessant passage of these fronts or frontiers. A paradoxical effect because the very possibility of the passage seems to forbid any advance, it seems aporetic *in itself*. Now, it is precisely in this place and at this moment, I will even go so far as to say on this condition, that all decisions, if there are any, must be taken, and that responsibilities *are taken*.

Halfway reassured by this editorial in the *Cahiers*, but my ears still tuned to the uneasy rumblings within me, it is then that I discovered, several months later in 1987, a series of articles also written several months later, after February 1940, in *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land*:

10. “Editorial,” *Cahiers* 4 (Feb. 1940), p. 1.

this time, therefore, after the defeat and under the occupation. What had happened in those few months? What was it I thought I could identify on a first reading, through the sadness and consternation I have mentioned? First of all, this massive and irreducible fact: whatever may be the overdetermination of the content or the internal strategy, a "literary and artistic column" had been regularly supplied between 1940 and 1942. A rather large number of texts had been published in newspapers accepted by the Nazi occupiers. If anyone still had any doubts about this, it sufficed, even before reading de Man's articles, to look at what surrounded them, sometimes framing them immediately on the same page. The subjection of this newspaper¹¹ cannot have escaped de Man for very long, even if the latter, let us suppose hypothetically, had let himself be blinded for several days or several weeks; even if, let us suppose hypothetically, he had thought he ought to benefit from the authority of a famous and influential uncle, Henri de Man, to whom he was very attached and whom he no doubt admired a lot;¹² and even if, let us also suppose

11. In an article about the story as reported in the *New York Times* ("Yale Scholar's Articles Found in Pro-Nazi Paper," 1 Dec. 1987), *Le Soir* recalls that de Man was "neither arrested nor tried in Belgium" and then adds:

It should be noted that, as regards *Le Soir*, the *New York Times* article is far from a model of journalistic rigor. *Le Soir* is described as "an anti-Semitic Belgian newspaper that collaborated with the Nazis." What our American colleague obviously does not know is that *Le Soir* was stolen and controlled by the occupiers, the directors and editorial board of our newspaper having, on the contrary, decided not to collaborate. Likewise the *New York Times* is completely wrong when it states that Paul de Man's uncle, Henri, was "a minister in the collaborationist Belgian government, trying to protect Belgian autonomy against Nazi domination." Need one recall that, except for the Vichy government in France, there was no collaborationist government in occupied Europe?

Le Soir is certainly correct to remind another newspaper of "journalistic rigor." But then what must be said of its own rigor when it blindly reproduces the nonsense published in certain American newspapers that are getting their information, in every case, from university professors? Here's what one may read in the same article: "Considered at Yale to be one of the most brilliant lights of the university, says the *New York Times*, he was the author of a controversial theory about language, some seeing in him one of the greatest thinkers of the age. This theory, 'deconstructionism,' sees in language an integrally false means of expression which always reflects the prejudices of the user." It is true that after reading such stupidities over and over again, one might end up believing them. ("Indignation aux États-Unis: un professeur (belge) de Yale avait été un *collaborateur*: l'ahurissante équipée d'un *brilliant* opportuniste" [Indignation in the United States: A (Belgian) professor at Yale had been a *collaborator*: the astounding adventure of a *brilliant* opportunist," *Le Soir*, 3 Dec. 1987.)

12. The influence of Henri de Man, Paul's uncle and godfather, was no doubt powerful and determining. One must approach this extraordinary European figure in order to understand anything of these dramatic events. During a half century, his reputation radiated through his actions and his writings. Among the latter, all of which are more or less autobiographical, two titles provide brief self-portraits, but also a prefiguration of Paul: *Cavalier seul* (Lone horseman) and *Gegen den Strom* (Against the current). Here, in a telegraphic style, are a few significant traits, for which I have relied on: *Au delà du marxisme* (French translation of Henri de Man's *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus* [Jena, 1926]; reissued by Seuil

hypothetically, de Man initially took advantage of things so as to see his unquestionable talent exercised and recognized—since the awarding of a prestigious literary and artistic column in a major newspaper cannot leave a young man of twenty-two indifferent, a young man who has things to say and who is longing to write once again, as he had already been doing in a brilliant way for several years, on all subjects: philosophy, sociology, politics, music, and especially literature.

Beyond this grave and undeniable fact, I would like to try to analyze now what I thought I was able to detect at the moment of that first, painful reading. It will be difficult, I prefer to say that right away, and for a number of reasons. The first has to do with the hypothesis of a general law that I believed I was able to form, then verify, at least in a first analysis. Like any law, this law supposes a sort of invariant that in this case takes the form of a recurrent alternation, according to the disjunctive partition of an “on the one hand . . . on the other hand.” But one of the difficulties I announced arises from this: the said alternation

in 1974 with a very useful preface by Michel Brelaz and Ivó Rens, the foreword of the first French edition (Paris, 1926), and a preface by the author denouncing the “nationalist imbecility” and the “prestige of race or nationality”); Henri de Man, *A Documentary Study of Hendrik de Man, Socialist Critic of Marxism*, comp., ed. and largely trans. Peter Dodge (Princeton, N.J., 1979); Dodge, *Beyond Marxism: The Faith and Works of Hendrik de Man* (The Hague, 1966); and Jules Gérard-Libois and José Gotovitch, *L'An 40: La Belgique occupée* (Brussels, 1971).

Freemason father, tolerant anticlerical: “one of the purest incarnations of stoic morality,” says his son of him. Henri was born in 1885, the year that the POB (Belgian Labor Party) was founded of which he will become vice-president in 1933. 1905: expelled from the Ghent Polytechnic Institute for having demonstrated in support of the Russian revolutionaries of 1905. Moves to Germany, “the native and the chosen land of Marxism.” Meets Bebel, Kautsky, Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg. Intense militant and theoretical activity in Germany. First Secretary of the Socialist Youth International. Dissertation on the woolen industry in Ghent in the Middle Ages. In London in 1910, joins the Social Democratic Federation (radical Marxist group). Returns to Belgium in 1911, provokes a crisis in the POB by criticizing its reformism.

First doubts about Marxism as the war begins, after having served as translator in talks between Jaurès and the future chancellor of the Weimar Republic to preserve the peace. Official mission to Russia after the Revolution in 1917. Publishes “La Révolution aux armées” in Emile Vandervelde’s *Trois aspects de la révolution russe, 7 mai–25 juin 1917* (Three aspects of the Russian revolution). In “La Grande désillusion” (1919; The great disillusion): “It is not for this reason, it is not so that the Europe of tomorrow will resemble the Europe of yesterday that we fought. It is not for the destruction of the German and Russian nations, it was for the independence of all nations and in order to free Europe of militarism.” Plans to immigrate to the U.S., two trips there (1918–20). Finds a system of worker education in Seattle. Professor of Social Psychology at University of Washington. Dismissed from his position after intervening in a local election campaign in favor of the Farmer-Labor Party. 1919: *The Remaking of a Mind: A Soldier’s Thoughts on War and Reconstruction*. 1922–26: lives in Darmstadt and teaches at the Akademie der Arbeit in Frankfurt. 1926: publishes his best-known work, *The Psychology of Socialism* (trans. Eden and Cedar Paul [New York, 1928]). 1929–33: lives and teaches in Frankfurt (newly created chair in social psychology). 1933: publishes *Die sozialistische Idee*, confiscated by the Nazis. Director of the Office of Social Studies of the POB (1932) which issues the famous *Plan du travail* (Labor

(that, out of concern for clarity, I will be obliged to harden into an *opposition* through the rhetoric of an “on the one hand, on the other hand”) will be only the phenomenon or the form of presentation, the logico-rhetorical scheme of this law—I will even say of the relation to the law in general. It would be necessary to go beyond the form of this schema and interrogate in its possibility that which thus sets limits on a complete binary formalization. No doubt I will only be able to sketch this movement with these examples and within the dimensions of an article. But I insist on showing the examples and on marking this necessity, even as I refer to other work, past or yet to come.

Plan) and the doctrine of planism (socialization of financial capital, credit, monopolies, and large landed property). Minister of Public Works and of Unemployment Reduction (1935), Finance Minister in 1936 in tripartite governments that reduce unemployment and fight back rexism (the extreme right). Appointed by the king to secret missions to preserve peace in 1938. Minister without portfolio for several months. Appointed to a post in the queen's service, during the final days before the defeat perhaps advises the king, who was already inclined in that direction, to share the fate of the army rather than to follow the government into exile. Like many others, believes the war is over. President of the POB, considers the political role of the party to be over and that the war “has led to the debacle of the parliamentary regime and of the capitalist plutocracy in the so-called democracies. For the working classes and for socialism, this collapse of a decrepit world is, far from a disaster, a deliverance” (“The Manifesto,” in *Hendrik de Man, Socialist Critic of Marxism*, p. 326). Dissolves the POB, creates a single central labor syndicate in 1940. His relations with the occupiers go downhill quickly. From June 1941, considers the pressures untenable, goes into exile in November 1941 in Savoie (France). Already in July 1940, his program had been considered by the German command, “because of its spirit and its origins” and despite elements that are “formally ‘pseudo-fascist,’” to be incapable of ever “being really integrated into a European order, such as Germany conceives it” (quoted in Brelaz and Rens, *Au delà du marxisme*, p. 16). Writes his memoirs (*Après coup*). His *Réflexions sur la paix* (Reflections on peace) banned in Belgium in 1942. Maintains relations with Belgian “collaborationists,” unorthodox Germans as well as French Resistants (Robert Lacoste). Informed of the conspiracy and the failed plot against Hitler. 1944: escapes to Switzerland where he is taken in by a Swiss socialist leader who helps him to win political asylum. At the time of the Liberation, severely condemned by a military tribunal “for having, while in the military, maliciously served the policy and the designs of the enemy.” Third marriage. *Au-delà du nationalisme* (1946). *Cavalier seul: Quarante-cinq années de socialisme européen* and *Gegen den Strom: Memoiren eines europäischen sozialisten* are two reworked versions of his 1941 autobiography. *Vermassung und Kulturverfall: Eine Diagnose unserer Zeit* (1951). On 20 June 1953, his car stops “for unknown reasons” on the railroad tracks at an unguarded crossing near his home. He dies with his wife when the train arrives. It was, they say, slightly behind schedule. (Suicides and allegories of reading: some day we will have to talk about suicide in this history.)

In 1973, in an article whose lucidity seems to me after the fact to be even more admirable and striking, Richard Klein was to my knowledge the first to take the figure of the uncle seriously into consideration. Paul de Man having pointed out to him that he (that is, Richard Klein!) had taken Henri de Man to be the former's father, Klein's postscript closes with the best possible question: “what, after all, is an uncle?” The rereading of this article, “The Blindness of Hyperboles, the Ellipses of Insight” (*Diacritics* 3 [Summer 1973]: 33–44), seems to me urgent for whoever is interested in these questions.

Let us say, then, "on the one hand . . . on the other hand," and what is more "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" on both hands. On both hands, both sides it would be necessary to pursue further the over-determining division.

On the one hand, the massive, immediate, and dominant effect of all these texts is that of a relatively coherent ideological ensemble which, most often and in a preponderant fashion, conforms to official rhetoric, that of the occupation forces or of the milieu that, in Belgium, had accepted the defeat and, if not state and governmental collaboration as in France, then at least the perspective of a European unity under German hegemony. A rigorous description of the conditions in which is inscribed what I am massively calling here the massive effect would suppose taking into account the extraordinary tangle of the political, religious, and linguistic history of Belgium, at least at that critical turning point of the constitutional monarchy when Henri de Man, after having been a socialist minister, decides, as the government is going into exile, to stay with the king whose adviser he will remain until November 1941, the date at which he in turn leaves Belgium. I cannot undertake this description here, but I believe it will be indispensable, in the future, for any serious interpretation of these texts.

But *on the other hand* and within this frame, de Man's discourse is constantly split, disjointed, engaged in incessant conflicts. Whether in a calculated or a forced fashion, and no doubt beyond this distinction between calculation and passivity, all the propositions carry within themselves a counterproposition: sometimes virtual, sometimes very explicit, always readable, this counterproposition signals what I will call, in a regular and contradictory manner, a *double edge* and a *double bind*, the singular artefact of a blade and a knot. As a result, paradoxically, these articles and the attitude that seems to sustain them are not without a certain conformity to the editorial of the *Cahiers* that wanted to avoid "dangerously simplifying."

That is why, in the *three series of examples* with which my hypothesis will be put to the test, I will follow precisely the themes put into perspective by the journal editorial: the destiny of the West, Europe and its outside, the nation, democracy and the individual. *And literature*: if it occupies more than just one place among others in this network, the reason is not only that, as in the *Cahiers*, de Man had the responsibility, official and statutory, to treat of literature in a privileged way.

1. *On the one hand . . . on the other hand*, then (first series of examples)

On the one hand, everything takes place as if, the German victory leaving no doubt and no exit, it was more imperative than ever to pose

the question of Europe's destiny by analyzing the past, the present, and especially the future. For that reason, de Man approves of those who attempt a "critical exposé" in order to "deduce the responsibilities for the defeat."¹³ One must "direct one's thinking toward the new problems that have arisen" and not give in to clichés (once again the critique of the "commonplace"): "it is not by spreading the belief that we are inept cowards that we will plan for a better future." It is not enough to accuse "the decayed political climate that provoked the defeat since that climate was not much better in 1914." When it is a question of the defeat, a certain Belgian nationalism, sometimes more precisely Flemish nationalism, seems just as obvious, even if the discourse on the nation and nationalisms often remains more cautious than the praise of the Belgian army whose defeat would have been more "glorious" than that of its allies.¹⁴ De Man judges this reflection on the war, that many others—but not everyone, and that is the question—might also think was over, to be just as necessary for France. He is already in a "postwar" period.¹⁵ He praises the French who, by means of the "symptoms of what may be the future" "reveal the fruitful meditation of a people attempting to pull themselves together by understanding objectively how [the] blow that has been struck changes its historical destiny."¹⁶ As in the editorial from the *Cahiers*, a big question cuts across all the articles: that of the future of Europe and of a European unity that, from now on, since the German victory seems irreversible and of profound importance, can only be accomplished around Germany.

Even if the form of his discourse is then more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*, even if it seems to call more for a realization and a knowledge than a commitment and an approbation, de Man permits himself no reservations (could he have done so in this newspaper?) when he defines, for example, what might "interest" the "visitors" on the occasion of an exhibition on the "history of Germany." One recognizes here the concern of someone who never ceased pointing to the necessity of posing the national problem, notably the German problem. And who can reproach him for that?

