More lurid figures

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MORE LURID FIGURES

Late in *Allegories of Reading*, towards the end of his chapter on the *Social Contract*, Paul de Man writes, "We have moved closer and closer to the 'definition' of *text*, the entity we are trying to circumscribe"[1], and many of his readers must lean closer to the page: here it comes!

We can think of other such points in works of criticism where analytic questioning is, for a moment, made to feel like a quest-narrative, the critic pausing to invite the reader to share a sense of mounting anticipation, of getting "closer and closer". There is Maurice Blanchot, on the opening page of *L'Espace littéraire*[2], gesturing at what he takes to be the region towards which his writing is moving, the pages on the gaze of Orpheus, on Orpheus' trip to the Underworld, his climb upward and then his turning to look back at Eurydice. Those pages have been frequently cited in recent years. Less familiar is an oddly apposite moment in William Empson's writing, another descent into Hell towards another woman. He is beginning his entry into the zone of maximum – that is, Type VII – ambiguity and has been discussing what Freud called the antithetical sense of primal words, citing Freud on how the primitive Egyptians use the same sign for "young" and "old"[3]. Now he catches

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1 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 268. Hereafter, references to this volume, designated as *AR*, will be given in the text. Other works of de Man's will be similarly referred to. They are: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983 (*BI*); *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984 (*RR*); and *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986 (*RT*).

2 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968 [1955], p. 5. Hereafter references to this work, abbreviated as *EL*, will appear in the text.

3 Empson goes on to cite Freud's claim that the Egyptians "only gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other", then comments: "When a primitive Egyptian saw a baby he

himself up, mock-apologetically, grants that all this talk about the Egyptians is "in some degree otiose" and writes:

> I have been searching the sources of the Nile less to explain English verse than to cast upon the reader something of the awe and horror which were felt by Dante arriving finally at the most centrique part of earth, of Satan, and of hell.
>
> Quando noi fummo là, dove la coscia
> Si volge appunto in sul grosso dell'anche,
> Lo Duca con fatica e con angoscia
> Volse la testa ov'egli avea le zanche[4].

Empson leaves untranslated these lines from the last canto of *Inferno*: "When we were where the thigh turns, just on the swelling of the haunch, the Leader with labour and strain brought round his head where his legs had been."[5] Drawing out the analogy, Empson then adds cheerfully: "We too must now stand upon our heads, and are approaching the secret places of the Muse" (*7T*, p. 196).

No one sounds less like Blanchot than Empson, but the two passages are thematically comparable. It is common, in end-of-the-line texts[6] of this sort, for movement towards one's goal to be allegorized in terms of the pull of desire, the fear of the law. So Blanchot can write, "Regarder Eurydice, sans souci du chant, dans l'impatience et l'imprudence du désir qui oublie la loi, c'est cela même, *l'inspiration*" (*EL*, p. 231), and Empson can, still more insouciantly, superimpose "the secret places of the Muse" on the shaggy loins of the character Dante calls "the Emperor

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at once thought of an old man, and he had to learn not to do this as his language became more civilised. This certainly shows the process of attaching a word to an object as something extraordinary; nobody would do it if his language did not make him [...]" (*7T*, p. 194). The passage, for all its throwaway quality, is worth comparing with de Man's linking of the "advent of theory" in literary studies to the "introduction of a linguistic terminology ... that considers reference as a function of language and not necessarily as an intuition" (*RT*, p. 8).

4 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, New York, New Directions, 1966 [1930], p. 196. Hereafter referred to, in text, as *7T*.

5 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, I: Inferno*, with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961 [1939], p. 425 [Canto xxxiv, lines 76-79].

6 On the movement of a text towards "the end of the line" see Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, rev. ed., New York, Vintage Books, 1957 [1941], pp. 56-75, and my own discussion of such scenarios in the "Afterword" to *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 217-39.

of the dolorous realm". But what of that moment in *Allegories of Reading:* can a similar figuration be read there as well?

At first glance, it would seem not: the pages we are concerned with (*AR*, pp. 266-70) move back and forth between lengthy citations of the *Social Contract* and careful interpretive paraphrase. The argumentation is compact, the diction a combination of Rousseau's own and de Man's conceptualized linguistic vocabulary. What governs the movement of these paragraphs is not a quest-narrative but the elaboration of an analogy between law and grammar with respect to the categories of the general and the particular. De Man begins with Rousseau's statement that "there can be no fundamental Law that is binding for the entire body of the people" and glosses this as implying that "the meaning of the contractual text has to remain suspended and undecidable" (*AR*, p. 266). He then notes Rousseau's insistence on the separation of the particular members of the body of the state from the state as a whole, noting the paradox that "to the extent that he is particular, *any* individual is, as individual, alientated from a law that, on the other hand, exists only in relation to his individual being" (*AR*, p. 267). This is paraphrastic, dry and demonstrative. But what de Man concludes from this passage of argument is put more intriguingly:

> From the point of view of the legal text, it is this generality which ruthlessly rejects any particularization, which allows for the possibility of its coming into being. Within the textual model, particularization corresponds to reference, since reference is the application of an undetermined, general potential for meaning to a specific unit. The indifference of the text with regard to its referential meaning is what allows the legal text to proliferate, exactly as the preordained, coded repetition of a specific gesture or set of gestures allows Helen to weave the story of the war into the epic. (*AR*, p. 268)

I will take up the allusion to Helen shortly. For the moment I would note that nothing in Rousseau – or in de Man's earlier argument – would seem to require that the legal text here be characterized, anthropomorphically, as "ruthless" or "indifferent". One effect of this diction, however, is to link a discussion of the law with de Man's later consideration of excuses in the final chapter of *Allegories of Reading*. There Rousseau's claim that his lie about Marion was unintentional, an *effet machinal* of his timidity, leads de Man to note that the excuse is both fiction and machine, referentially detached implacable in its repetition of a preordained pattern, comparable in this respect to Kleist's marionettes, "capable of taking on

any structure whatever, yet entirely ruthless in its inability to modify its own structural design for nonstructural reasons" (*AR*, p. 294). That de Man had the later discussion in mind while he was working on the *Social Contract* is clear from another reference to Rousseau's lie in the pages we're considering: "as we know from the *Confessions*", de Man writes, "we never lie as much as when we want to do full justice to ourselves, especially in self-accusation" (*AR*, pp. 269-270). In both chapters of *Allegories of Reading* and elsewhere – *passim* – de Man's language personifies the agency of the text, but personifies it as impersonal, often fiercely so.

But to return to Helen: where did she come from? what is she doing *dans cette galère*? Like Rousseau's lying excuse, de Man associates her with both fiction and machine. Years earlier, in "Criticism and Crisis", he had written:

> All literatures, including the literature of Greece, have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction; in the *Iliad*, when we first encounter Helen, it is as the emblem of the narrator weaving the actual war into the tapestry of a fictional object. Her beauty prefigures the beauty of all future narratives as entities that point to their own fictional nature. (*BI*, p. 17)

There Helen served as a figure in a *mise en abîme*, hovering somewhere between standing in for the narrator and standing in for the aesthetic object. In the later text she figures less as an emblem of the narrator than as the locus of a set of gestures, her own agency enabled by, but also submitted to the imperious control of the text. But I am flattening out what is in fact a more interesting formulation in de Man: the analogy his sentence insists on is between "the legal text" and "Helen" – the ruthless indifference of the one rubs off on the other, and we are reminded that Helen is at once the accomplished artist of the beautiful, the weaver passively rehearsing the weavers' code, and the woman whose beauty initiated the Trojan War and "brought death to so many brave men".

That last quotation is not from the Man, but from what I would speculate was de Man's source for this allusion to Helen, a remarkable paragraph in Empson which I shall cite, in the interests of thickening up the texture, and raising the stakes, of this discussion.

We know that when de Man read *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in the 1950s he found its first and seventh chapters particularly compelling. Appended to the first chapter is an "Annex on Dramatic Irony" illustrative of what Empson calls "a sort of dramatic ambiguity of judgement

which does not consider the characters so much as the audience" (*7T*, p. 43). In this case the characters are Portia and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* – Empson is writing of the scene of the three caskets – and his point is that the song Portia sings while Bassanio is deciding which casket to choose ("Tell me where is fancy bred ...") hints in its rhymes at the proper choice without exactly suggesting that Portia is intentionally tipping him off. The scene allows us to entertain some doubt as to Portia's honesty, but leaves the question unresolved. Empson goes on:

> Irony in this subdued sense, as a generous scepticism which can believe at once that people are and are not guilty, is a very normal and essential method; Portia's song is not more inconsistent than the sorrow of Helen that she has brought death to so many brave men, and the pride with which she is first found making tapestries of them; than the courage of Achilles, which none will question, 'in his impregnable armour with his invulnerable skin underneath it'; than the sleepers at Gethsemane, who, St. Luke says, were sleeping for sorrow; than the way Thésée (in Racine), by the use of a deity, at once kills and does not kill Hippolyte. This sort of contradiction is at once understood in literature, because the process of understanding one's friends must always be riddled with such indecisions and the machinery of such hypocrisy; people, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind. (*7T*, p. 44)

I set down this paragraph in part as a contribution to the recent polemic about Paul de Man's behavior during the war, about which I shall have more to say later in this paper. One could wish that Empson's "generous scepticism which can believe at once that people are and are not guilty" were as widespread as he generously believed it to be. But I also imagine that, coming upon this soon after the war, de Man may very well have been struck – both entertained and gratified – by the matter-of-fact shrewdness with which Empson could take up loaded questions of innocence and guilt. That those questions were on de Man's mind as well, and remained there as questions to be taken seriously, nobody who has read *Allegories of Reading* can doubt.

But my more immediate reason for citing *Seven Types* is to suggest that the way in which Empson links the image of Helen weaving to the thematics of indecision, machinery and guilt may account for the allusion's surfacing where it does in de Man's essay, in the middle of a consideration of machinery, guilt and indecision – what de Man calls undecidability and figures as suspension. Helen, he says, is like the legal text,

and that text, as we noted before, "has to remain suspended and undecidable" (*AR*, p. 266). The paragraph that begins "We have moved closer and closer to the 'definition' of *text* ..." concludes in this way:

> But just as no text is conceivable without grammar, no grammar is conceivable without the suspension of referential meaning. Just as no law can ever be written unless one suspends any consideration of applicability to a particular entity including, of course, oneself, grammatical logic can function only if its referential consequences are disregarded.
>
> On the other hand [the next paragraph begins], no law is a law unless it also applies to particular individuals. It cannot be left hanging in the air, in the abstraction of its generality. (*AR*, p. 269)

That final image, of the law "left hanging in the air", coming as it does just after the repetition "suspension", "suspends", could have been included in the essay called "Lurid Figures"[7], where I commented on the recurrence in de Man's writings of what I took as a kind of idiosyncratic punning, in which certain terms he relies on conceptually – words like "suspension" and "disfiguration" – often turn up in proximity to images of hanging or of physical defacement or mutilation, producing an odd but characteristic pathos. I labelled it the "pathos of uncertain agency", and, since I need to say more about that notion, and cannot assume a reader's familiarity with the earlier essay, I shall briefly rehearse some of its claims here.

I tried to show that lurid figuration in de Man was not willful or gratuitous but a necessary by-product of his theoretical concerns, a function of his attempt to dwell, speculatively, on what he called a "permanent disjunction" (*RT*, p. 92) in language, the "radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text" (*AR*, p. 298). I cited what was already a much-cited pronouncement of his – "No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words" (*RR*, p. 122) – setting it alongside some bizarre writing of his own that seemed to me to qualify as sufficiently mad to illustrate his point. The idea that the particular pathos in de Man's text was linked to a sense of uncertain agency I derived at first from a reading of a paragraph in his essay on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", which I shall set down again here:

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7 In Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (eds.), *Reading de Man Reading*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 82-104 (Hereafter referred to as *RDR*).

> All these activities – critical philosophy, literary theory, history – resemble each other in the fact that they do not resemble that from which they derive. But they are all intralinguistic: they relate to what in the original belongs to language, and not to meaning as an extralinguistic correlate susceptible of paraphrase or imitation. They disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated. They reveal that their failure, which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an essential failure, an essential disarticulation which was already there in the original. They kill the original by discovering that the original was already dead. (*RT*, p. 84)

What's noticeable here is that a familiar deconstructive turn – the claim that the activity of disarticulation is discovered to have always already taken place – is given an unfamiliar twist: the construal of disarticulation as murder and murder as, paradoxically, "discovering that the original was already dead". This, it seemed to me, adds, if only fleetingly, a pathos of uncertain agency. The prose conjures up a subject – "perhaps a killer, perhaps only the discoverer of the corpse – who can serve as a locus of vacillation: did I do it? or had it already been done?" and thus introduces another version of undecidability (or suspension), this time between judgements of a subject's passivity or activity, innocence or guilt (*RDR*, p. 86).

It may be worth recalling that in the pages we are considering, pages en route to a definition of "text", the ruthless or indifferent activity of the law – or the text – is set over against a counter-force, a form of covert or subversive agency attributed, in the legal model, to the individual and in the textual model to the referent. De Man notes that "the logic of grammar generates texts only in the absence of referential meaning, but every text generates a referent that subverts the grammatical principle to which it owed its constitution". Similarly, glossing Rousseau's argument that "all citizens constantly desire the well-being of each [because] no one exists who does not secretly appropriate the term *each* and think of himself when he votes for all", de Man characterizes this as an "act of deceit", a theft which "steal[s] from the text the very meaning to which [...] we are not entitled, the particular *I* which destroys its generality"; and it is at this point that he links this discussion to the *Confessions*, to the motifs of guilt, lying and self-accusation (*AR*, p. 269). The basis for that link should now be clearer: it is in the traces, in the language of this page of argumentation, of the figure of an undecidably guilty subject and/or referent who can be imaged as facing off in specular fashion with a power-

ful but vulnerable (that is, flawed, disarticulated, already dead) law and/or text.