This is the first element that may interest visitors: to have a clearer vision of the very complex history of a people whose importance is fundamental to the destiny of Europe. They will be able to see that the historical evolution of Germany is governed by a fundamental factor: the will to unite the set of regions that have a like racial structure but that adversaries have incessantly endeavored to divide. The periods of weakness always coincide with a territorial parceling up. Each time there has been an attempt to react against

13. De Man, "Les livres sur la campagne de Belgique," *Le Soir*, 25 Feb. 1941.

14. *Ibid.*

15. De Man, "Le Solstice de juin, par Henri de Montherlant," *Le Soir*, 11 Nov. 1941; hereafter abbreviated "SjM."

16. De Man, "Témoignages sur la guerre en France," *Le Soir*, 25 Mar. 1941.

a state of inferiority, it has taken the form of seeking to reconquer and assimilate the lost provinces.¹⁷

This paragraph echoes a concern whose traces may be found throughout the whole history and all the writings of Henri de Man. His nephew goes back to the treaties of Westphalia and Versailles, then he adds:

There is another reason for which Germany's historical destiny both past and future cannot leave us indifferent: and that is because we depend on it directly . . . none can deny the fundamental importance of Germany for the life of the West as a whole. One must see this obstinacy that resists subjugation as more than a simple proof of national steadfastness. The whole continuity of Western civilization depends on the unity of the people who are its center.¹⁸

Likewise, although he assumes nothing directly to his own account, although his language is almost always that of a chronicler-commentator, de Man does not openly criticize those who, like Jacques Chardonne, dare "to look in the face of the situation born of the German victory" and form "the hope of finding that the victor has projects and intentions capable of reconstructing a Europe with better social and political conditions."¹⁹ There seems to be no doubt in his eyes that Belgium and Europe are in the process of living a "revolution." That is his term. But this word is also borrowed: it is the rallying cry of all those who, notably in France, speak of "national revolution" in order to name the new Pétainist era. Revolution, which is to say, then, a social and national revolution of the right. It is, moreover, also in reference to France (which, as we shall see, he alternately praises and criticizes) that de Man speaks, as does his uncle during his Marxist and "beyond Marxism" phase, of a "political and social revolution." What is more, he diagnoses a fatality rather than assigning a duty and we ought always to pay attention to the mode of his utterances. On the subject of *Notre avant-guerre* by Robert Brasillach: "I can imagine that, for a cultivated Frenchman, *Notre avant-guerre* still evokes a lost paradise. But he will have to resign himself to completing a political and social revolution before he can hope to regain a similar paradise, one that would have more solid and, consequently, less ephemeral foundations."²⁰ Thus the present moment is apprehended, in the then dominant code, as that of a "revolution": the "present rev-

17. De Man, "L'exposition 'Histoire de l'Allemagne' au Cinquantenaire," *Le Soir*, 16 Mar. 1942.

18. *Ibid.*

19. De Man, "Voir la figure, de Jacques Chardonne," *Le Soir*, 28 Oct. 1941; hereafter abbreviated "VFC."

20. De Man, "*Notre avant-guerre*, de Robert Brasillach," *Le Soir*, 12 Aug. 1941; hereafter abbreviated "NaB."

olution,"²¹ the "maze of the present revolution,"²² the "current revolution"²³ or the one to come (for Belgium that "has not yet had its revolution").²⁴ This "maze," who can seriously see its outcome, the topological design, the essential plan? No one or almost no one, in de Man's eyes, the eyes of someone who, knowing he cannot see in a labyrinth, pricks up his ears:

For what must preoccupy the minds of those who wish to orient a reform or a revolution is not a search for the means of adapting themselves to new conditions. In the spiritual domain as much as in the political one, they find themselves confronted with new lines of conduct to be recast, with institutions to be recreated, with programs of organization to be elaborated. And one may remark that strictly none of the essays published in such great number in France and French-speaking Belgium since the war contain so much as a slight concern for tracing the givens of the different problems. ["SjM"]

One can see that de Man is defining a *labyrinthine* task, to be sure, but an altogether new one, that of a revolution in thinking. One has to think the revolution and do something other than "adapt to new conditions." Does he not feel that he alone, at the time, is up to defining or approaching this task? I have that impression. This labyrinthine task would be both theoretical (abstract) and more than theoretical. It resists its own theorization and the massiveness of the schema I have just outlined.

On the other hand . . .

For, *on the other hand*, the same article speaks of the need for an abstract theorization of problems that have not yet been elaborated—in particular on the subject of the "primordial question of European unity." De Man is politically cautious enough to specify that this theoretical elaboration must not be left to "technicians," even if caution can always (this is the double edge) be turned against itself (antitechnicism, demagogic populism—but this is not the dominant accent in the text):

Which does not mean that only technicians can participate in the debate. The postwar period brings with it philosophical and psychological problems of a *purely abstract* nature just as much as it does difficulties having to do with tangible realities. More than that, one may even say that the most important questions are situated on a *purely abstract* plane. Thus, to take just this example, the primordial question of European unity can only be envisioned from a *quasi-theoretical* angle. ["SjM"; my emphasis]

21. De Man, "Content of the European Idea," *HVL*.

22. De Man, "Sur les falaises de marbre, de Ernst Jünger: deux ouvrages d'actualité," *Le Soir*, 31 Mar. 1942.

23. De Man, "Le Problème français; Dieu est-il français, de F. Sieburg," *Le Soir*, 28 Apr. 1942; hereafter abbreviated "PFS."

24. De Man, "La littérature française devant les événements," *Le Soir*, 20 Jan. 1942.

Why is that? We have just gone from the “purely abstract” to the “quasi-theoretical.” That is why, immediately afterward, the “spiritual givens” of the problem, which are taken to be essential, “cannot be treated in a general and theoretical form.” In the rather awkward phrase I am going to cite (and where I do not exclude the possibility of a typo having slipped in, since this wartime newspaper contains many such mistakes), it is difficult to know whether language does or does not belong to these “spiritual givens.” Language is defined as “material and direct,” an interesting notation that probably also concerns national languages and their diversity, but which no doubt should not be overinterpreted retrospectively in the light of what de Man has since said about materiality:

That which unites the European peoples are precisely those factors that escape all materialization: a similar political past, a common philosophical and religious thinking, an economic and social organization that has gone through an analogous evolution in all countries. On the contrary, that which is material and direct (such as language, habits, popular customs) appears as disparate and variable. One may thus see that, in this case, it is a matter of spiritual givens that cannot be treated in a general and theoretical form. [“SjM”]²⁵

What is still more interesting, through the convolution of this remark, is its final aim within the article. The article is about a book by Montherlant. As far as I can judge at this point, the list of books, in particular of French books, reviewed by de Man can seem to speak loudly all by itself (Jouvenel, Fabre-Luce, Benoist-Méchin, Chardonne, Drieu La Rochelle, Giono, and so on). By what it retains as well as by what it excludes, the filter seems to correspond to that of the legitimation machine (thus the censorship machine) of the official Pétainist ideology. Is de Man letting these choices be imposed totally from without? Is he responding on his own to a demand? Does he assume responsibility for it? Up to what point? Does he consider that these books, having just appeared (and being authorized to appear with authorized publishers—an enormous French history that I have to leave aside here), were part of the current events about which it is the chronicler’s duty to speak, even if, on the other hand, he has already indicated his interest in so many other authors, from Joyce to Kafka, from Gide to Hemingway, and so forth? As for me, I do not have the means to answer these questions. But what I can say, from reading this article on Montherlant, for example, and taking responsibility for

25. On “matter” in de Man, see *Mémoires*, chap. 2. On the lexicon of “spirit,” that is so manifest in these texts of 1940–42, as in the writings of so many others in the period between the wars, see my *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question*. I wish to make it clear, however, that the number and nature of differences between Heidegger and de Man would render any analogism more confused than ever.

this reading, is that the argument I mentioned a moment ago around "theory" seems destined, through de Man's clever and not particularly docile strategy, to discredit Montherlant's political discourse at the point at which it proposes "a general view." How does this text operate when we look at it closely?

It begins by quoting, as if in epigraph and in order to authorize itself, a remark by Montherlant. Then it turns the remark against him with an irony whose pitiless lucidity, alas (too much lucidity, not enough lucidity, blindly lucid), spares no one, not even de Man almost a half century later. Writing by profession on current affairs, he deals with a current affair in this domain and he announces the oblivion promised those who devote their literature to current affairs. Do not these lines, that name "the worst," become unforgettable from then on? It is frightening to think that de Man might have handled so coldly the double-edged blade, while perhaps expecting "the worst":

In this collection of essays by Montherlant, there is a phrase that all those who have followed literary publication since August 1940 will approve. It is the passage that says: "To the writers who have given too much to current affairs for the last few months, I predict, for that part of their work, the most complete oblivion. When I open the newspapers and journals of today, I hear the indifference of the future rolling over them, just as one hears the sound of the sea when one holds certain seashells up to the ear." One could not have put it any better. And this just and severe sentence applies to all the books and essays in which writers offer us their reflections on war and its consequences, including *Solstice de juin* itself [the title of the book by Montherlant de Man is reviewing]. It is an odd distortion, belonging to our age, to demand from artists and writers, in particular, directives and judgments on political and historical circumstances. Because writers are capable of expressing commonplaces in an elegant way, they are made into oracles and one takes their words to be providential messages. And the credit they enjoy in this domain is considerable. Gide's quarrels with communism exercised more influence over people's minds than would have numerous documented and serious works treating the same question. And yet there is no reason whatsoever to grant men of letters such authority in an area of human behavior which, manifestly, lies outside their competence. It is surprising to discover the naïveté and nullity of some of their sentences once they have been stripped of the brilliant varnish that a careful style confers on them. A whole side of the question—the economic, social, technical side—is totally alien to them, so that when they venture onto this terrain, in that offhand way that only the ignorant are capable of, one may expect the worst. ["SjM"]

After that, one does not have to wait long for a condemnation of the individual and the individualist Montherlant "who likes to give lessons":

his "meditations" are "conventional" and "insipid," "uninteresting" and "ineffective." By "practicing the political essay," Montherlant can only "echo official declarations" and "swell the ranks of those who talk to no useful purpose."

An analogous gesture, although more discreet, as regards Chardonne. After having quoted him ("Only Germany can organize the continent and that country provides us with the opportunity of an internal rebuilding that was necessary and that it is up to us to accomplish . . ."), de Man adds: "After such sentences, one may perhaps *debate* Chardonne's ideas, but one certainly cannot reproach them for a lack of sharpness [*netteté*]" ("VfC"). A double-edged sentence—on sharpness, precisely, and on the cutting edge itself. One may suppose, without being sure, that de Man judges these ideas to be very debatable.

Likewise, although de Man often insists, and rightly so, on the riches of German culture, on the complexity of the national problem in Germany, on the fundamental role that it always plays and ought still to play in the destiny of Europe, at no point, to my knowledge, does he name Nazism, a fortiori in order to praise it. In all the texts I have been able to read and about which the least one can say is that they were turned in the direction of politics and current affairs, the word "Nazi," "Nazi party" appears only once or twice, if I am not mistaken, and then it does so in a neutral or informative mode. What is more, on one occasion it provides another opportunity to criticize a French writer who was then one of the most "authorized" by collaborationist France: Brasillach and his "lack of political sense"! "Brasillach's reaction faced with a spectacle like that of the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, when he manifests a certain terror before the 'strange' nature of this demonstration, is that of someone for whom the sudden importance of the political in the life of a people is an inexplicable phenomenon" ("NaB").

However overdeterminable this remark may be, it indicates not just a distance but a very critical step back when it comes to writers or ideologues as marked as Montherlant, Chardonne, or Brasillach. As for what remains neutral or suspended in his approach, one must, it seems to me, find a supplementary explanation, and here again it will be a question of "responsibility." In an article titled "Sur les possibilités de la critique" (which will greatly interest those who would hasten toward a recognition of prefigurations in these "early writings"), de Man defines a certain autonomy of literature, but also of literary history. To be sure, there is a responsibility to evaluate the literary object, but it is a specific responsibility. It is not to be confused, he says, with that of a moral and political judgment on the moral or political responsibilities of the writer.

Literature is an independent domain having a life, laws, and obligations belonging only to it and which in no way depend on the philosophical or ethical contingencies stirring at its side. The least one can say is that the artistic values governing the world of letters

do not merge with those of the Truth and the Good, and that whoever borrows his criteria from this region of human consciousness will be systematically mistaken in his judgments. . . . One does not have the right to condemn Gide as a novelist because his moral life was debatable. . . . A writer can be attacked for the inadequacies of his style, for sins against the laws of the genre he practices, but never for weaknesses or lacks in his moral personality. The most beautiful pages in the world's literatures are often those that express a failure, a renunciation, a capitulation. And the worst platitudes have been written to exalt the most noble sentiments. All of this is quite obvious and it would be pointless to repeat it if we did not have to listen to reassertions of criticism's duty to "derive from a set of deductions, joined to a philosophy of broad humanism or better yet to a moral responsibility linked to the supernatural fidelity of man."²⁶

This is not the place for a substantive debate about all these formulations and about literature as an "independent domain"—which, moreover, de Man does not remove from history, any more than he ever did. This is very clear in the rest of the same article which even speaks of a "philosophy of literary history that is no less fruitful than the philosophy of history as such." It is also "quite obvious" that literary criticism, if it is *critical*, that is, if it is a judgment, an evaluation, an assignment of responsibility, could not be, insofar as it is *literary* criticism of *works*, a moral or political criticism of authors. That being the case, what does de Man do here?

1. If the responsibility of the *criticized* works can be acute in literary terms without that meaning it is a moral or political responsibility, then this is also true for criticism, for *criticizing* criticism of works. Some will be able to say, out of malevolence in my opinion, that de Man wants to subtract his critical activity from any future moral and political trial, even though some "capitulation" was readable there.

2. More significant seems to me to be the example of Gide, the "accursed" author of the period. De Man disputes the validity of any moral and political trial that one might bring against Gide's literary work. He even formulates general principles invalidating such a judgment. He puts forth reasons for a radical resistance to the organization of such verdicts. He does it at a moment when moral and political trials, often carried out in the name of, precisely, "humanism," were common and had serious consequences. This seems to me to be a remarkable gesture. For if literature remains neutral in de Man's eyes or at least independent of morality and politics, it is not neutral, it is even an offensive and courageous gesture to recall this axiom and to resist the moralizing orthodoxy at a moment of great repression during which so many writers

26. De Man, "Sur les possibilités de la critique," *Le Soir*, 2 Dec. 1941.

are being condemned for their moral or political opinions (present or past).

3. The logic of this argument anticipates, up to a certain point, that of Jean Paulhan (whom de Man was rediscovering during the last years of his life, no doubt in reference to other themes, but it is still not insignificant). Writing after the Liberation in *De la paille et du grain* (On the wheat and the chaff), this writer-resistant disputed the right of his "friends" on the National Committee of Writers to conduct, as writers, political trials of other writers known to have collaborated with the enemy. If there were grounds for such a trial, then it was the province of other tribunals competent to judge political acts: there ought to be no literary "épuration" [purge], no writers' tribunals to judge other writers *as writers*. Nor should there be "voluntary policemen," or "that supplementary force of gendarmes that Charles Maurras cried out for—and that you have invented."²⁷ My own thinking as regards Paulhan's discourse cannot be summed up in a few lines. Yet, it is remarkable in any case that an analogous logic was put to work several years earlier by de Man *and this time in an opposite context*, so to speak, when it was a matter of protesting against tribunals and purges on *the other side*. Thus, once again do not "dangerously simplify the question"!

In a like manner, finally, although he grants a lot of attention to the role that Germany or "German genius" has played or ought to play in the destiny of Europe, although he recalls constantly the necessity of understanding thoroughly the history of the German nation in order to understand Hitlerism, although he is vigilantly opposed to the commonplace and the "lazy and widespread solution" that comes down to "supposing an integral dualism between Germany, on the one hand, and Hitlerism on the other . . . the latter considered to be a strange phenomenon, having no relation to the historical evolution of the German people, but rather born of a momentary aberration and destined to disappear like a morbid symptom that would have merely upset the normal life of the nation for a little while" ("VfC"), although his analysis leads him to judge German "hegemony" in Europe to be ineluctable, this diagnosis seems rather cold and rather far removed from exhortation. And when, in the same text, he describes the "innovations of totalitarian regimes" and the "obligations" or "duties" taking the place of "anarchy," he underscores that the "style that will result from this process is far from being definitively consecrated. It may appear crude and somewhat rudimentary" because of the "rigid and relatively narrow mold that is the war." Then he concludes by noting that enriching these possibilities may run the risk of "dangerous temptations" ("VfC"). The week before, in an

27. Jean Paulhan, *De la Paille et du grain* (Paris, 1948). The principal ideologue and organizing force of the *Action Française*, Maurras was a prolific and much-admired writer. (Trans.)

article that was also, let us never forget, a commentary on Daniel Halévy, de Man recognized, admittedly, that in France "immediate collaboration" seemed compelling to "any objective mind," but he warned against an attitude that would be content to "strike out against the nearest guilty parties" or "to adopt the mystical beliefs from which the victors have drawn their strength and power."²⁸ Here once again, there is an appeal to historical, even the historian's, analysis of the past so as to rediscover the strengths and the patrimony of the nation, but also so as to draw "the lesson from events by means of theoretical considerations."²⁹

2. *On the one hand . . . on the other hand (second series of examples)*

On the one hand, the question of nations dominates all these texts. It is approached in all its *theoretical* aspects (ethnic, historical, political, linguistic, religious, esthetic, literary). Nothing could be more legitimate, one might say, especially at that moment, and I will add: still today. But this interest is not only theoretical. In certain of its forms, it resembles nationalist commitment: Belgian, sometimes Flemish. And there seems to be evidence of a great respect, in a privileged fashion, with regard to German nationalism. Most utterances of a "comparatist" style are made to the benefit of Germany and to the detriment of conquered France. This interest for the nation seems to dominate in two ways: it outweighs interest for the state, notably in its democratic form, and still more interest for the individual who constitutes the target of numerous critiques.

We have already seen how this interest was resonating in a muffled way in the editorial from the *Cahiers*. De Man, translator and commentator of A. E. Brinckmann's *Geist der Nationen, Italiener-Franzosen-Deutsche* (1938), speaks in this regard of "national grandeur." His commentary describes "a sober faith, a practical means to defend Western culture against a decomposition from the inside out or a surprise attack by neighbouring civilizations."³⁰ Looked on more or less favorably by the Nazis, Brinckmann's book is concerned especially with the arts. But de Man recalls that it applies to all domains: "what is true in the domain of the history of arts holds true for all domains. Europe can only be strong, peaceful, and flourishing if it is governed by a state of mind which is deeply conscious of its national grandeur, but which keeps its eyes open for all experiments and problems that touch our continent" ("AM"). This Western nationalism must adapt itself to the "contemporary revolutions" we spoke

28. De Man, "Trois épreuves, par Daniel Halévy," *Le Soir*, 14 Oct. 1941.

29. *Ibid.*

30. De Man, "Art as Mirror of the Essence of Nations," *HVL*; hereafter abbreviated "AM."

of earlier. De Man emphasizes that the aims of the book he is reviewing are not only theoretical. They have value as practical engagement. Does he subscribe to them in his name? It seems that he does, but he does not say so:

The aim of a work like this is not only to analyse the artistic activity from an aesthetic point of view, or to give an explanation of a practical nature. It originated out of an attempt to ensure the future of Western civilisation in all its aspects. As such it contains a lesson, which is indispensable for all those who, in the contemporary revolutions, try to find a firm guidance according to which they can direct their action and their thoughts. ["AM"]

Comparisons between the German and French cultures, notably as regards their literary manifestations, the one dominated by myth, metaphor, or symbol, the other by psychological analysis, the predilection for moderation, limit, and definition, thus for the finite (one thinks of many of Nietzsche's statements on this subject), seem often to be made to the benefit of the former. Does de Man assume to his own account what he says in commenting on Sieburg? It seems that he does, but he does not say so.

Instead of an artificial and forced denationalization that leads to a considerable impoverishment—such as we have seen happen in Flanders and Walloon Belgium as a result of France's force of attraction—a free contact among peoples who know themselves to be different and who hold onto this difference, but who esteem each other reciprocally guarantees political peace and cultural stability. It is no doubt in this domain that France must perform the most serious turnaround, or risk disappearing forever from the political scene.

As for the spiritual domain [*le domaine de l'esprit*], the forces that seem to have taken over the conduct of history are not very much in accordance with France's specific soul. To realize this, it suffices to examine the opposition pointed out by Sieburg between a certain form of French reason that everywhere seeks to fix limits and to establish the right measure, and the sense of grandeur and of the infinite that indeed seems to characterize present tendencies. We are entering a mystical age [let us not forget that elsewhere de Man speaks of his mistrust as regards the victor's mysticism], a period of faith and belief, along with everything that supposes in the way of suffering, exaltation, and intoxication. ["PFS"]

The Flemish nationalism is clearer, notably in "Le Destin de la Flandre," whose pretext was the "Germano-Flemish Cultural Convention." Paul de Man was born in Antwerp, and his family is Flemish. He recalls several times the "Flemish genius" and the struggle against "French influences that, through the intermediary of the complicitous Belgian

state, were spreading rapidly.” He supports a solution that would guarantee Flanders a certain autonomy in relation to Walloon Belgium and Germany, whether it is a matter of defense or of national, and first of all linguistic, patrimony: “that, of the language before all else and of that form of freedom that permits creators to work in accordance with their impulses and not as imitators of a neighbor whose spirit is dissimilar.”³¹ This attention to national language appears throughout these first texts which also form a short treatise on translation. Literature is often examined from the point of view of the problems of translation by someone who was also a polyglot, a very active translator (especially in his youth) and an original interpreter of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.” Resistance to translation is how one recognizes national roots and the idiomatic character of a literary work. From this point of view, one should read the column devoted to German novels. It begins thus:

There exists an excellent means that permits one to discover if a literary work either does or does not send its roots down into the depths of national feelings: it is to see whether it resists translation. When a novel or a poem carries within itself these somewhat mysterious and undefinable virtues that make up the particular genius of a people, the most careful translation will never succeed in rendering the original.³²

This problematic of translation is, moreover, in accordance with the “comparatism” and the hierarchies (which, by the way, are very unstable) that we were evoking a moment ago. Notably, and in what is all the same the most traditional fashion, between the Germanic spirit and the Latin spirit. If “the most conscientious and most faithful translation cannot render the accent of the original work,” it is in particular because of

the divergence between the rational and constructive French spirit and the German tendency toward the visionary, that does not stop at an objective consideration [of the sort de Man does not fail to call for elsewhere!], but penetrates regions where the laws of reason no longer hold. Thus, the virtues of clarity and harmony are lost. The novel [*Léonore Griebel*, by Hermann Stehr] is much less finished and less even than the work of Flaubert. But one gains depth. . . . With the Latin, intelligence and rational reasoning prevail; with the Germanic, it is a stirring poetic intuition.³³

Although it has to efface itself before the original text, the translation ought not, therefore, to efface the fact that it is still a translation. One

31. De Man, “Le Destin de la Flandre,” *Le Soir*, 1 Sept. 1941; hereafter abbreviated “F.”

32. De Man, “Romans allemands,” *Le Soir*, 10 Feb. 1942; hereafter abbreviated “Ra.”

33. *Ibid.*

ought to “feel that it is a translation.” Hence the reproach addressed to Betz, the translator of Rilke whom de Man already knew and appreciated, when he translated Jünger (another of de Man’s favorites) “too well,” to the point of making one forget that the original was written in German, “which, especially when he recounts the story of a German invading France, has something amazingly shocking about it.”³⁴

Between Germany and France, between these two “cultural blocks,” Flemish nationalism should endeavor to save “that core that has given humanity admirable products of an independent genius. The political status of Flanders ought to be established in the new Europe in accordance with this destiny” (“F”). Despite obvious affinities, this independent genius cannot be reduced to the German genius, and it is clearly opposed to those ultra-French things that are “abstraction” and “cerebralness” (remember this latter word; it occurs frequently and in a moment we will see it applied to the Jew, not the Frenchman). Flemish genius manifests itself particularly in realist picturality, which does not mean only painting but colorful plasticity even in literature, and shows less interest in “abstract content.” This is the “principal opposition between French and Flemish art.” But the “attachment to external forms rather than to cerebral analysis” has nothing “superficial” about it. That is what Hegel says in his own way in the *Aesthetics*. De Man will later study that text closely, perhaps he already knows it when he writes, in the service of Flemish genius—or any genius as it is traditionally called: “This mentality has nothing superficial about it since the external envelope of beings and objects, when it is seen by the careful eye of genius that discovers all its resources, can reveal their deep meaning” (“F”).

But *on the other hand*, already clearly enveloped, as we have indicated, by the cautious modality (more descriptive than prescriptive) of the utterances, this nationalist demand is complicated, multiplied, inverted in several ways. First of all, because, through the practice of an abyssal logic of exemplarity, the national affirmation *in general* is caught up in the paradoxical necessity of respecting *the idiom in general*, thus *all* idioms, all national differences. Next, because Flemish nationalism must resist both the French influence and the German influence. Finally, because this young Fleming is also writing in French. If he is a nationalist, his language, his training, and his literary preferences make of him as much a nationalist of French culture as a Flemish nationalist. This war and its fronts thus divide all the so-called early writings.

Because de Man *also* praises French individualism: it is “more analyst than organizer” and it “survives even if it no longer intends to play an organizing role.” It “remains a precious national character.”³⁵ And in the very text that speaks of the necessity for France to open itself to

34. De Man, “*Jardins et routes*, par Ernst Jünger,” *Le Soir*, 23 June 1942.

35. De Man, “Littérature française.”

“foreign influences” and to abandon “provincialism” [*l'esprit de clocher*] (which are in themselves and out of context excellent recommendations), praise of the “Latin spirit” compensates for and eloquently overcodes the strategy of motifs that we quoted earlier, like the play of forces that this strategy could serve. But let no one accuse me of “dangerously simplifying”: it is true that things can be reversed again, a certain extreme right in France can also play the card of Latinity. Always the double edge. De Man has just spoken of “the lesson of a long humanist past that guards against any obscurantism” and he then continues, out of a concern, once again, not to “conform to the spirit of the day” and “the general orientation”:

It is on this last point that one sees the considerable role French genius may still be able to play. It cannot for a moment be a question of wanting to destroy or overlook, on the grounds that they do not conform to the spirit of the day, the virtues of clarity, logic, harmony that the great artistic and philosophic tradition of this country reflects. Maintaining the continuity of the French spirit is an inherent condition of Europe's grandeur. Particularly when the general orientation goes in the direction of profound, obscure, natural forces, the French mission, that consists in moderating excesses, maintaining indispensable links with the past, evening out erratic surges, is recognized to be of the utmost necessity. That is why it would be disastrous and stupid to destroy, by seeking to modify them by force, the constants of the Latin spirit. And it is also why we would be committing an unforgivable mistake if we cut our ties with the manifestations of this culture. [“PFS”]

Likewise, there are abundant warnings against narrow nationalism and jealous regionalism.³⁶ Will one say that these warnings can also serve German hegemony? Yet, in opposition to the latter, de Man defines a concept of an autonomous Flanders that will let itself be neither assimilated nor annexed by Germany as it was occasionally a question of doing. A moderate discourse, a differentiated position that rejects the “anti-Belgian spirit” of certain Flemish and sees the allegation of an “artificial and forced denationalization” of Flanders as a relic and a “myth.” Once again from “The Destiny of Flanders”:

But the revisionist situation born of the present war causes various questions to bounce back again, questions that had been more or less skilfully settled before the conflict. And since the organizing force emanates from Germany, Flanders, for whom that country constitutes an eternal point of support, finds itself placed in a peculiar situation. The memory of activism, when Germany sup-

36. “Art as Mirror” rejects “sentimental patriotism” and “narrow-minded regionalism.”

ported the Flemish in their legitimate claims, is still too much alive not to provoke certain stirrings in an analogous direction. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that on this side as well the danger of assimilation exists and all the more clearly because affinities link the two races. As a result, the temptation is even stronger for the Flemish to let themselves dissolve into a Germanic community which risks effacing everything that constitutes their profound originality. It is for this reason that Mr. Elias, burgomaster of Ghent, felt he had to react "against those who wanted to extend the idea of the Germanic State to the reabsorption of the Low Countries (Nederlanden) in an artificial German community." ["F"]

It is true that the burgomaster's speech seems compelled to remain within a contradiction, if I have understood it correctly, unless it is signaling toward some confederation that, however, it does not name. As for de Man, he merely quotes him:

"Many no doubt fear that this would lead to the disappearance of the Flemish as a people and their leveling out as Germans. I have no hesitation about saying that such a conception could lead, in Flanders, to catastrophic results. . . . We can only be worthy members of a Germanic State as long as the State allows us to be worthy Netherlanders." ["F"]

3. On the one hand . . . on the other hand (third series of examples)

I will gather these examples around the article that appeared to me, as to so many others, to be the most unbearable. I mean the article titled "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" (Jews in Present-day Literature).³⁷

Nothing in what I am about to say, analyzing the article as closely as possible, will heal over the wound I right away felt when, my breath taken away, I perceived in it what the newspapers have most frequently singled out as recognized antisemitism, an antisemitism more serious than ever in such a situation, an antisemitism that would have come close to urging exclusions, even the most sinister deportations. Even if, in the texts already quoted, no pro-Nazism was ever declared, even if the disjunctions, the precautions, the complications seemed to protect against any simple allegiance, is not what we have here the most unquestionable manifestation of an antisemitism as violent as it is stereotyped? Does not this antisemitism take over from, so as to sharpen its coherence, the "racique" (rather than the racial) as it it frequently called in other texts?