This section of "Promises (*Social Contract*)" concludes with the promised "definition" of text as an "entity" that must be considered from a double perspective: from the perspective of grammar it is a "generative, open-ended, non-referential" system; from the perspective of figure it is "closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence" (*AR*, p. 270). We can see that half the chapter's title refers to the grammatical system, to the structure of promising, the other half to the particular "allegorical narrative of [the text's] impossibility", the paradoxes of contractual society that de Man has teased out of Rousseau. The indirection of allegory was necessary, de Man had argued, because "what remains hidden in the everyday use of language, the fundamental incompatibility of grammar and meaning, becomes explicit when the linguistic structures are stated, as is the case here, in political terms" (*AR*, p. 269).

In "Lurid Figures" I tried to demonstrate that yet another narrative could be read out of de Man's writings about textuality, one that had been suggested to me by a biographical anecdote, the story of de Man's mother's death. Because I had been told this story in confidence the anecdote does not appear in "Lurid Figures"; however, one result of the recent interest in Paul de Man's youth has been the publication of the story, or a version of it, so I feel free to discuss it here. The story, as a university friend of de Man's, Edouard Colinet, tells it, goes like this:

> Paul's father, Robert (Bob) de Man, was a businessman, manufacturing and selling medical instruments and x-ray equipment in Antwerp. Paul's elder brother died in an accident and, after that, his mother committed suicide: Paul had the bad luck of being the first to find her hanged – he was about 15 years old at the time. Paul's father was so disturbed by these two violent deaths that for a time Paul had to be taken care of by his uncle Henri[8].

I would stress the fact that this is an anecdote, one account of how something may have taken place; there are other versions. According to Paul de Man's cousin Jan – Henri's son – it was Robert who found his wife's body, and it was not the case that Paul "had to be taken care of by his uncle". That never happened, says Jan de Man: Paul was seventeen,

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8 Edouard Colinet, "Paul de Man and the Cercle du Libre Examen", *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, edited by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1989, p. 427.

not fifteen, at the time and didn't need taking care of[9]. Jan de Man has the dates right, that much can be confirmed: the elder brother was killed June 20, 1936, when Paul was 16; his mother hung herself exactly a year later. But as to who found her body, all that can be said is that the story Paul de Man told Edouard Colinet and some other Belgian friends is the same story he told, in later years, to various members of his family.

What he chose to tell provides the germ for what I find obliquely inscribed at various points in his writings – a tableau of uncertain agency, of someone confronting a suspended body, himself suspended between feelings of matricidal guilt and of the intensified innocence of the bereft, immobilized in the act of having "kill[ed] the original by discovering that the original was already dead". Its appearance in de Man's texts may be read as another example of end-of-the-line figuration, to be contrasted with the passages from Blanchot and Empson with which we began. As each of these theorists approaches an elusive center – named variously as *text* (de Man), as the articulation of *l'oeuvre* and *l'ombre* (Blanchot), or as "the most complicated and deeply-rooted notion of the human mind" (Empson) – they find themselves spinning gendered allegories of law and desire. In this passage of Blanchot's the object of desire and the law that forbids its realization seem distinct: Orpheus, in the impatience and imprudence of his desire to look at Eurydice, must forget the law, we are told (*EL*, p. 231). In Empson, things are less clear-cut: Satan and the Muse don't occupy the same imaginary space, but rather are juxtaposed metonymically, seemingly at the critic's whim. More remarkably, at the equivalent point in de Man's text, the law – at once ruthless and vulnerable to subversion – is impossible to differentiate from the object of ambivalent desire: the law is like a hanging woman. The structure is not triangular and static but specular and unstable, and, precisely because of that instability, it is available to figure the textual operations that de Man will follow in one essay after another[10].

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9 Letter from Jan H. de Man, June 27, 1988.

10 Compare de Man's account, in "Lyric and Modernity" (1969) of the non-filial (or, at least, non-Oedipal) relation of Mallarmé to his predecessor Baudelaire: "The truly allegorical, later Baudelaire of the *Petits Poèmes en Prose* never stopped haunting Mallarmé, though he may have tried to exorcize his presence. Here was, in fact, the example of a poetry that came close to being no longer representational but that remained for him entirely enigmatic. The darkness of this hidden center obscures later allusions to Baudelaire, including the *Tombeau* poem devoted to the author of the *Fleurs du Mal*. Far from being an older kinsman who sent him on his way, Baude-

I am proposing that Paul de Man's writing bears the traces of a particular, thoroughly contingent event in his life, but the form those traces take is bound to be overdetermined. The figure of the hanging woman has a long history that pre-dates de Man's encounter with it in 1937; indeed, we can be sure that de Man's own relation to that figure must predate its actualization for him at the time of his mother's death. For the figure recurs in fantasies of matricide and abjection that inform texts from classical times to our own[11]. If we would speculate that de Man's

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laire, or, at least, the most significant aspect of Baudelaire, was for him a dark zone into which he could never penetrate" (*BI*, p. 184). In Mallarmé's "Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire" that "dark zone" is named "un immortel pubis". De Man is engaged in contesting the appropriateness of thinking in terms of genealogical lines of descent, whether of critics of modern lyric (e.g., Otto Friedrich as "father" of Hans-Robert Jauss, who, in turn, "fathered" Karl-Heinz Stierle) or of poets (e.g., Baudelaire as "father" of Mallarmé and "grandfather" of the surrealists). Here representational poetry is aligned with genealogy and a reassuring, if conflictual, pattern of Oedipal lineage, the "truly allegorical" with "a dark zone into which [one] could never penetrate": a figure that blurs differences – of position and of gender, of figures of law and desire – much as does the passage in *AR*, or Empson's evocation of Satan at the "most centrique part of earth" which is somehow also the site of "the secret places of the Muse".

11 On the particular association of death by hanging – and of other forms of suspension – with women in classical texts, see Eva Cantarella, "Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece" in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.) *The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives, poetics today*, 6(1985), pp. 91-101. Cantarella cites among other sources the work of Nicole Loraux: "Le corps étranglé" in *Actes de la Table Ronde: "Du châtiment dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peines de mort dans le monde antique"*, Rome, Ecole Française de Rome, 1984, pp. 195-214, and *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme*, Paris, Hachette, 1985.
Marc Redfield has pointed out to me an intriguing modern instance in *Great Expectations*, where the reiteration of the word "figure" loads a macabre scene with a further, rhetorical burden. In Chapter 8 Pip wanders into an abandoned brewery on Miss Havisham's property, sees Estella in the distance, then suffers this hallucinatory moment:
"It was in this place, and at this moment, that a strange thing happened to my fancy. I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a stranger thing long afterwards. I turned my eyes – a little dimmed by looking up at the frosty light – towards a great wooden beam in a low nook of the building near me on my right hand, and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; and it hung so, that I could see that the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me. In the terror of seeing the figure, and in the terror of being certain that it had not been there a moment before, I at first ran from it, and then ran towards it. And my terror was greatest of all

witnessing an externalized version of one such fantasy was traumatic, we must also add that such a witnessing would necessarily place him in a different relation to the contents of the fantasy, a relation we can know nothing about but which need not have been merely disabling[12].

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when I found no figure there." (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations,* New York, Harper Bros., 1961 [1861], p. 77.) Dickens will have Pip recall this moment twice later in the novel, each time in connection with his unsuccessful attempts to grasp the secret of Estella's face: whom does she remind him of? That the answer turns out to be Magwitch, Estella's literal and Pip's figurative father, complicates the bearing of the hallucination: a dimly discerned admonitory man's face is superimposed on the vision of a hanging woman, the law blurred into the lineaments of the ghastly bride of desire, and all under the sign of resemblance and figuration.

The writings of Thomas Hardy display the interrelation of suspension and disfiguration in similarly remarkable ways. The quasi-hallucinatory memory of a hanging woman – a murderess whose execution Hardy had witnessed as an adolescent – is disseminated throughout his fiction, sometimes in elaborate scenes, sometimes in brief descriptive figures, often in conjunction with the motif of a mask or a close-clinging garment that conceals/reveals the outlines of a person's face or figure. The surfacing of this material invariably signals a reflection on the relations of narrator and character, author and text. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick drew my attention to the fullest account of the biographical anecdote, in Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy,* Boston and Toronto, Little Brown, 1975, pp. 32ff.

De Man has written of the appearance of the word "hangs" in Wordsworth's texts, characterizing it as "*the* exemplary metaphor for metaphor, for figuration in general" (*RR,* p. 89), and in "Lurid Figures" I discussed the ways that word gets caught up in gendered scenarios of specular encounter (*RDR,* pp. 95-102). That discussion is amplified in the last pages of this essay.

12 De Man's disputing the primacy of psychoanalytically based theories of motivation – most explicitly in "Excuses (*Confession*)" (*AR,* pp. 278-301), but also in his earlier discussion of Yeats (*RR,* p. 231; cf. *RDR,* p. 89) – should make one cautious about bringing terms like "fantasy" and "trauma" to bear on his writings. But his point was never the irrelevance of psychoanalysis, merely (*et encore*!) the difficulty of its articulation with a theory of textuality like his own. Hence one finds him insisting, for example, that "the moment of dispossession", the moment when a writer loses control of his text, "from the point of view of the subject [...] can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (*AR,* p. 296) and one would like to hear him develop more fully the implications of that "can only": what necessity, other than textual, is he granting to the fantasy of castration?

With respect to the pervasiveness of fantasies of matricide, the pertinent psychoanalytic writings are those developing the insights of Melanie Klein, and developing them with an alertness to the implication of subjectivity in language. I have found suggestive formulations in Nicolas Abraham's work on introjection and incorporation and in Julia Kristeva's discussions of abjection. Here, for example, is Abraham on the origins of the sense of guilt: "Coupable sera donc celui qui n'a pas échappé à la duplicité, qui se sert du langage. [...] Il s'agira de considérer l'origine de la dupli-

If one is persuaded that there is this strand of figuration in de Man's writings there still remains the question of what can be made of it. Can it be shown to function in ways that invalidate the general bearings of de Man's work or, alternatively, can it serve to deconstruct his more abstract theoretical arguments? Here the model would be de Man's remarks on *The Birth of Tragedy*:

> [T]he deconstruction does not occur between statements, as in a logical refutation or a dialectic, but happens instead between, on the one hand, metalinguistic statements about the rhetorical nature of language and, on the other hand, a rhetorical praxis that puts these statements into question. (*AR*, p. 98)

Are we dealing with such a rhetorical praxis here? De Man would say we are not, and offer another name for what we are pursuing: he would call it an obsession and he would have no trouble accommodating it to his

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cité et du langage. Or nous savons que ce qui rend la duplicité inéluctable c'est la rupture de la symbiose qui lie d'abord l'enfant à la mère. A l'opposé de toute autre théorie, je tiens pour acquis que cette rupture n'est ni un fait d'abandon, de frustration, de scansion, ou de sevrage, mais le résultat naturel d'un processus d'introjection c'est-à-dire d'intériorisation de la relation d'abord innocente à la mère. Le résultat de cette introjection est le dédoublement du pôle objet de la relation innocente en objet interne et objet externe. C'est ainsi précisément qu'advient la duplicité et son acolyte le langage. La culpabilité première se trouve ainsi inscrite dans l'étape la plus archaïque de la constitution du Moi. [...] Le fantasme du 'crime' ne serait alors rien d'autre qu'une rationalisation rétrospective de la culpabilité inhérente à l'acte même de l'introjection." ("Le 'crime' de l'introjection" in *L'Ecorce et le noyau*, Paris, Aubier-Flammarion, 1978, p. 126). I would set this passage on the guilt that language necessarily imposes on the subject alongside the lines (discussed below) with which the Man closes his essay on Rilke, lines in which a sense of primal duplicity is projected onto an encountered face: "Masque? Non. Tu es plus plein,/ mensonge, tu as des yeux sonores" (*AR*, p. 56). A passage from Kristeva on the constitution of phobic objects describes the hallucinatory transformation of that face: "[O]n est en droit de supposer que *toute* activité de verbalisation, qu'elle nomme ou non un objet phobique ayant trait à l'oralité, est une tentative d'introjecter les incorporats. En ce sens, la verbalisation est depuis toujours confrontée à cet 'ab-ject' qu'est l'objet phobique. L'apprentissage du langage se fait comme une tentative de faire sien un 'objet' oral qui se dérobe, et dont l'hallucination forcément déformée nous menace du dehors." (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, p. 52). It should be stressed that neither Abraham nor Kristeva is seeking to describe unusual or pathological states; on the contrary, they are offering hypothetical accounts of the routine violence of the speaking subject's entry into language. Abraham's "crime", Kristeva's menacing "ab-ject" are components of what, to borrow a phrase of Santayana's, might be called "normal madness", what de Man called "the madness of words".

understanding of how texts work. He knows about obsessions, his own and other people's, and can be wrily witty on the subject, as in these remarks about Michael Riffaterre:

> It would be all too facile to point to the psychological implications of Riffaterre's model, in which the mathematical as well as the maternal implications of the "matrix" are obvious, or of his literary examples, with their obsessional stress on death, on sarcophagi, on a not altogether simple sexuality, on hallucination and on obsession itself. If morbidity happens to be one's measure of theoretical audacity, Riffaterre is second to none. (*RT*, p. 40)

De Man's reader, picking up the allusion to the maternal, noting de Man's own interest in "death...sarcophagi...obsession itself" might be tempted to read this as veiled autobiography, but that would not dismay de Man. He could acknowledge writing of this sort as telling – telling of his own obsessions – and still insist that obsession-in-general plays only a secondary and derivative role in the motivation of texts[13]. Obsessional concerns will find expression in what I have been calling lurid figures, and the covert narratives of violence or eroticism these imply are, de Man has argued, "defensive motion[s] of the understanding", ways of imposing intelligibility on otherwise baffling operations of language.