37. De Man, "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle," *Le Soir*, 4 Mar. 1941; hereafter abbreviated "Jla."

For example: the “historical, *racique*, and so forth, components that allow one to determine whether or not a people has a nationality worthy of being respected” (“F”), the “sensibility . . . intimately linked to the virtues of his race” (“Ra”) (that of Hermann Stehr, author of *Léonore Griebel* that de Man is reviewing here). Does not the lack of vigilance regarding racism induce other articles to speak frequently of human “types,” according to a familiar code which was not only that of Jünger (whom de Man admired and whom Heidegger criticized on this point in *Zur Seinsfrage*)? Whether or not he assumes it to his own account in the texts of commentaries, this vocabulary never seems to arouse suspicion when de Man speaks, rather pejoratively, of a “certain type of [French]man who was hearty and enterprising, sufficiently gifted to have been able to approach great problems without, however, being able to tolerate the intransigent demands made on true genius, a human type with an affection for friendship, irony” (“NaB”); or when he speaks, rather approvingly, of a “certain human type” or of a “personality-type” formed by “great renewals”; or the “creation of a new set of individual ideals” (“VfC”); or still again, paraphrasing Drieu La Rochelle, of “the creation of a radically new human type.”³⁸ Even when he criticizes the individualist (French) conception of this “new type, human individual,” de Man does not seem to distrust the constant reference to “type.” Likewise, is not the logic of “The Jews in Present-day Literature,” its praise for the “good health” and the “vitality” of a European literature that would keep its “intact originality” despite any “semitic interference” (“Jla”), coherent with the very frequent valorization of “vitality,”³⁹ of the “healthy” (“NaB”), of the “uncorrupted” (“Ra”) as well as sometimes with the critique of abstraction and “cerebralness” here associated with Judaism? Is it not coherent with so many warnings against “outside influences” (“Ra”)?

But let us now look more closely at an article that it will be better to quote *in extenso*.

On the one hand, it indeed seems to confirm the logic that we have just reconstituted. In effect, it describes the traits of what, according to some, are “degenerate and decadent, because *enjuivés* [‘enjewished’]” cultural phenomena, or yet again an “enjuivé” novel; he mentions the “important role” that the Jews have played in “the phony and disordered existence of Europe since 1920.” He has recourse, following a well-known tradition, to the stereotypical description of the “Jewish spirit”: “cerebralness,” “capacity for assimilating doctrines while maintaining a certain coldness in the face of them.” He notes that “Jewish writers have always remained in the second rank and, to speak only of France, the André Maurois’s, the Francis de Croissets, the Henri Duvernois’s, the Henri

38. De Man, “Notes pour comprendre le siècle, par Drieu La Rochelle,” *Le Soir*, 2 Dec. 1941.

39. *Ibid.*

Bernsteins, Tristan Bernard, Julien Benda, and so forth, are not among the most important figures, they are especially not those who have had any guiding influence on the literary genres" ("Jla"). And then, in a terrifying conclusion, the allusion to "a solution to the Jewish problem":

The observation is, moreover, comforting for Western intellectuals. That they have been able to safeguard themselves from Jewish influence in a domain as representative of culture as literature proves their vitality. If our civilization had let itself be invaded by a foreign force, then we would have to give up much hope for its future. By keeping, in spite of semitic interference in all aspects of European life, an intact originality and character, it has shown that its basic nature is healthy. What is more, one sees that a solution of the Jewish problem that would aim at the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, deplorable consequences. The latter would lose, in all, a few personalities of mediocre value and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its great evolutive laws. ["Jla"]

Will I dare to say "on the other hand" in the face of the *unpardonable* violence and confusion of these sentences? What could possibly attenuate the fault? And whatever may be the reasons or the complications of a text, whatever may be going on in the mind of its author, how can one deny that the effect of these conclusions went in the sense and the direction of the worst? In the *dominant* context in which they were read in 1941, did not their *dominant* effect go unquestionably in the direction of the worst? Of what we now know to have been the worst?

But one must have the courage to answer injustice with justice. And although one has to condemn these sentences, which I have just done, one ought not do it without examining everything that remains readable in a text one can judge to be disastrous. It is also necessary, when evaluating *this act, this text* (notice I do not say the life and work of its signatory which will never be reduced to this act, this text) to maintain a "certain coldness" and to take the trouble of that "work of lucid analysis" de Man associates with this "coldness" even as he attributes it, *in this very text*, to the Jews. As these traits are rules of intellectual responsibility rather than natural characteristics reserved to Jews and Frenchmen, does not the "work of analysis" have to be tirelessly pursued with "a certain coldness"? Therefore, I will dare to say, this time as before, "on the other hand."

Yes, *on the other hand* and *first of all*, the *whole* article is organized as an indictment of "vulgar antisemitism." It is, let us not forget, directed against that antisemitism, against its "lapidary judgment," against the "myth" it feeds or feeds on. In the first two paragraphs, which I am

going to cite, de Man proceeds unquestionably toward a demystification, not without certain risks, of this vulgarity, of its "myth," of an "error" and a "very widespread opinion." Once again, as in the *Cahiers* and as he will always do, he takes on the "commonplace." Immediately after this critique, he continues with a "But . . ." ("But the reality is different.") This will then lead us to ask ourselves which reality interests him especially—and we will have to talk once again about literature. Here then is the uncompromising critique of "vulgar antisemitism" and of the contradiction, even of the boomerang effect to which the latter is exposed or which perhaps it already translates. I have just used the word "boomerang"; I could have said that de Man also designates the double edges of the said "vulgar antisemitism." These are the first two paragraphs, in which I hear some mockery:

Vulgar antisemitism readily takes pleasure in considering postwar cultural phenomena (after the war of '14–18) as degenerate and decadent because they are *enjuivés*. Literature has not escaped this lapidary judgment: It has sufficed to discover a few Jewish writers behind Latinized pseudonyms for all of contemporary production to be considered polluted and harmful. This conception entails rather dangerous consequences. First of all, it condemns a priori a whole literature that in no way deserves this fate. What is more, from the moment one agrees that the literature of our day has some merit, it would be a rather unflattering appreciation of Western writers to reduce them to being mere imitators of a Jewish culture that is foreign to them.

The Jews themselves have contributed to spreading this myth. Often, they have glorified themselves as the leaders of literary movements that characterize our age. But the error has, in fact, a deeper cause. At the origin of the thesis of a Jewish takeover is the very widespread belief according to which the modern novel and modern poetry are nothing but a kind of monstrous outgrowth of the world war. Since the Jews have, in fact, played an important role in the phony and disordered existence of Europe since 1920, a novel born in this atmosphere would deserve, up to a certain point, the qualification of *enjuivé*. ["Jla"]

Things are very serious. Rather than going too quickly, it would be better to run the risk of paraphrase and redundancy. What does this article say? It is indeed a matter of criticizing vulgar antisemitism. That is the primary, declared, and underscored intention. But to scoff at vulgar antisemitism, is that also to scoff at or mock the vulgarity of antisemitism? This latter syntactic modulation leaves the door open to two interpretations. To condemn vulgar antisemitism may leave one to understand that there is a distinguished antisemitism in whose name the vulgar variety is put down. De Man never says such a thing, even though one may condemn his silence. But the phrase can also mean something else, and this reading

can always contaminate the other in a clandestine fashion: to condemn "vulgar antisemitism," *especially if one makes no mention of the other kind*, is to condemn antisemitism itself *inasmuch as* it is vulgar, always and essentially vulgar. De Man does not say that either. If that is what he thought, a possibility I will never exclude, he could not say so clearly in this context. One will say at this point: his fault was to have accepted the context. Certainly, but what is that, to accept a context? And what would one say if he claimed not to have fully accepted it, and to have preferred to play the role there of the nonconforming smuggler, as so many others did in so many different ways, in France and in Belgium, at this or that moment, inside or outside the Resistance? And I repeat, what is that, to *fully* accept a context? Because this article, in any case, is nonconformist, as Paul de Man, as also his uncle, always was. It is not particularly conformist to denounce antisemitism, an antisemitism, whichever it may be, at that moment, in that place, and to attribute to vulgar antisemitism the recognizable and then widespread vocabulary of *all* antisemitism: "enjuivé," "degenerate," "decadent," "polluted," "harmful." At the very least, it is rather anticonformist to add in the same breath, in the same sentences, that this is a "lapidary judgment," that this antisemitism may have "dangerous consequences," that what we have here is a "myth," an "error," that these judgments turn back against the literature of those who pronounce them and who from then on would give themselves away by talking, finally, only about themselves. Already, in the second paragraph, the argument that would consist in making the Jews coresponsible for this antisemitic "myth" and this "error" is right away discredited. It was evoked merely as a rhetorical ploy: "But the error has, in fact, a deeper cause."

The logic of these first two paragraphs controls everything that follows: it is a matter of condemning antisemitism *inasmuch as it is vulgar* (I leave this expression all its ambiguity, which is the ambiguity of the article) and of condemning this antisemitism *as regards literature*: its history, its own laws, its relations to history in general. It is as regards literature that de Man wants to say something and obviously thinks he has something original to say. He especially wants to talk about literature, here as elsewhere, and it is moreover literature that is his domain at the newspaper. This is one of the early articles in *Le Soir*, where de Man began writing about two months previously. I have yet to find any allusion to the Jewish problem or any declaration of antisemitism in any of the other articles. Left to formulate hypotheses, I can imagine that, for a page devoted to Judaism, he was asked to treat the subject from a literary point of view. What one can read on the same page surrounding this article seems to me to support this hypothesis. One then notices that, if de Man's article is necessarily contaminated by the forms of vulgar antisemitism that frame it, *these coincide in a literal fashion, in their vocabulary and logic, with the very thing that de Man accuses*, as if his article were denouncing the

neighboring articles, pointing to the “myth” and the “errors,” the “lapidary judgments,” and the “very widespread belief” that can be read just to one side, in another article in the same issue (“Freudism”—and not Freud—as the product of a “particularly keen Jewish intelligence,” well received in “the intellectual and artistic milieu of a decadent and *enjuivée* society”), as well as the declaration no doubt falsely attributed to Benjamin Franklin: “A leopard cannot change its spots. Jews are Asiatics; they are a threat to the country that admits them and they should be excluded from the Constitution.”

De Man wants especially to propose a thesis on literature that visibly interests him more here than either antisemitism or the Jews. But before getting to that, a few points about vulgarity. It is a word and a major motif in all the articles. An *ideology* dominated by a disdain for vulgarity can be evaluated in diverse and contradictory ways. We know these programs very well, so I may be spared further development. But one must be aware that de Man rejects all kinds of conformism of the period as so much “vulgarity” (the word was also a favorite of his uncle).⁴⁰ Once again the double edge. In his view, there can be no salvation for any “vulgarity.” Read his “Propos sur la vulgarité artistique” (Remarks on artistic vulgarity). Behind the word vulgarity, and on almost every line, it is “our age” that is condemned, always in a fashion that cuts both ways: what “the radio, the cinema, publishing,” even “the press” “undertake to unload on us”; and then there are “fake artists,” “mechanized formulas that guarantee success with the masses,” the “falseness of tone.” That these are signs of aristocratism and estheticism is not at all in doubt, especially since de Man says so himself. Still one must be specific: this aristocratism is more esthetic than social, it is social *on the basis of* the esthetic, an esthetic determined *on the basis of* literature, even if music and painting play a considerable role. Although it intends “French letters” in particular, the conclusion of this article is eloquent in its every word: “Henri Pourrat represents something very pure and very precious within French letters: that regionalism of a noble attachment to the native soil which is the index of an authentic literary aristocracy.”⁴¹

If his focus is on literature, what does de Man want to say about it? Why does he reproach vulgar antisemitism its mistake *as regards literature*?

40. Henri de Man speaks, for example, of “pure Marxism and vulgar Marxism” in *The Psychology of Socialism*. The first is a “dead truth,” the second is a “living error.” Elsewhere, he writes:

I despise all forms of vulgarization, of truth put within reach of those who prefer ersatz goods, radio and phonograph music, champagne for democratic banquets. . . . This confession might sound strange coming from the pen of a socialist, especially a former director of worker education programs. But socialism is not demagoguery; and educating the people is not bringing science down to their level, but raising them to the level of science. Truths exist only for those who seek them.

(Henri de Man, foreword, *Au delà du marxisme* (Paris, 1926).

41. De Man, “Propos sur la vulgarité artistique,” *Le Soir*, 6 Jan. 1942.

Why does he write "But the reality is different?" The following four paragraphs, which form the center and the thesis of the article, no longer contain the slightest allusion to Jews or to antisemitism. They speak only of literature, of its original historicity, and of the "very powerful laws" that govern "esthetic evolution." There is a history of art and of literature. It is essential and irreducible, but it maintains its originality. It does not merge with sociopolitical history either in its rhythms or in its causal determinations. Historicism, and especially "vulgar" historicism, would consist in mapping one history onto the other, in ignoring the powerful structural constraints, the logics, forms, genres, methods, and especially the temporality proper to literary history, the duration of the waves within its depths that one must know how to listen for over and above the swirls and agitation of the immediate, to listen for the sounds coming from the "artistic life" there where it is "little swayed" by the waves of the present. Literary duration enfolds and unfolds itself otherwise, in a way that differs from the phenomena of sociopolitical history in the brief sequences of their events: it precedes them, sometimes succeeds them, in any case it exceeds them. This notion compromises all the ideologies of literature, even the opinions or the propaganda on the subject of literature whenever they would attempt to enclose themselves in a strictly determined context ("current affairs"). Whether they are revolutionary or not, on the left or the right, these ideological discourses speak of everything except literature itself. Sometimes, from "within" literature itself, manifest discourses of certain literary movements ("surrealism" or "futurism") are, precisely in the form of their "manifestos," ideological or doxical in this sense. They also mistake the historicity proper to literature, the ample rhythms of its tradition, the discreet convolutions of its "evolution": in sum, a "vulgar" approach to literature.⁴²

There would be much to say in a closely argued discussion around this question: literature, history, and politics. Here I must restrict myself to *three points*.