That is the burden of the last pages of "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric", where de Man reads the relationship between Baudelaire's sonnets "Correspondances" and "Obsession" as the "construction and undoing of the mirror-like structure that is always involved in a reading" (*RR*, p. 252). After the symmetries between the two have been established, de Man goes on to demonstrate the several ways "Obsession" translates "Correspondances" into "psychological and therefore intelligible" equivalents for elements in the more enigmatic poem. Although he had begun his reading by warning that to arrange the two sonnets "into a valorized qualitative hierarchy" would be "more convenient than it is legitimate" (*AR*, p. 254), he will nevertheless insist that the more "perfectly and quickly" understood "Obsession" is the less

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13 See the Foreword to the Revised, Second Edition of *BI*: "I am not given to retrospective self-examination and mercifully forget what I have written with the same alacrity I forget bad movies – although, as with bad movies, certain scenes or phrases return at times to embarrass or haunt me like a guilty conscience. When one imagines to have felt the exhilaration of renewal, one is certainly the last to know whether such a change actually took place or whether one is just restating, in a slightly different mode, earlier and unresolved obsessions." (*BI*, p. xii)

commanding text. Even if, contrary to fact, it had been written first, it could not be taken as either the origin or the cause of "Correspondances". "'Correspondances' implies and explains 'Obsession' [he goes on] but 'Obsession' leaves 'Correspondances' as thoroughly incomprehensible as it always was." What emerges from these pages is that obsession (in Baudelaire's poem and in general) will always operate as a "defensive motion of the understanding" – like figuration, it is a mode of intelligibility. De Man concludes:

> Whenever we encounter a text such as "Obsession" – that is, whenever we read – there always is an infra-text, a hypogram like "Correspondances" underneath. (*RR*, 262)

If the specular figures we have been noting are thus obsessive, if, following de Man, we can not hope to find in them the source or origin of the more difficult turns of his text, how then might they function? Perhaps as signs of a defensive wish for just such a source and origin, the confirmation of self (purchased at whatever cost) that a traumatic recollection could provide? De Man would seem to imply something of the sort in the last chapter of *Allegories of Reading* when he considers the threat that a writer may lose control of his text, a threat that contains within it the possibility of "the radical annihilation of the metaphor of selfhood and the will" (*AR*, p. 296):

> This more than warrants the anxiety with which Rousseau acknowledges the lethal quality of all writing. Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration.

But in the pages that follow an interesting complication is developed, one I was unable to take account of in "Lurid Figures" but which bears on our earlier discussion. The threat just described is not, it seems, the most threatening of threats, for it remains tied, de Man argues, to the metaphor of text as body. He will then go on to treat of the "more directly threatening alternative of the text as machine" (*AR*, p. 297). Recalling the moments in the *Fourth Rêverie* that conjure up a dangerous machine, he adds:

> The threatening element in these incidents then becomes more apparent. The text as body, with all its implications of substitutive tropes ultimately always retraceable to metaphor, is displaced by the text as machine and, in the process, it suffers the loss of the illusion of meaning. The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar. This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss of something that once was present and that it once possessed [that is, the threat is not one of castration or beheading – NH], but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text. (*AR*, 298)

In "Lurid Figures" I had simply conflated these two accounts, and, glossing what I took to be a "moment of madness", had cited both of them as well as a third, similar formulation of de Man's:

> [F]iguration turns hallucinatory [I wrote] in an attempt to render intelligible what, according to de Man, cannot be rendered intelligible, the "radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text" [*AR*, p. 298]. Or again in the language of *Allegories of Reading*, it is the moment in which "the writer severs himself from the intelligibility of his own text," one that "has to be thematized as a sacrifice" [*AR*, p. 205-207], or that, "from the point of view of the subject ... can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" [*AR*, p. 296]. (*RDR*, pp. 99-100)

But it now seems clear that only two of these citations – the last two – describe the same moment, a moment that is figured as sacrifice or castration, and that these in turn are meant to be contrasted with a more dangerous moment, that of the radical estrangement of meaning and performance. If that's so, how are we now to read the passage on the *Social Contract* with which we began? With its allusions to the "fundamental incompatibility of grammar and meaning", to the "impersonal, machine-like systematicity" of the *Social Contract* (*AR*, p. 268), it asks to be read as a figuring of the text as a motiveless machine. Yet threaded through these pages, I would argue, in the allusions to the social body and its members, in the specular struggle between a quasi-personified ruthless generality and a deceitful, thieving particular *I*, and in the images of the hanging text or law, is just the sort of figuration de Man associates with text-as-body. Could the more lurid figures – because lurid and because figural – mark a defensive motion of understanding? would the simultaneous conjuring up of text-as-body shelter the subject from the more threatening aspects of text-as-machine? That would be like saying one finds the sonnet "Obsession" threaded through "Correspondances"; and

indeed that is one way of reading de Man's pages on those poems. Or it would be like saying that the appearance of Helen in the text – her beauty, her equivocally active and passive relation to the motions of weaving – similarly conflates the object of desire and the law so as to veil the threat to meaning in luridly attractive metaphoricity. It may be possible to proffer a theoretical distinction between these two metaphors for text, body and machine, but it may not be possible to write of the text-as-machine without drawing on the idiom of text-as-body, that is, without calling upon lurid figures.

It may seem that the only interest of the appearance of these figures in de Man's writings lies in the ways they might serve as clues to the unfolding of a drama of engagement and defense – engagement with problems of textuality and defense against the risks attendant on such thought. But obsessions may serve as promoters of thought as well, and I think that can be demonstrated by looking at pages de Man devoted to two thematically related poems, one by Rilke ("Quai du Rosaire" [*AR*, pp. 4-43]) the other by Hugo ("Ecrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande" [*RT*, pp. 45-51]). Both concern the motif of a Flemish carillon, the "Glockenspiel, das in den Himmeln hängt", in Rilke's plangent final line, and de Man will refer to the Rilke poem, nine years later, in "Hypogram and Inscription", where he offers a reading of the Hugo poem to give focus to his critique of Riffaterre's semiotics.

De Man turns to "Quai du Rosaire" in the course of a discussion of figuration in Rilke, and concludes his brief account of it by locating the poem's "true interest" not in its "thematic statements" but rather in "the intricacy and wealth of movements triggered by the original chiasmus". One can acknowledge this and still note that the thematic statements, which de Man does not ignore, are loaded ones for him. Or rather, that de Man's paraphrase and selective citation of the poem loads it with a secondary, lurid interest that is neither dissimulated nor fully confronted. The poem, written in German, is a description of the city called Brugge in Flemish, but by referring to the francophone Flemish poet Georges Rodenbach, de Man can name the city in French, not once but three times in the space of two pages, as "Bruges la morte". It is as if the sound of that feminine ending – *la morte* – were particularly compelling, set as it is in an interpretation that dwells on "the seductive but funereal image of a temporal annihilation which is enjoyed as if it were a sensuous pleasure, 'der Süssen Traube/ des Glockenspiels', which actually is

the death knell that reduced the city to a ghostly memory"[14]. De Man will locate the poem's thematic appeal in its combining "the audacity of a

14 References in de Man's texts to authors other than the ones he is directly concerned with are rare enough to prompt some curiosity when they occur. In this case there is an immediate warrant for the allusion: as de Man points out in a footnote (*AR*, p. 42, n. 22), Rilke was familiar with Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-morte*. Indeed, turning to the novel, one finds that much of its action takes place in a house on the Quai du Rosaire. There are other resonances of Rodenbach in de Man's work, however, that are not mediated by Rilke, but seem rather to have been effects of Rodenbach's importance as a cultural touchstone, especially for francophone Flemish readers. As a participant in the literary revival associated with the review *La Jeune Belgique* in the 1880s, then as a Belgian Symbolist poet and novelist living in Paris and associated with Mallarmé, Rodenbach represented the possibility of high art that was at once cosmopolitan in its modernity and rooted in the particularities of Flemish history and geography. De Man's articles in *Le Soir* testify to his own youthful investment in this ideal.

But there are still other ways in which Rodenbach's writings reverberate in de Man's texts, particularly, but not exclusively, in his discussions of "Quai du Rosaire" and "Ecrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande". Rodenbach's novels *Bruges-la-morte* (1892) and *Le Carillonneur* (1897) play out fin-de-siècle dramas that link the sound of Bruges's churchbells and a sense of a city poised between the powerful memory of its medieval prestige and the possibility of its modern revival to narratives of erotic madness and death. The later novel ends with its hero climbing the town's main belltower to hang himself within the largest of the bells: "Et il entra dans la cloche comme la flamme dans l'éteignoir" (*Le Carillonneur*, Paris, Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1913 [1897], p. 325). In *Bruges-la-morte* (Paris, Flammarion, 1904 [1892]) a widower settles in Bruges precisely because the city was, like the wife, dead, and he was haunted by "un sentiment inné des analogies désirables" (p. 94). He falls in love with a woman he takes for his dead wife's double, then, increasingly tormented by the differences between them, ends by strangling her with the long tress of his wife's hair he had saved as a relic: "Les deux femmes s'étaient identifiées en une seule. Si ressemblantes dans la vie, plus ressemblantes dans la mort, ... il ne les distingua plus l'une de l'autre – unique visage de son amour" (pp. 271-72). A mourner/murderer, haunted by what Rodenbach names explicitly as "le démon de l'Analogie" (p. 64). The lurid thematics and uncanny coincidences in each novel are in the service of a very canny and controlled exploration of the nature of resemblance.

One last "resemblance" is worth citing here, as further possible evidence of the hold of Rodenbach's imagery on de Man's imagination. In "Lurid Figures" (*RDR*, p. 92), I quoted de Man's reading, in "Shelley Disfigured", of the disappearance of the "shape all light" in *The Triumph of Life*: "There is no doubt that, when we again meet the shape (11. 425ff.) it is no longer gliding along the river but drowned, Ophelia-like, below the surface of the water" (*RR*, p. 111), and I noted that there were no signs of a drowning in Shelley's lines. Nor is there any allusion to Ophelia, and it is a puzzle how she made her way into de Man's text. One possibility is that she had migrated from *Bruges-la-morte*, where she figures in a hallucinatory moment, as the widower

paradox with a promise of beauty or even, in the image of the grapes, of sensuous gratification on the far side of the grave", then, in a characteristic gesture, draw back from the seductions of his own paraphrase: "Yet the true interest of the poem does not stem from these thematic statements ...". What is missing from de Man's critical account is any thematization of the reader-critic's own fascination. In the terms he would later adopt, de Man refuses to "give a face" to the suspended carillon[15]; hence he can find no way of inscribing his own face in this text, as he will in the later essay, with the help of Hugo's remarkable image of the mind as "l'esprit, ce veilleur fait d'oreilles et d'yeux" (*RT*, p. 49).

But the need for just such an inscription is signalled further along in the Rilke essay, in its concluding paragraphs. There, after commenting on the way in which certain of Rilke's poems represent a "renunciation of the euphonic seductions of language", a "denunciation of the ultimate figure, the phonocentric Ear-god on which Rilke, from the start, has wagered the outcome of his entire poetic career, as error and betrayal", de Man cites, as a valediction, these lines from one of Rilke's French texts:

> Masque? Non. Tu es plus plein,
> mensonge, tu as des yeux sonores.

"At the moment of its fulfillment", de Man comments, "the figure announces itself by its real name", that is, as *mensonge* (*AR*, pp. 55-56).

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walks by the canals of the dead city: "Dans l'atmosphère muette des eaux et des rues inanimées, Hugues avait moins senti la souffrance de son coeur, il avait pensé plus doucement à la morte. Il l'avait mieux revue, mieux entendue, retrouvant au fil des canaux son visage d'Ophélie en allée, écoutant sa voix dans la chanson grêle et lointaine des carillons." (p. 19) – A linked series – *la morte, visage, Ophélie, carillons* – is available here for further linking to motifs of hanging, suspension, face, figure, figuration, when the topic at issue is, as it is at key points in de Man's work, the power and limitations of metaphorical structures.

15 De Man's insistence on the importance of the trope of prosopopeia is first formulated in a summary fashion in "Autobiography as De-Facement": "Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration" (*RR*, p. 76). On de Man's use of the term "face", more particularly on his reading of Wordsworth, see Catherine Caruth, "Past Recognition: Narrative Origins in Wordsworth and Freud", *Modern Language Notes*, 100, 1985, pp. 935-48, and Cynthia Chase, "Giving a Face to a Name", in *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 82-112.