1. Debatable or not, this interesting and consistent thesis concerns, then, first of all the historicity proper to literature and the arts. Forming the central body of the article which has no relation with any "Jewish question" whatsoever, it develops as a theoretical demonstration in three moments: (a) general propositions on art; (b) illustration using the privileged example of the novel; (c) "analogous demonstration" with the example of poetry.

42. This is a remarkably constant de Manian concern up until the final articles, and notably the article titled "Continuité de la poésie française: À propos de la revue 'Messages'" (Continuity of French poetry: On the journal "Messages"), *Le Soir*, 14 July 1942. The journal *Messages*, which was banned off and on in France, was published and made known in Belgium with Paul de Man's help. See below concerning the journal *Exercice du Silence*, which was apparently the title of the third issue of this journal.

2. In 1941, under the German occupation, and first of all in the context of this newspaper, the *presentation* of such a thesis (for precisely the reasons that some today would judge it to be "formalist" or "estheticist" or in any case too concerned about protecting "literarity," if not from all history, as we saw that is not the case, then at least from a socio-political history and against ideology) goes rather against the current. One can at least read it as an anticonformist attack. Its insolence can take aim at and strike all those who were then, in an active and properly punitive fashion, undertaking to judge literature and its history, indeed to administer, control, censor them in function of the dominant ideology of the war or, as de Man puts it, of a "profound upheaval in the political and economic world."

3. The examples chosen (Gide, Kafka, Lawrence, Hemingway, surrealism, futurism) are troubling in this context. They are visibly invoked as great canonic examples on the basis of which, beyond any possible question, one ought to be able to say what literature *is*, what writers and literary movements *do*. We know from many other signs, his articles in the *Cahiers* for example, that these writers were already important references for de Man. The examples chosen are already curious and insolent because there are no others, because there is no German example, because the French example is Gide, the American Hemingway, the English Lawrence, and because Kafka is Jewish, but especially because they represent everything that Nazism or the right wing revolutions would have liked to extirpate from history and the great tradition. Now, what does de Man say? That these writers and these movements were already canonical: they belong to tradition, they have "orthodox ancestors," whether one likes it or not, whether they recognize it themselves or not. Taking the risk of a certain traditionalism (always the double edge), de Manian genealogy reinscribes all of these "accursed ones" in the then protective legitimacy of the canon and in the great literary family. It lifts them out of repression's way and it does so in an exemplary fashion since, he says, "the list could be extended indefinitely." I have said why I will cite this article *in extenso*. Here are the central paragraphs, where I have underlined the "buts," "But the reality," "in reality":

But the reality is different. It seems that esthetic evolution obeys very powerful laws that continue their action even when humanity is shaken by considerable events. The world war has brought about a profound upheaval in the political and economic world. *But* artistic life has been swayed relatively little, and the forms that we know at present are the logical and normal successors to what there had been before.

This is particularly clear as concerns the novel. Stendhal's definition, according to which "the novel is a mirror carried along a highway," contains within it the law that still today rules this literary genre. There was first the obligation to respect reality

scrupulously. *But* by digging deeper, the novel has gotten around to exploring psychological reality. Stendhal's mirror no longer remains immobile the length of the road: it undertakes to search even the most secret corners of the souls of characters. And this domain has shown itself to be so fruitful in surprises and riches that it still constitutes the one and only terrain of investigation of the novelist.

Gide, Kafka, Hemingway, Lawrence—the list could be extended indefinitely—all do nothing but attempt to penetrate, according to methods proper to their personality, into the secrets of interior life. Through this characteristic, they show themselves to be, not innovators who have broken with all past traditions, *but* mere continuers who are only pursuing further the realist esthetic that is more than a century old.

An analogous demonstration could be made in the domain of poetry. The forms that seem to us most revolutionary, such as surrealism or futurism, *in reality* have orthodox ancestors from which they cannot be detached. ["Jla"]

Now let us look closely at what happens in the last paragraph of this central demonstration, that is in the conclusion of a sort of syllogism. No more than the central body of the article (the paragraphs just quoted), the *general* scope of the conclusion, I mean conclusion in its general and theoretical form, is not concerned with the Jews. It does not name them in this general formulation. This conclusion concerns—and contests—an "absurd" *general* theorem regarding current literature, an absurdity that is denounced, precisely, as the axiom of antisemitism inasmuch as it is vulgar. And this conclusion announces by means of a "Therefore . . ." what must be deduced from the preceding demonstration: "Therefore, one may see that to consider present-day literature as an isolated phenomenon created by the particular mentality of the 20s is absurd."

And so we arrive at the last paragraph of the article, the most serious and in fact the only one that can be suspected of antisemitism. There, the return to the question of "Jews in present-day literature" corresponds to the rhetoric of a supplementary or analogical example. It comes to the aid of a general thesis or antithesis opposed to vulgar antisemitism. The demonstration that matters is considered established. De Man adds: "Likewise, the Jews. . . ." Next, and still without wanting to attenuate the violence of this paragraph that for me remains disastrous, let us remark this: even as he reminds us of the limits of "Jewish influence," of "semitic interference," even as, however, he seems to turn the discourse over to "Western intellectuals" by reconstituting their anxieties and then reassuring them, the manner in which he describes the "Jewish spirit" remains unquestionably positive. Even in its stereotyped, and therefore equivocal form, it is presented as a statement that no one is supposed to be able to question: a classical technique of contraband. For who, at that time, could dispense in public with *disputing* such praise? Who could

publicly subscribe to it? Well, de Man does not dispute it; on the contrary, he assumes it. Even better, he himself underscores a *contradiction* that cannot go unnoticed and has to leave some trace in the consciousness or the unconscious of the reader:

one might have expected that, given the specific characteristics of the Jewish spirit, the latter would have played a more brilliant role in this artistic production. Their cerebralness, their capacity to assimilate doctrines while maintaining a certain coldness in the face of them, would seem to be very precious qualities for the work of lucid analysis that the novel demands. ["Jla"]

One can hardly believe one's eyes: would this mean that what he prefers in the novel, "the work of lucid analysis," and in theory, a "certain coldness" of intelligence, correspond precisely to the qualities of the "Jewish spirit"? And that the "precious qualities" of the latter are indispensable to literature and theory? What is coiled up and resonating deep within this sentence? Did one hear that correctly? In any case, de Man does not say the contrary. And he clearly describes what were in his eyes "precious qualities." (Was he then recognizing the qualities of the enemy or those in which he would have liked to recognize himself? Later, these were the qualities his American enemies always attributed to him.)

The last lines, the most terrible, begin with another "But in spite of that. . . ." They are attacking once again, let us not forget, the antisemitic obsession that always needs, that has a compulsive and significant need, to *overevaluate* the Jewish influence on literature. Here is the final paragraph:

Therefore, one may see that to consider present-day literature as an isolated phenomenon created by the particular mentality of the 20s is absurd. Likewise, the Jews cannot claim to have been its creators, nor even to have exercised a preponderant influence over its development. On any somewhat close examination, this influence appears even to have extraordinarily little importance since one might have expected that, given the specific characteristics of the Jewish spirit, the latter would have played a more brilliant role in this artistic production. Their cerebralness, their capacity to assimilate doctrines while keeping a certain coldness in the face of them, seemed to be very precious qualities for the work of lucid analysis that the novel demands. But in spite of that, Jewish writers have always remained in the second rank and, to speak only of France, the André Maurois's, the Francis de Croissets, the Henri Duvernois's, the Henri Bernsteins, Tristan Bernards, Julien Bendas, and so forth, are not among the most important figures, they are especially not those who have had any guiding influence on the literary genres. The observation is, moreover, comforting for Western intellectuals. That they have been able to safeguard themselves from

Jewish influence in a domain as representative of culture as literature proves their vitality. If our civilization had let itself be invaded by a foreign force, then we would have to give up much hope for its future. By keeping, in spite of semitic interference in all aspects of European life, an intact originality and character, that civilization has shown that its basic nature is healthy. What is more, one sees that a solution of the Jewish problem that would aim at the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, deplorable consequences. The latter would lose, in all, a few personalities of mediocre value and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its great evolutive laws. ["Jla"]

Through the indelible wound, one must still analyze and seek to understand. Any concession would betray, besides a complacent indulgence and a lack of rigor, an infinitely culpable thoughtlessness with regard to past, present, or future victims of discourses that at least resembled this one. I have said why I am not speaking here as a judge, witness, prosecutor, or defender in some *trial of Paul de Man*. One will say: but you are constantly delivering judgments, you are evaluating, you did so just now. Indeed, and therefore I did not say that I would not do so at all. I said that in analyzing, judging, evaluating this or that discourse, this or that effect of these old fragments, I refused to extend these gestures to a general judgment, with no possibility of appeal, of Paul de Man, of the totality of what he was, thought, wrote, taught, and so forth. I continue thus to ask myself questions. If I persist in wondering how, in what conditions he wrote this, it is because even in the sum total of the articles from that period that I have been able to read, I have found no remark analogous or identical to this one. I did not even find any allusion to the Jews or to some "Jewish problem." Or rather, yes: in May 1941, some remarkable and emphatic praise for Péguy the Dreyfusard.⁴³ How is one to explain that? Who will ever know how this text was written and published? Who can exclude what happens so often in newspapers, and especially during that period and in those conditions, when editors can always intervene at the last moment? If that was the case, Paul de Man is no longer here to testify to it. But at that point one can say: supposing this to have been the case, there was still a way of protesting which would have been to end his association with the newspaper. Yes, but he would have had to be certain that this rupture was a better idea than his ambiguous and sometimes anticonformist continuation on the job. He would also

43. De Man, "Charles Péguy," *Le Soir*, 6 May 1941. The unmitigated praise for this "genius" who was "notoriously independent and undisciplined" is organized completely around the Dreyfus affair. In the portrait of Péguy the Dreyfusard, and in the history of (Péguy's) *Cahiers*, one cannot fail to remark all the quasi-autobiographical traits that de Man seems to take pleasure in proliferating.

have had to evaluate the gravity of the last lines of this article as we are doing today. Now, in order to evaluate them correctly, we must understand what this allusion to “a Jewish colony isolated from Europe” meant at that moment. I admit that, in the present state of my information, I do not understand it. To which “solution,” to which hypothesis that was perhaps current at the time was he making allusion? I do not know; perhaps to what was called the “Madagascar solution.” As of that date (4 March 1941), the word “solution” could not be associated with what we now know to have been the project of the “final solution”: the latter was conceived and put into effect later. At the end of 1942, Paul de Man stops contributing to the newspaper *Le Soir* (to my knowledge, he publishes nothing else during the war and he explains this in a letter that I will cite later). The same year, Henri de Man had left Belgium and given up all public responsibility.

Last September, then, this first reading and this first series of questions led me to an interpretation that is itself divided by what I have called “double bind,” “disjunction,” and especially “double edge,” each term of this division never coming to rest in a monadic identity. The experience of the double edge can be an ironic ruse on one side, a painful suffering on the other, and finally one and the other at every moment. But in what I have read of these texts, as in what I had learned to know earlier of Paul de Man and which it was difficult for me to abstract, nothing ever authorized me to translate this division into a hypocritical, cynical, or opportunistic duplicity. First of all, because this kind of duplicity was, to a degree and with a clarity that I have rarely encountered in my life, alien to Paul de Man. His irony and his anticonformist burst of laughter took instead the form of insolent provocation—one which was, precisely, cutting. One feels something of that in these “early writings.” Second, because cynical opportunism is another form of acquiescence; it is profoundly conformist and comfortable, the opposite of the double edge. Finally because all of that would have continued after 1942. And this was not the case; the rupture was unquestionably a cut. I have the sense that de Man, in whom a certain analytical coldness always cohabited with passion, fervor, and enthusiasm, must have, like his uncle, obeyed his convictions—which were also those of his uncle: complicated, independent, mobile, in a situation that he thought, incorrectly as did many others, offered no other way out after what seemed, up until 1942, like the end of the war.

So I will continue my story. For my own part, I was quickly convinced at the end of August that what had just been discovered could not and should not be kept secret. As quickly and as radically as possible, it was necessary to make these texts accessible to everyone. The necessary conditions had to be created so that everyone could read them and interpret them in total freedom. No limit should be set on the discussion. Everyone

should be in a position to take his or her responsibilities. For one could imagine in advance the effect that these "revelations" were going to produce, at least in the American university. One did not have to have second sight to foresee even the whole specter of reactions to come. For the most part, they have been programmed for a long time—and the program is simple enough to leave little room for surprises. I was also conscious of the fact that the serious interpretation of these texts and their context would take a lot of time. All the more reason not to delay. I discuss it, once again in Paris, with Sam Weber. I suggest that we take advantage of a colloquium that is supposed to take place a few weeks later at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in order to discuss the matter with about twenty colleagues. It is appropriately a colloquium dealing with academic institutions and politics ("Our Academic Contract: The Conflict of the Faculties in America") and bringing together, *among others*, some former students and colleagues of Paul de Man. Sam Weber agrees, as does Ortwin de Graef from whom I request authorization to distribute to all these colleagues photocopies of the articles I have just described. Richard Rand, the organizer of the colloquium, also agrees and makes the necessary arrangements. On 10 October, all the colloquium's participants having read these texts, we had a discussion that lasted more than three hours and touched on both the substance of things and the decisions to be made. I cannot summarize the discussion, all of which was tape-recorded.