If we had any doubts that here, at the end of the Rilke essay, de Man is belatedly and surreptitiously addressing the suspended carillon, they disappear when, in "Hypogram and Inscription", he writes, of Hugo's poem, that the "carillon's relation to time has to be like the relationship of the mind to the senses: it is the sonorous face, the 'masque aux yeux sonores' (Rilke) which, by metonymic substitution, links the sound of the bells to the face of the clock" (*RT*, p. 48). Precisely by dwelling on his own version of the figure Wordsworth calls the "speaking face" (*RR*, p. 89), by untying the knot named "masque aux yeux sonores", a knot by which, in the language of "Shelley Disfigured", "knowledge, oblivion and desire hang suspended" (*RR*, p. 107), de Man has been able to press his understanding of figuration past where it was in the Rilke essay to the explicit and rewarding discussions of reading-as-prosopopeia that characterize his work after *Allegories of Reading*. In "Hypogram and Inscription" the gain is registered in two ways: in the critic's embedded signature – the mystery guest signing in as "a bizarre waking monster", "l'esprit, ce veilleur fait d'oreilles et d'yeux" – and in the lucidity of the discussion that accompanies this signature, in which de Man articulates the link between the hallucinatory aspect of prosopopeia and the arbitrary or "catachretic" imposition of meaning (*RT*, pp. 48-49)[16].

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With this in mind, I want to return to the question of de Man's wartime writings and their relation to his later work, a question that takes on a somewhat different look (or ring) when it is posed against the background I have been sketching in. And I want to link it to another historical question, that of de Man's interest in the work of William Empson. More particularly, I shall offer a speculative account of what de Man found in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* when he set out to introduce Empson's work to the French reading public in 1956.

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16 Appropriately, the critic's signature is inscribed in what de Man calls a "seduction scene", a scene in which questions of cognition are played out "in the erotic mode of 'mere' sense perception" (*RT*, p. 49). The scene prompts de Man to append an uncharacteristically La Rochefoucauldian footnote: "Rather than being a heightened version of sense experience, the erotic is a figure that makes such experience possible. We do not see what we love but we love in the hope of confirming the illusion that we are indeed seeing anything at all" (*RT*, p. 53, n. 23).

De Man's discussion of *Seven Types* concentrates on Empson's remarkable seventh chapter, for it is there that he finds both the boldest theoretical formulations and the most intriguing illustrative material. We have already noticed Empson's way of figuring his path through his book: coming to the Seventh Type, that is, coming to terms with radical ambiguity is like reaching Satan, like Dante's reversing direction at the center of the earth, like approaching "the secret places of the Muse". As the chapter goes on the implications of this playful language are developed into a darker thematics of incest, sacrifice, hanging and gender confusion. For example, glossing the last lines of Keat's "Ode on Melancholy" – "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might/ And be among her cloudy trophies hung" – Empson writes:

> *Her trophies* (death-pale are they all) are *cloudy* because vague and faint with the intensity and puzzling character of this fusion, or because already dead, or because, though preserved in verse, irrevocable. They are *hung* because sailors on escaping shipwreck hung up votive gifts in gratitude (Horace, III,i.), or because, so far from having escaped, in the swoon of this achievement he has lost life, independence, and even distinction from her. (*7T*, p. 217)

This swoon into indistinction, into a hanging which is also a fusion with "Veiled Melancholy", resonates with the lurid figuration I have been tracing in de Man's writing. Moreover, in these pages, the swoon is made to feel like a mode of sacrifice, as, further along, Melancholy is replaced by the figure of Christ depicted, in Empson's account, as a "monstruous hermaphrodite deity". The phrase occurs in the course of a discussion of an epigram of Crashew's improvising on the Biblical verse "Blessed are the paps that thou hast sucked" (*Luke* 11:27). Crashaw had written:

> Hee'l have his Teat e're long (a bloody one)
> The Mother then must suck the Son,

and Empson comments:

> The [...] couplet is 'primitive' enough; a wide variety of sexual perversions can be included in the notion of sucking a long bloody teat which is also a deep wound. The sacrificial idea is aligned with incest, the infantile pleasures, and cannibalism; we contemplate the god with a sort of savage chuckle; he is made to flower, a monstruous hermaphrodite deity, in the glare of the short-circuiting of the human order. (*7T*, p. 221)

What Empson is tracing is what he calls "something weird and lurid" in the seventeenth-century mystics" "apprehension of the sacrificial system", which he will characterize as "a true sense of the strangeness of the mind's world" (*7T*, p. 222). The drift of the chapter is towards a reading of George Herbert's "The Sacrifice", in which the Crucifixion is held up as *the* privileged manifestation of a Type VII ambiguity. Empson moves through the poem slowly, glossing various stanzas, stressing the "fusion of the love of Christ and the vindictive terrors of the sacrificial idea" (*7T*, p. 228) until he reaches what he calls "the final contradiction":

> Lo here I hang, charged with a world of sin
> The greater world of the two . . .
>
> as the complete Christ; scapegoat and tragic hero; loved because hated; hated because godlike; freeing from torture because tortured; torturing his torturers because all-merciful; source of all strength to men because by accepting he exaggerates their weakness; and, because outcast, creating the possibility of society. (*7T*, p. 232-33)

Left out of this litany of paradoxes is an odd equivocation concerning the gender of the voice that speaks in Herbert's poem, one Empson had noted earlier in his commentary. The refrain with which each stanza ends – "Was ever grief like mine?" – and whose repetition contributes more than any other verbal device to what Empson calls the poem's "strange monotony of accent" is a quotation from the Old Testament that, as Empson remarks, "refers in the original not to the Saviour but to the wicked city of Jerusalem, abandoned by God, and in the hands of her enemies for her sins" (*7T*, p. 227). Empson's pronouns convey the shift of gender, though he does not comment on it; his remark is made very much in passing. But it is worth our dwelling on for a moment. It is one thing for Jesus on the Cross to knowingly echo the Psalmist – "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*Matt*, 27:46; *Ps* 22:1) – and another, somewhat more puzzling thing for Herbert (or the liturgical tradition he was drawing on) to have the hanging Christ ventriloquize the lament not *for* but *of* a sinful and abandoned woman[17]. Here are the

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17 Rosemund Tuve would contest this statement. In "On Herbert's 'Sacrifice'" (*Kenyon Review*, 12, Winter 1950, pp. 51-75) she had taken Empson to task for ignoring the poetic and liturgical traditions that informed both the figuration and the tone of Herbert's poem. Empson had replied briefly in "George Herbert and Miss Tuve" (*Kenyon Review*, 12, Autumn 1950, pp. 735-38), and Tuve had gone on to extend and further document her disagreements with Empson in the opening section ("The

verses from *Lamentations* (1:8-9, 12, 16), first the words of the poet, traditionally taken to be Jeremiah, describing Jerusalem, then the plaint of Jerusalem herself:

> Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed: all that honoured her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness; she sigheth, and turneth backwards.
>
> Her filthiness is in her skirts; she remembereth not her last end; therefore she came down wonderfully: she had no comforter. O Lord, behold my affliction: for the enemy hath magnified himself.
>
> Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.
>
> For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me: my children are desolate because the enemy prevaileth.