Whatever may have been the remarks of the various people, no one, it seems to me, questioned the necessity of making these texts widely accessible and to do everything to permit a serious, minute, patient, honest study of them, as well as an open discussion. What remained to be decided was the best technical conditions in which to accomplish this. In the weeks that followed, broad exchanges led us to confide to Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan the task of completing the collection of articles, of preparing their publication, as well as that of a volume in which as many as possible of those who wished to do so could communicate their reflections, whatever may have been their relation to Paul de Man and his work. A letter of invitation was addressed to this effect to numerous colleagues, known for their competence or for the interest they might have in the problem and, let me underscore this point, whatever may have been the extent, the form, or the premises of their agreement or their disagreement with the person or the work of de Man. These two volumes will appear soon. Even though they constitute merely the beginning of work that will have to be long term and opened to still more people, no one will doubt, I hope, the wish of those who took the initiative for it: to allow everyone to take his or her responsibilities in the clearest possible conditions. Nevertheless, as one could also foresee and as Werner Hamacher has since written to me, those who took this initiative have found themselves faced with a double accusation that is both typical and contradictory: on the one hand, of betraying Paul

de Man, and, on the other hand, of protecting him; on the one hand, of exposing him in great haste to the violence of the most expeditious lapidary judgments, even to a symbolic lapidation and, on the other hand, of wanting to save his work and, at the same time, defend all those for whom, in one way or another, it is important. I can understand this double accusation and the indications it alleges in support. But it seems to me perverse and inevitably unjust. First of all because one cannot do both of these things at once. You could not succeed in doing both of them even if you tried. Second, because those who launch one or the other of these accusations are themselves, necessarily, doing one or the other by obeying one or the other of these motivations. So as to explain how, as I see it, neither one nor the other of these intentions should enter into things, I will quote now, in its literal and integral transcription, what I tried to say at the outset of the discussion in Tuscaloosa. After an account that corresponds, for the facts although not for the reading of the texts, to the one I have just given, I added this in French (which, because it is part of the archive, I think I have to include in my narration):

I insist on improvising. For the last two months, I have not stopped thinking in a quasi-obsessional fashion about this, but I preferred not to prepare what I am going to say. I think it is necessary this evening that everyone tell us, speaking personally and after a first analysis, what he or she thinks of these things. On the other hand, I wanted to tell you what my own feeling is. I have known Paul de Man since 1966. You know of the friendship that we shared since then. I knew that he had lived through some difficult times when he left Belgium for the United States. We never spoke of what happened during the war. We were very close, from a certain point of view, but because our friendship remained very discreet, I never felt indiscreet enough to ask him about what had happened then, even though, like many others, I knew that this had been a [singular? inaudible word] moment in his personal, private but also public (professional, et cetera) history. But I want to begin there: never in the course of these fifteen or sixteen years did I read anything of his nor hear anything from him that leaves the least suspicion in my memory as to any persistence of, let us say—how to name it?—a certain ideology, readable for me in the texts I read with you, in the texts published in French, the only ones I have been able to read directly. On the contrary, everything I can remember of the texts he published afterward and of conversations I had with him, of all the evaluations of different sorts (social, political, et cetera) leave me with the certainty that he had in any case broken in a radical, internal, rigorous way with anything whatsoever that one might suspect in the ideology of the texts we are going to talk about. I wanted thus to begin by setting temporal limits on the things we are going to talk about. I wanted to set out that everything indicates, in any case for me, that along with what there may be that is shocking in these texts (and I do not hide that), he had broken radically with all that and there was no trace to my knowledge either in his life or in his

remarks or in his texts that allows one to think the opposite. He broke with what happened when he was between twenty-one and twenty-three years old. I realize that we will now be able to read all his published texts, everyone will do so, us in particular, the texts we already know, while trying, some will do it with malevolence, with an unhealthy jubilation, others will do it otherwise, to find in the published texts signs referring back to that period.

Even as I improvise and in a somewhat confused way, I would like to say the following: I think there is a continuity and I would like to be specific. Paul de Man is someone who had that experience, who asked himself the questions that are asked in those texts, and who at twenty-one or twenty-three years old, brought to them the answers that are in these texts. He thus went through this experience which is not just any experience, he read the texts you know about, he wrote what you now know.

It is out of the question to imagine that the rupture means all of that is erased. All of it is part of his experience. In my opinion, he must have drawn a certain number of lessons from it: historical, political, rhetorical, of all sorts; and besides the rupture, this lesson must in effect be readable in his texts. It is one thing to read it as a lesson; it would be another to amalgamate everything, as some, I imagine, will perhaps be tempted to do, calling it a continuity, in which nothing happens without leaving traces, from these texts to those that followed. Our responsibility, in any case mine, would be to analyze all these texts, those from *Le Soir*. We do not have them all and some of them are much more convoluted, complicated, others are simple and unfortunately readable, but others are convoluted, complicated. Those who are seriously interested in the question will have to take the time to work on, analyze those texts, then the texts published in the U.S., with the greatest rigor and attention to detail. I have decided to improvise because I have taken as a rule to ally urgency with patience. It is urgent that we (perhaps I am forcing things by saying we, please excuse me), that some of us hasten to take their responsibilities as regards these texts, to be the first to show that there is no question of dissimulating them or of participating in any kind of camouflage operation. It is urgent that, in one mode or another, no doubt the mode of improvisation, we make the thing public, but it is also urgent that, while doing this, we call upon ourselves and those who are interested in the thing, the well-intentioned and the ill-intentioned, to look at them closely, to undertake a reflection on the substance of what made this possible, for Paul de Man and for others, and of what the rupture with that means for someone like Paul de Man, only a part of whose work (or life) we know. We have a lot of work before us if we are to know what actually happened, not only in the political, ideological fabric of Belgium at the time, but also in the life of Paul de Man.

Two more things, perhaps three. Rethinking about all of this in an obsessional way and with much, how to say, worry, consternation, the feeling that wins out over all the others in my bereaved friendship, bereaved once again, is, I have to say, first of all a feeling of immense compassion. Through these texts and through other things [inaudible] of what must have been Paul de Man's life during the ten years from 1940–50, through the ruptures, exile, the radical reconversion,

what I begin to see clearly is, I imagine and I don't think I am wrong, an enormous suffering, an agony, that we cannot yet know the extent of. And I must say after having read these pages written by a young man of twenty-one or twenty-two (I do not mention his age in order to clear him or attenuate anything: at twenty-one or twenty-two, one takes responsibilities and, notably in that situation; people have pointed out, and they are right, that certain young men of twenty or twenty-one took adult responsibilities, in the Resistance, for example, or elsewhere. Thus, when I mention his age, it is not so as to say "he was a child.") Nevertheless, what appears clearly is that, in a situation that we will have to describe, that of occupied Europe from which hope seemed banished except for a few, through a reflection on what might be the spirit [inaudible] we were talking about earlier⁴⁴ and under the influence of his uncle (about whom we will certainly have much to say, perhaps not tonight but later), a young man with clearly an immense culture, gifted, brilliant, exceptional, became involved in all that, we'll talk about this some more, and then found that he had to break with it and turn everything almost upside down, through problems that were also personal problems, indissociable from this whole story. This man must have lived a real agony and I believe that what he wrote later, what he taught, what he lived through in the United States obviously carry the traces of this suffering. I want to say that whatever may be—how to say—the wound that these texts are for me, they have changed nothing in my friendship and admiration for Paul de Man.

One more thing: some of us might think that, having broken with what he said and did under his signature at that time, Paul de Man tried, in the United States at any rate, to hide the thing. The fact is that we did not speak about it and that to my knowledge he did not speak about it very much. Perhaps he spoke to some people we do not know, but in any case to most of those here he never spoke about these things. If he did, then people will be able to say so.

But we do know, and Tom Keenan can confirm this in a moment, that in 1955 while de Man was at Harvard, there was an anonymous denunciation concerning his activity in Belgium during the war. And de Man explained himself at that moment, in a letter of which we have at least the draft, to the Head of the Society of Fellows.⁴⁵ This is a public act with which he explained himself on these

44. This is an allusion to the lecture I had given the same afternoon on Heidegger (questions of spirit, of Nazism, of nationalism, of language, of the destiny of Europe, and so forth).

45. De Man, letter to Renato Poggioli, Director of the Harvard Society of Fellows, 25 Jan. 1955 (from a draft dated Sept. 1954). Here is an extract from this draft that no doubt will be published: "In 1940 and 1941 I wrote some literary articles in the newspaper "Le Soir" and, I like most of the other contributors, stopped doing so when nazi thought-control did no longer allow freedom of statement. During the rest of the occupation I did what was the duty of any decent person." According to Charles Dosogne, a contemporary and friend of de Man, "beginning at the end of September 1940, preliminary censorship by the Propaganda Abteilung was limited to important political articles. Literary columns were thus exempted from this, at least until August 1942—date at which censorship was reestablished. It was at this moment that Paul de Man's activities as a journalist ceased" (letter to Neil Hertz, 11 Jan. 1988). It seems, however, that they continued a few months longer.

matters. It is a long letter from which we can extract at least this: in effect during the German occupation, in 1940–42, he maintained a literary column, but when the pressure of German censorship became too much—Tom will read this in a moment—he ceased writing and did what decency demanded that he do. Naturally, we are not obliged to give credence to this presentation of the thing, his version of the facts, in this letter. I don't know. We are, for those who are interested in it, at the beginning of a long movement of approach. But whatever the case may be, whether or not this letter speaks the whole truth about what happened then, about the reasons for which he wrote and then stopped writing, about these texts, what they are or are not, that is less important for the moment and for what I want to say, than the fact in any case (1) that he did explain himself publicly; (2) that he indicated what his evaluation of the thing was, that is, that he wished in 1955 never to have done anything that could be suspected of Nazism or collaboration. He explains himself, he broke with that and there can be no doubt about the kind of look he himself casts at that time at least on the period in question and on the ideological implications that one may read in these texts. He explained himself publicly and in my opinion that is a reason, whatever we might do from now on, not to organize today a trial of Paul de Man. I would consider it absolutely out of place, ridiculous, strictly ridiculous, to do something (I am not saying this for us but for others) that would look like a trial, after the death of Paul de Man, for texts that, whatever they may be (we will come back to this) he wrote when he was between twenty-one and twenty-three years old, in conditions with which he absolutely and radically broke afterward. I think that anything that would look like such a trial would be absolutely indecent and the jubilation with which some may hasten to play that game ought to be denounced. In any case, personally, I plan to denounce it in the most uncompromising manner.

These are the preliminary things that I wanted to say to you. On the texts you read, there will be much, very much to say, but I do not want to keep the floor any longer. I will take it again when the time comes on the subject of the texts. I already have an extremely complicated relation to these texts. There are things that are massively obvious to me and that seem to me to call for a denunciation whose protocols are rather clear. But these things are woven into a very complex fabric, one that deserves, not only this evening, but beyond this evening the most serious and careful analyses.

Before going to the end of my story, I want to be more specific about certain points touched on in this improvisation. First, about Paul de Man's silence. Although, as I mentioned, it was not absolute, although it was publicly broken on at least one occasion and thus cannot be understood in the sense of a dissimulation, although I have since learned that it was also broken on other occasions, in private, with certain colleagues and friends, I am left to meditate, endlessly, on all the reasons that induced him not to speak of it more, for example to *all* his friends. What could the ordeal of this mutism have been, for him? I can only imagine it. Having explained himself once publicly and believing he had dem-

onstrated the absurdity of certain accusations in the Harvard letter, why would he himself have incited, spontaneously, a public debate on this subject?

Several reasons could both dissuade and discourage him from doing so. He was aware of having never collaborated or called for collaboration with a Nazism that he never even named in his texts, of having never engaged in any criminal activity or even any organized political activity, in the strict sense of the term, I mean in a public organization or in a political administration. Therefore, to provoke spontaneously an explanation on this subject was no longer an obligation. It would have been, moreover, an all the more distressing, pointlessly painful theatricalization in that he had not only broken with the political context of 1940–42, but had distanced himself from it with all his might, in his language, his country, his profession, his private life. His international notoriety having spread only during the last years of his life, to exhibit earlier such a distant past so as to call the public as a witness—would that not have been a pretentious, ridiculous, and infinitely complicated gesture? All of these articles, whose disconcerting structure we have glimpsed, would have had to be taken up again and analyzed under a microscope. He would have had himself to convoke the whole world to a great philologico-political symposium on his own “early writings,” even though he was only recognized by a small university elite. I would understand that he might have found this to be indiscreet and indecent. And this modesty is more like him than a deliberate will to hide or to falsify. I even imagine him in the process of analyzing with an implacable irony the simulacrum of “confession” to which certain people would like to invite him after the fact, after his death, and the autojustification and auto-accusation quivering with pleasure which form the abyssal program of such a self-exhibition. He has said the essential on this subject and I invite those who wonder about his silence to read, among other texts, “Excuses (*Confessions*)” in *Allegories of Reading*. The first sentence announces what “political and autobiographical texts have in common”⁴⁶ and the conclusion explains again the relations between irony and allegory so as to render an account (without ever being able to account for it sufficiently) of this: “Just as the text can never stop apologizing for the suppression of guilt that it performs, there is never enough knowledge available to account for the delusion of knowing” (A, p. 300). In the interval, between the first and last sentences, at the heart of this text which is also the last word of *Allegories of Reading*, everything is said. Or at least almost everything one can say about the reasons for which a totalization is impossible: ironically, allegorically, and *en abyme*. Since I cannot quote everything, I will limit myself to recalling this citation of Rousseau, in a note. The note is to a phrase that names the “nameless avengers” (A, p. 288).

46. De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), p. 278; hereafter abbreviated A.

Nameless? Minus the crime, (almost) everything is there, the count is there and it is almost correct, I mean almost the exact number of years: "If this crime can be redeemed, as I hope it may, it must be by the many misfortunes that have darkened the later part of my life, by forty years of upright and honorable behavior under difficult circumstances'" (A, p. 288).

Even if sometimes a murmur of protest stirs in me, I prefer, upon reflection, that he chose not to take it on himself to provoke, during his life, this spectacular and painful discussion. It would have consumed his time and energy. He did not have very much and that would have deprived us of a part of his work. Since it is at the moment of his greatest notoriety that this "demonstration" would have had some legitimacy, we do not know what price he would have had to pay for it. We do not know to what extent it would have weakened him or distracted him from his last works, which are among the most remarkable, when he was already ill. So he did the right thing, I say to myself, by leaving us also with this heavy and obscure part of the legacy. We owe it to him and we will owe him still more since what he leaves us is also the gift of an ordeal, the summons to a work of reading, historical interpretation, ethico-political reflection, an interminable analysis. Well beyond the sequence 1940–42. In the future and for the future, I mean also the future of philosophico-political reflection, this will not do anybody any harm. Especially not those who, if they want still to accuse or take revenge, will finally have to read de Man, from A to Z. Had they done so? Would they have done so otherwise? It is now unavoidable. You will have understood that I am speaking of transference and prosopopeia, of that which goes and returns only to the other, without any possible reappropriation, for anyone, of his own voice or his own face.

Permit me an ellipsis here since I do not have much more time or space. Transference and prosopopeia, like the experience of the undecidable, seem to make a responsibility impossible. It is for that very reason that they require it and perhaps subtract it from the calculable program: they give it a chance. Or, inversely: responsibility, if there is any, requires the experience of the undecidable as well as that irreducibility of the other, some of whose names are transference, prosopopeia, allegory. There are many others. And the double edge and the double bind, which are other phenomena of the undecidable. Before answering, responding for oneself, and *for* that purpose, in order to do so, one must respond, answer to the other, about the other, *for* the other, not in his place as if in the place of another "proper self," but *for* him. My ellipsis here, my economical aphorism, is a thought for all these "fors" that make responsibility *undeniable*: *there is some, one cannot deny it, one cannot/can only deny it [on ne peut (que) la dénier] precisely because it is impossible.*

Yes, to read him, that is the task. How shall one do that from now on? Everyone will go about it in his or her own way, the paths open are

so many, the work is spreading and becoming more and more differentiated, and no one has any advice to give anyone. Therefore, at the moment of beginning to read or to reread Paul de Man, I will mention only a few of the rules that impose themselves on me today.

First of all, of course, to take account of what we have just discovered, to try to reconstitute this whole part of the corpus (I have mentioned only a few articles) without overlooking any of the "internal" or "contextual" overdeterminations ("public" and "private" situation, if possible—without forgetting what de Man has said about this distinction), in the direction, for example, of "Belgium during the war" and everything that can be transferred onto the uncle. But taking the 1940–42 articles into account does not mean giving them a disproportionate importance while minimizing the immensity of the rest, in a landscape that would look like those geographical maps of the Middle Ages or the territorial representations organized around a local, immediate, distorting perception. (I am thinking of those projections by Saul Steinberg where a New York street looks larger than the United States, not to mention the rest of the world.) How can one forget de Man's world, and first of all the United States? And the map of all his great voyages? The texts of 1940–42 can also be represented there as a minuscule point.

Next, without ever forgetting or overlooking these first articles (how could I?), I would try to *articulate* them with the work to come while avoiding, if possible, two more or less symmetrical errors.

One would consist in interpreting the rupture between the two moments of de Man's history and work as an interruption of any passage, an interdiction against any contamination, analogy, translation. In that case, one would be saying: no relation, sealed frontier between the two, absolute heterogeneity. One would also be saying: even if there were two moments, they do not belong to history, to the same history, to the history of the "work." There would have been a prehistory, some politico-journalistic accidents, then history and the work. This attitude would be giving in to defensive denegation, it would deprive itself of interpretive resources, including the political dimension of the work. Most important, by annulling the so-called prehistory, it would compound its own political frivolity by an injustice toward Paul de Man: what he lived through then was serious, probably decisive and traumatic in his life, and I will never feel I have the right, on the pretext of protecting him from those who would like to abuse it, of treating the experience of the war as a minor episode.

I would also try to avoid the opposite error: confusing everything while playing at being an authorized prosecutor or clever inquisitor. We know from experience that these compulsive and confusionist practices—amalgam, continuism, analogism, teleologism, hasty totalization, reduction, and derivation—are not limited to a few hurried journalists.

So I would make every effort to avoid giving in to the typical temptation of a discourse that seeks to shore up this shaky certainty: everything is

already there in the "early writings," everything derives from them or comes down to them, the rest was nothing but their pacifying and diplomatic translation (the pursuit of the same war by other means). As if there were no more difference of level, no displacement, a fortiori no fundamental rupture during these forty years of exile, reflection, teaching, reading, or writing! The crudeness of an enterprise guided by such a principle (that, precisely, of the worst totalitarian police) can seek to hide behind more or less honest tricks and take purely formal precautions on the subject of the too-obvious differences. But it cannot fool anyone for long. It is not even necessary here to recall de Man's own warnings against such foolishness or such trickery, against the models of a certain historicism, or against the forms of causality, derivation, or narration that still crowd these dogmatic somnambulisms. When one is seeking, at all costs, to reconstruct in an artificial way genealogical continuities or totalities, then one has to interpret discontinuity as a conscious or unconscious ruse meant to hide a persistence or a subsistence, the stubborn repetition of an originary project (what this is is good old existential psychoanalysis of the immediate postwar period!). Why is this totalitarian logic essentially triumphant? Triumphant? And made strong by its very weakness? Why is it recognizable by its tone and its affect? Because it authorizes itself to interpret everything that resists it in every line, in Paul de Man's work or elsewhere, and resists it to the point of disqualifying or ridiculing it, as the organization of a defensive resistance, precisely, in the face of its own inquisition. For example, when de Man demonstrates theoretically (and more than just theoretically, but beyond constative or cognitive logic, precisely) that a historical totalization is impossible and that a certain fragmentation is inevitable, even in the presentation of his works, the detective or the chief prosecutor would see there a maneuver to avoid assuming the totalizing anamnesis of a shameful story. With a clever wink and while poking you each time with his elbow, he would find damning evidence everywhere. He would draw your attention to sentences as revealing, from this point of view, as the following, among many others: "This apparent coherence *within* each essay is not matched by a corresponding coherence *between* them. Laid out diachronically in a roughly chronological sequence, they do not evolve in a manner that easily allows for dialectical progression or, ultimately, for historical totalization."⁴⁷ This modest statement is relayed, everywhere else, by a critical or deconstructive discourse with regard to historical totalization in general. It would thus suffice to extend the scope of these sentences through analogy to all de Man's writings and to conclude confidently that this preface confesses what it hides while declaring it inaccessible. The trap would be sprung, the amateur analyst could rub his hands together and conclude: "de Man does not want to sum up or assume the totality of his history

47. De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. viii; hereafter abbreviated *R*.

and his writings. He declares that it is impossible in principle in order to discourage in advance all the policemen and to evade the necessary confession." Now, one could find examples like this on every page. Before leaving this example, I will quote only the end of this preface to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*: "The only place where I come close to facing some of these questions about history and fragmentation is in the essay on Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*. How and where one goes on from there is far from clear, but certainly no longer simply a matter of syntax and diction" (*R*, p. ix).

And from there, I would invite whoever wants to talk seriously about de Man to read him, to read this essay on Shelley to its end or its final interruption (*R*, pp. 121, 123). I do not have the room to quote the pages where de Man speaks of "what we have done with the dead Shelley, and with all the other dead bodies . . .," of the "suspicion that the negation is a *Verneimung*, an intended exorcism," of what "always again demands to be read," of "recuperative and nihilistic allegories of historicism" (*R*, pp. 121–22). Here is how the essay ends:

Reading as disfiguration, to the very extent that it resists historicism, turns out to be historically more reliable than the products of historical archeology. To monumentalize this observation into a *method* of reading would be to regress from the rigor exhibited by Shelley which is exemplary precisely because it refuses to be generalized into a system. [*R*, p. 123]

If I give up playing the policeman's petty game, is it only because the exercise is too easy? No, it is because its dogmatic naïveté will always fail to render an account of this unquestionable fact: a statement can never be taken as a presumption of guilt or evidence in a trial, even less as proof, as long as one has not demonstrated that it has only an idiomatic value and that no one else, besides Paul de Man or a Paul de Man signatory of the 1940–42 texts, could have either produced the statement or subscribed to it. Or inversely, that all similar statements—their number is not finite and their contexts are highly diverse—could not be signed and approved by authors who shared nothing of Paul de Man's history or political experiences.

Even though I give up on this petty and mediocre game, I have at the disposal of those who would like to play it a whole cartography of false leads, beginning with what de Man wrote and gave us to think on the theme of memory, mourning, and autobiography. I have myself tried to meditate on this theme in *Mémoires*. Since Paul de Man speaks so much of memory and of mourning, since he extends the textual space of autobiography to this point, why not reapply his categories to his own texts? Why not read all these as autobiographical figures in which fiction and truth are indiscernible? And, as de Man himself shows, is not this latter

problematic political through and through? Did I not underscore that myself in *Mémoires*, in a *certain way*? Yes, but in what way? Can one, ought one to take the reading possibilities that de Man himself offers us and manipulate them as arms, as a suspicion or an accusation against him in a “*décision de justice*,” as we say in French, in a final judgment, authorizing oneself this time to decide in the absence of proof or knowledge? What would be the rule, if there is one, for avoiding abuse, injustice, the kind of violence that is sometimes merely stupidity? Before going any further into this question, here is the beginning of a list of themes that could become weapons in the arsenal of the investigators. The list is, by definition, incomplete, and, one may say it a priori, it links up with the “whole” de Manian text in a mode that never excludes “disjunction.”

There is “Autobiography as De-Facement,” an “autobiography [which] is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (*R*, p. 70); then there is the autobiographical aspect, *that is, also the fictional* aspect of any text, even if one cannot remain within this undecidability (“the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but . . . it is undecidable” [*R*, p. 70]); or else, speaking of Lejeune’s *Le Pacte autobiographique*: “From specular figure of the author, the reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer’s behavior, the extent to which he respects or fails to honor the contractual agreement he has signed” (*R*, pp. 71–72); or else, that about which I myself said it “precludes any anamnestic totalization of self” (*M*, p. 23):

The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the topological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of topological substitutions. [*R*, p. 7]

Or yet again, the insistence on rhetoric and the irreducibility of the topological substitutions can always be interpreted, by “the reader” as “judge” or “policing power,” as a theoretical machine of the ruse meant to lead him or her astray in advance and turn aside the police inquiry; especially the insistence on the hallucinatory prosopopeia, about which I said four years ago that it was “the sovereign, secret, discreet, and ideal signature—and the most giving, the one which *knows how to efface itself*” (*M*, p. 26). Is it not de Man who speaks to us “beyond the grave” and from the flames of cremation? “The dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is, as we saw, the prosopopeia, the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave; an unlettered stone would leave the

sun suspended in nothingness" (*R*, p. 77); and yet again, the motif of "true mourning" and of the nostalgic resistance to the "materiality of actual history"; and then there is the major motif of disjunction, as well as what I called "an uncontrollable necessity, a *nonsubjectivizable* law of thought beyond interiorization" (*M*, p. 37), the motif of thinking memory (*Gedächtnis*) beyond interiorizing memory (*Erinnerung*); and then the structure of allegory, even of memory itself, if not as amnesia, then at least as relation to an "unreachable anteriority,"⁴⁸ a memory, in sum, without a past in the standard sense of the term. Ah ha! someone will say, is that not a maneuver meant to deny or dissimulate, even to repress say the cleverest ones, an intolerable past? The problem is that the maneuver being suspected, in other words, this *thought* of memory, can be, has been, and will be once again, in this form or in a nearby form, assumed by persons whose past has no relation with de Man's. To the accusers falls the obligation of proving the contrary. I wish them patience and courage.

So many false leads, then, for hurried detectives. The list is incomplete, as I said, the "whole" de Manian text is available as a boobytrapped resource for symptomatologists in training. The latter could even begin by suspecting or denouncing the titles of "all" de Man's books! If they do not understand what I mean, they should write to me and I will point out a few tricks. Besides the pleasure (everyone gets it where he or she can), this exercise for late beginners may even procure a professional benefit for some. Especially if they take advantage of the opportunity to extend the trial, through contiguity or confusion, allusion, insinuation, or vociferation, to all those who are interested in de Man, to supposed groups or schools against whom it is advisable to wage war. I will come back to this in a moment.

As will have become clear, I see these two opposed errors as both intellectual and ethico-political errors, that is, both errors and falsifications. What would I do in the future so as to avoid them? Since it is a matter of nothing less than reading and rereading de Man without simplifying anything about the questions (general and particular, theoretical and exemplified) of the context, I cannot show here, in an article, what I would do at every step of a reading that ought to remain as open and as differentiated as possible. But I can try to advance a few hypotheses and, for the formation of these hypotheses themselves, one or two rules. Even if the hypotheses remain hypotheses, I assume as of now responsibility for the rules.

First rule: respect for the other, that is, for his right to difference, in his relation to others but also in his relation to himself. What are all these grand words saying here? Not only respect for the right to error,

48. De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, 1983), p. 222.

even to an aberration which, moreover, de Man never tired speaking of in a highly educated and educating manner; not only respect for the right to a history, a transformation of oneself and one's thought that can never be totalized or reduced to something homogeneous (and those who practice this reduction give a very grave ethico-political example for the future); it is also respect of that which, in *any* text, remains heterogeneous and can even, as is the case here, explain itself on the subject of this open heterogeneity while helping us to understand it. We are also the heirs and guardians of this heterogeneous text even if, precisely for this reason, we ought to maintain a differentiated, vigilant, and sometimes critical relation to it. Even those who would like to reject or burn de Man's work know very well and will have to resign themselves to the fact, that from now it is inscribed, at work, and radiating in the body or the corpus of our tradition. Not work but *works*: numerous, difficult, mobile, still obscure. Even in the hypothesis of the fiercest discussion, I would avoid the totalizing process and trial [procès]: of the work and the man. And the least sign of respect or fidelity will be this: to begin, precisely, by listening, to try to hear what he said to us, him, de Man, *already*, along with a few others, about totalizing violence, thus, to lend an ear, and an ear finely tuned enough to perceive, between the Atlantic and the Pacific, something other than monotonous noise and the rumbling [rumeur] of the waves.

The *second rule* is still more demanding, as inaccessible as what is called a "regulating ideal." But it is no less important to me and has been for a long time. Since we are talking at this moment about discourse that is totalitarian, fascist, Nazi, racist, antisemitic, and so forth, about all the gestures, either discursive or not, that could be suspected of complicity with it, I would like to do, and naturally I invite others to do, whatever possible to avoid reproducing, if only virtually, the *logic* of the discourse thus incriminated.

Do we have access to a complete formalization of this logic and an absolute exteriority with regard to its ensemble? Is there a systematic set of themes, concepts, philosophemes, forms of utterance, axioms, evaluations, hierarchies which, forming a closed and identifiable coherence of what we call totalitarianism, fascism, nazism, racism, antisemitism, never appear outside these formations and especially never on the opposite side? And is there a systematic coherence proper to each of them, since one must not confuse them too quickly with each other? Is there some property so closed and so pure that one may not find any element of these systems in discourses that are commonly opposed to them? To say that I do not believe that there is, not absolutely, means at least two things: (1) Such a formalizing, saturating totalization seems to me to be precisely the essential character of this logic whose project, at least, and whose ethico-political consequence can be terrifying. One of my rules is never to accept this project and consequence, whatever that may cost.

(2) For this very reason, one must analyze as far as possible this process of formalization and its program so as to uncover the statements, the philosophical, ideological, or political behaviors that derive from it and wherever they may be found. The task seems to me to be both urgent and interminable. It has occurred to me on occasion to call this deconstruction; I will come back to that word in a moment.

I will give some concrete illustrations of these two abstractly formulated rules. In many of the discourses I have read or heard in the last few months (and I was expecting them in a very precise way), whether they attack or defend de Man, it was easy to recognize axioms and forms of behavior that confirm the logic one claims to have rid oneself of: purification, purge, totalization, reappropriation, homogenization, rapid objectification, good conscience, stereotyping and nonreading, *immediate* politicization or depoliticization (the two always go together), *immediate* historicization or dehistoricization (it is always the same thing), immediate ideologizing moralization (immorality itself) of all the texts and all the problems, expedited trial, condemnations, or acquittals, summary executions or sublimations. This is what must be deconstructed, these are a few points of reference (that is all I can do here) in the field open to this research and these responsibilities that have been called, for two decades, deconstructions (in the plural). I would not have pronounced this word here if all the newspaper articles and all the rumors that have reached me as of this day had not, in a way that is both so surprising and so unsurprising, associated deconstruction (in the singular) to this whole affair. By touching quickly on this problem, I will no doubt be able to go *from the rule to the hypothesis* and differentiate a little what I have meant since the beginning of this article by the word "rupture."

In spite of its discouraging effect, I have begun to get used to journalistic presentations of deconstruction and to the even more discouraging fact that the responsibility for them belongs most often not with professional journalists, but with professors whose training ought to require at least some attempt at reading. This time, finding as always its foothold in aggressivity, simplism has produced the most unbelievably stupid statements.⁴⁹ Some might smile with disabused indulgence at the highly transparent gesticulations of those who leap at the chance to exploit without delay an opportunity they think is propitious: at last, still without reading the texts, to take some cheap revenge on a "theory" that is all the more threatening to institutions and individuals because, visibly, they do not understand anything about it. One may also wonder, with the same smiling indulgence: but, after all, what does deconstruction (in the singular) have to do with what was written in 1940–42 by a very young man in a

49. I will have neither the room nor the patience nor the cruelty to cite them all. I merely recall that they often appear in university campus newspapers and are generally passed along to the journalists by professors.

Belgian newspaper? Is it not ridiculous and dishonest to extend to a "theory," that has itself been simplified and homogenized, as well as to all those who are interested in it and develop it, the trial one would like to conduct of a man for texts written in Belgian newspapers forty-five years ago and that moreover, once again, one has not really read? Yes, this deserves perhaps hardly more than a smile and most often I manage to shrug it off.

But not always. Today I will speak of my indignation and my worry. (1) First, because the gestures of simplification and the expedited verdicts have, yes, *in fact*, a relation to what happened around 1940–42, earlier and later, in Europe and elsewhere. When someone asking "not to be identified" sees himself quoted by an unscrupulous professor-journalist, when he says he is "shocked" by the fact that certain people are gathering, if only in order to *discuss* these problems (he would thus like to forbid the right to assembly and discussion? What does that remind you of?), and when he says he is "shocked" in the name of a "moral perspective,"⁵⁰ you can see why I am indignant and worried; and why it is necessary to remain vigilant; and why more than ever one must guard against reproducing the logic one claims to condemn. Precisely from a "moral perspective." Be on your guard for morality and thus the well-known immorality of so many moralisms.

2. Second, because, paradoxically, I think deconstructions *do have a relation*, but an altogether other relation, to the substance of the problems we are talking about here. To put it in a word, deconstructions have always represented, as I see it, the at least necessary condition for identifying and combating the totalitarian risk in all the forms already mentioned.

Not only can one not accuse deconstruction (in the singular) in the expeditious trial some are dreaming about today, but without deconstructive procedures, a vigilant political practice could not even get very far in the analysis of all these political discourses, philosophemes, ideologemes, events, or structures, in the reelaboration of all these questions on literature, history, politics, culture, and the university. I am not saying that, *inversely*,

50. Quoted in Jon Wiener, "Deconstructing de Man," *The Nation*, 9 Jan. 1988, p. 24. From its title to its final sentence, this spiteful and error-ridden article gathers within its pages more or less all the reading mistakes I have evoked up until now. It is frightening to think that its author teaches history at a university. Attempting to transfer onto deconstruction and its "politics" (such as he imagines them) a stream of calumny or slanderous insinuation, he has the nerve to speak of de Man as an "academic Waldheim," practices dogmatic summary without the least hesitation, attributes to me, for example, the foundation of deconstruction even as he also describes me as attributing its paternity to the "progenitor" Heidegger, about whom it would have been shown that his "commitment to Nazism was much stronger than has previously been realized." Now draw your own conclusion. Having explained myself at length elsewhere, again recently but for a long time already, on all these questions (notably on what the deconstruction that interests me receives but also deconstructs of Heidegger, on Heidegger and Nazism, and so on), I can here only refer the interested reader to these numerous publications.

one must organize trials in the name of (singular) deconstruction! But rather that what I have practiced under that name has always seemed to me favorable, indeed destined (it is no doubt my principal motivation) to the analysis of the conditions of totalitarianism in all its forms, which cannot always be reduced to names of regimes. And this in order to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible, because it is not enough to untie a knot through analysis (there is more than one knot and the twisted structure of the knot remains very resistant) or to uproot what is finally, perhaps, only the terrifying desire for roots and common roots. One does not free oneself of it effectively at a single blow by easy adherences to the dominant consensus, or by proclamations of the sort I could, after all, give in to without any great risk, since it is what is called the objective truth: "As for me, you know, no one can suspect me of anything: I am Jewish, I was persecuted as a child during the war, I have always been known for my leftist opinions, I fight as best I can, for example against racism (for instance, in France or in the United States where they are still rampant, would anyone like to forget that?), against *apartheid* or for the recognition of the rights of Palestinians. I have gotten myself arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned by totalitarian police, not long ago, so I know how they ask and resolve questions, and so forth." No, such declarations are insufficient. There can still be, and in spite of them, residual adherences to the discourse one is claiming to combat. And deconstruction is, in particular, the tireless analysis (both theoretical and practical) of these adherences. Now, today, from what I have read in newspapers and heard in conversation, I would say that these adherences are more numerous and more serious on the part of those who accuse de Man than in the latter's books or teaching. And this leads me to complicate or to differentiate still more (I warned that it would be long and difficult) what I have said so far about the "rupture."

By saying several times and repeating it again that de Man had radically *broken* with his past of 1940–42, I intend clearly an activity, convictions, direct or indirect relations with everything that then determined the context of his articles. In sum, a deep and deliberate uprooting. But after this decisive rupture, even as he never ceased reflecting on and interpreting this past, notably through his work and a historico-political experience that was ongoing, he must have proceeded with other *ruptures*, *divergences*, *displacements*. My hypothesis is that there were many of them. And that, with every step, it was indirectly at least a question of wondering: how was this possible and how can one guard oneself against it? What is it, in the ideologies of the right or the left, in this or that concept of literature, of history or of politics, in a particular protocol of reading, or a particular rhetorical trap which still contains, beneath one figure or another, the possibility of this return? And it is the "same man" who did that for forty years. My hypothesis is that this trajectory is in principle readable in what de Man was, in what he said, taught, published in the

United States. The chain of consequences of these ruptures is even what is most interesting, in my view, in these texts, and whose lesson will be useful for everyone in the future, in particular for his enemies who would be well inspired to study it.

Those who would like to exploit the recent "revelations" against deconstruction (in the singular) ought to reflect on this fact. It is rather massive. "Deconstruction" took the forms in which it is now recognized more than twenty years after the war. Its relation to all its premises, notably Heideggerian premises, was from the start itself both critical and deconstructive, and has become so more and more. It was more than twenty years after the war that de Man discovered deconstruction. And when he began to talk about it, in the essays of *Blindness and Insight*, it was *first of all in a rather critical manner*, although complicated, as always. Many traits in this book show that the theoretical or ideologico-philosophical consequences of the "rupture" were not yet drawn out. I have tried to show elsewhere in *Mémoires*⁵¹ what happens in his work when the word "deconstruction" appears (very late) and when, in *Allegories of Reading*, he elaborates what remains his original relation to deconstruction. Is it really necessary to recall once again so many differences, and to point out that this singular relation, however interesting it may seem to me, is not exactly mine? That little matters here. But since it is repeated everywhere, and for a long time now, that de Man is not interested in history and in politics, we can better take the measure today of the inanity of this belief. I am thinking in particular of the irony with which he one day responded, on the question of "ideology" and "politics": "I don't think I ever was away from these problems, they were always uppermost in my mind."⁵² It is necessary to read the rest. Yes, they were "in [his] mind" and no doubt more than in the mind of those who, in the United States or in England, accused him of distraction in this regard. He had several reasons for that; experience had prepared him for it. He must have thought that well-tuned ears knew how to hear him, and that he did not even need to confide to anyone about the war in this regard. In fact, that is all he talked about. That is all he wrote about. At moments I say to myself: he supposed perhaps that I knew, if only from reading him, everything he never spoke to me about. And perhaps in effect I did know it in an obscure way. Today, thinking about him, about him himself, I say to myself two things, among others.

1. He must have lived this war, in himself, according to two temporalities or two histories that were at the same time disjoined and inextricably associated. On the one hand, youth and the years of Occupation

51. See Derrida, *Mémoires*, pp. 120 and *passim*.

52. Stefano Rosso, "An Interview with Paul de Man," *The Resistance to Theory*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 33 (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 121; rept. from *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 788-95.

appeared there as a sort of prehistoric prelude: more and more distant, derealized, abstract, foreign. The "real" history, the effective and fruitful history, was constituted slowly, laboriously, painfully after this rupture that was also a second birth. But, on the other hand and inversely, the "real" events (public and private), the grave, traumatic events, the effective and indelible history had already taken place, over there, during those terrible years. What happened next in America, for the one whom a French writer friend, he told me, had nicknamed in one of his texts "Hölderlin in America," would have been nothing more than a posthistoric afterlife, lighter, less serious, a day after with which one can play more easily, more ironically, without owing any explanations. These two lives, these two "histories" (prehistory and posthistory) are not totalizable. In that infinitely rapid oscillation he often spoke of in reference to irony and allegory, the one is as absolute, "absolved" as the other. Naturally these two nontotalizable dimensions are also equally true or illusory, equally aberrant, but the true and the false also do not go together. His "living present," as someone might put it, was the crossroads of these two incompatible and disjunctive temporalities, temporalities that nevertheless went together, articulated in history, in what was *his history*, the only one.

2. After the period of sadness and hurt, I believe that what has happened to us was doubly necessary. First as a fated happening: it had to happen one day or another and precisely because of the deserved and growing influence of a thinker who is fascinating enough that people always want to learn more—from him and about him. Second, it had to happen as a salutary ordeal. It will oblige all of us, some more than others, to reread, to understand better, to analyze the traps and the stakes—past, present, and especially future. Paul de Man's legacy is not poisoned, or in any case no more than the best legacies are if there is no such thing as a legacy without some venom. I think of our meeting, of the friendship and the confidence he showed me as a stroke of luck in my life. I am almost certain that the same is true for many, for those who can and will know how to make it known, and for many others, who perhaps do not even realize it or will never say so. I know that I am going to reread him and that there is still some future and promise that await us there. He will always interest me more than those who are in a hurry to judge, thinking they know, and who, with the naïve assurance of good or bad conscience, have concluded in advance. Because one has in effect concluded when one already thinks of staging a trial by distributing the roles: judge, prosecutor, defense lawyer, witnesses, and, waiting in the wings, the instruments of execution. As for the accused himself, he is dead. He is in ashes, he has neither the grounds, nor the means, still less the choice or the desire to respond. We are alone with ourselves. We carry his memory and his name in us. We especially carry ethico-political responsibilities for the future. Our actions with regard to what remains to us of de Man will also have the value of an example, whether we like

it or not. To judge, to condemn the work or the man on the basis of what was a brief episode, to call for closing, that is to say, at least figuratively, for censuring or burning his books is to reproduce the exterminating gesture which one accuses de Man of not having armed himself against sooner with the necessary vigilance. It is not even to draw a lesson that he, de Man, learned to draw from the war.

Having just reread my text, I imagine that for some it will seem I have tried, when all is said and done and despite all the protests or precautions, to protect, save, justify what does not deserve to be saved. I ask these readers, if they still have some concern for justice and rigor, to take the time to reread, as closely as possible.

The story I promised is more or less finished for the moment. As an epilogue, three more telephone calls, in December. The first is from Neil Hertz. He passes along the account of a certain Mr. Goriely, former Belgian resistant. He knew de Man well; they were friends during those dark years. Throughout the whole period of his clandestine activity, Mr. Goriely communicated in total confidence with de Man. He gives the same testimony to *Le Soir*, in an article dated 11 December 1987: according to this "university professor," de Man was "ideologically neither antisemitic nor even pro-Nazi . . . I have proof that de Man was not a fanatic from the fact that I saw him frequently during the war and he knew I was a clandestine, mixed up with the Resistance. I never feared a denunciation." The same professor has no memory of an antisemitic article, of that article that *Le Soir* claims it cannot find in its archives!⁵³ And he

53. I had already been intrigued by *Le Soir's* remark in the article of 3 Dec. (see n. 11) that it could not find in its archives what was perhaps a separately printed special issue, and by Mr. Goriely's claim to have no memory of such an article. The same surprise is marked by Charles Dosogne in his letter to Neil Hertz (see n. 45). Dosogne, who was the first director of the *Cahiers du Libre Examen* (whose contributors included "a certain number of Israelites"), recalls first of all that Paul de Man

found himself at twenty years old, with a young wife and a baby, without a university degree, during a period of governmental disorganization, all of which did not permit him to aspire to a paying job. All he had going for him was his vast culture and his great intelligence, which he was able to take advantage of by accepting what some connections of his proposed to him: an association with "Le Soir" and the "Vlaamse Land."

Then, drawing from the experience of his long friendship (1938–47), Charles Dosogne adds this:

I can confirm that never, neither before nor after the war, did Paul de Man's remarks or attitudes permit one to suspect an antisemitic opinion—which, let me say in passing, would have ended our relations. Racism was in fundamental contradiction with his profoundly human nature and the universal character of his mind. That is why I remain deeply skeptical concerning the remarks "with antisemitic resonances" cited by the *New York Times* that could be imputed to him. Is there not room to ask certain questions concerning a document that does not figure among "Le Soir" 's own collection, and, on the copy to be found at the Bibliothèque Albertine, is marked by three asterisks. Why??

adds: "What is more, I believe I know that our man also gave texts to a Resistance publication: *Les Voix du silence* [The voices of silence]!" Intrigued by this latter testimony and by the Malraux title, Werner Hamacher calls me and asks me to try to learn more from Georges Lambrichs, a Belgian writer who for a long time was the director of the new NRF for Gallimard, and who, while in the Resistance, would have had some part in this episode. De Man had told me they knew each other well. I call him. His response is very firm, without the least hesitation: "One must take into account the history and the authority of the uncle. Even though de Man did not belong to an organization of the Resistance, he was anything but a collaborator. Yes, he helped French Resistants publish and distribute in Belgium a journal that had been banned in France (with texts by Eluard, Aragon, and so forth). The title of the journal was not *Les Voix du silence* but *Exercice du silence*" (to be continued).

Although my ear is glued to the telephone, I am not sure I have heard him clearly. Lambrichs repeats: "*Exercice du silence.*"

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