With his usual offhandedness, Empson doesn't quote the passage, merely identifying it as "a quotation from Jeremiah" (*7T*, p. 227), which may well have led some readers to the wrong book of the Bible. But Paul de

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Sacrifice' and modern criticism") of *A Reading of George Herbert,* London, Faber and Faber, 1952, pp. 19-99. There, in the fuller version, she addresses, among many other passages, Empson's reading of "Was ever grief like mine?". Adducing a medieval lyrical genre, the Monologue or complaint of Christ, she writes: "One group of these monologues is formed by the *O vos omnes qui transitis* poems. Christ's first words, as in Herbert, will be some variant of these phrases from Lam. i.12, where, of course, they are said by the city of Jerusalem. They are twice repeated, as if by Christ, in the Good Friday and Holy Saturday responsories, and it is liturgical convention, not Herbert, which makes 'any grief like unto my grief' apply to *Christ's* sorrow. [...] Both in liturgy and in lyric the conventionalizing of a situation, for one thing, fixes certain words and ideas inextricably in a particular frame of reference – as the 'attendite, et videte Si est dolor similis sicut dolor meus' become inescapably Christ's own words, for Herbert or for Handel, so that we must be chary of interpretations based on a lively sense of their being rather said by the city of Jerusalem 'in the original'. [...] Herbert's 'original' was not a verse in Lamentations, but a well-known and effortlessly accepted tradition which made a double reference to both Old and New Testament, with all the resulting implications, absolutely inescapable." (p. 34) – Although her stress is on how "inextricably" or "inescapably" certain meanings are fixed within "a particular frame of reference", Tuve seems to be granting that "double reference ... with *all* the resulting implications" is also "inescapable"; the question seems to come down to whether one's sense of a particular implication was "lively" or subdued. My claim in the following pages is that there are signs de Man responded to Empson's "lively" reading of "Was ever grief like mine?" when he encountered it in 1956.

Man, in 1956, seems to have taken the trouble to track down the allusion to *Lamentations*, to give the appropriate reference and to quote one of the verses, which then figures at the conceptual center of his praise of *Seven Types*. Empson's "less serene mind", he writes, was not content with I.A. Richards' "reassuring notion of art as the reconciliation of opposites", for he understood, de Man goes on, that

> the text does not resolve the conflict, it *names* it. And there is no doubt as to the nature of the conflict. Empson has already prepared us by saying that it is "at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross", and ends his book on George Herbert's extraordinary poem entitled "The Sacrifice", a monologue uttered by Christ upon the cross, whose refrain is drawn from the "Laments of Jeremiah" (I,12).

And de Man copies out the Biblical verse ("Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by, etc.") before going on to assimilate Empson's theory of poetic ambiguity to a Hegelian account of the Crucifixion:

> This conflict can only be resolved by the supreme sacrifice: there is no stronger way of stating the impossibility of an incarnate and happy truth. The ambiguity poetry speaks of is the fundamental one that prevails between the world of the spirit and the world of sentient substance: to ground itself, the spirit must turn itself into sentient substance, but the latter is knowable only in its dissolution into non-being. The spirit cannot coincide with its object and this separation is infinitely sorrowful. (*BI*, p. 237)

The propriety of de Man's translating Empson into the idiom of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness has been questioned recently[18], but more interesting than this debate, from my point of view, is the fact that the language de Man chooses to give voice to by introducing the Biblical verse into his text is not to be found in either Empson's chapter or Herbert's poem. The voice de Man summons up, in an act of prosopopoeia, is that of an allegorical figure in *Lamentations*, an afflicted woman called "Jerusalem", and it echoes that of another afflicted woman the central character in a poem de Man reviewed in *Le Soir* in 1942, a poem about the ravages of war in Belgium which takes as its epigraph these verses from the Gospel of Matthew:

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18 See Terry Eagleton, "The Critic as Clown", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 619-31, and Christopher Norris "Some versions of rhetoric: Empson and de Man", in *The Conflict of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, pp. 70-96.

> Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,
>
> In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children ... (Matt, 2:17-18; allusion to Jer, 31:15)

The poem, "The Massacre of the Innocents", was by Hubert Dubois, a Belgian Catholic poet de Man had written of admiringly before[19]. It is, in the words of de Man's review, "a meditation on the guilt that has led humanity to the dreadful state in which it finds itself for the moment", a meditation structured as a narrative of the abjection and redemption of that figure of Rachel who, the poet claims, is to be found within all his readers as they cry out, with him, against the horrors and injustices of war. Because de Man's review is interested exclusively in the poem's ethical themes and its formal mastery, a brief rehearsal of its plot is necessary, if the connection I would propose, between this piece of wartime journalism and de Man's later writings – on Empson and Herbert as well as, more generally, on the economy of sacrifice – is to make sense.

After an introductory stanza personifying the Rachel "within each one of us" – representing her drunk with grief, cradling a dead child in her arms and demanding justice of the Lord – her pitying and powerfully accusatory voice is heard until it is interrupted, first by the poet, shocked by the "impudence" of her address to God, then by a downpour of blood and a chorus of voices from heaven, identified as the dead voices "of children or of angels":

> Assez crier, assez mentir! Allons, Mère, à genoux!
> Assez fonder sur Dieu ton injuste courroux.
> [...]
> Allons, Rachel, tu sais que si l'on prend tes fils,
> Toi-même les perdais, toi-même en fis jadis
> Périr [...]
>
> Il pleut leur sang sur toi, coupable mère.

The voices go on to recount why Rachel bears this blood guilt, and the accusation turned against her reads like an indictment of heedless loose-

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19 De Man's review of "Le Massacre des Innocents" appeared in *Le Soir*, September 1, 1942; it is reproduced on pp. 265-66 of Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943*, edited by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1988. His review of Dubois' earlier work, "La poésie du bois dormant", appeared on September 9, 1941; it is reproduced on pp. 143-144 of the same volume.

living during the *entre-deux-guerres* period, the sort of indictment familiar to readers of right- and left-wing anti-plutocratic, anti-parliamentarian tracts of the 20s and 30s. Rachel has turned men away from virile and arduous pursuits towards "les biens caressants [...] les biens donnés,/Les biens charnels". She is responsible, moreover, for their losing the desire to transmit life, to propagate sons – and here the poem takes on a tone of pro-life fervor familiar to us these days but not always present in pre-war denunciations of capitalist decadence: Rachel is blamed for denying her vocation as mother, and for counseling young brides not to bear children, hence for murdering the unborn, the very children whose voices are now denouncing her. The voices press Rachel to abandon her hypocritical self-pity and to acknowledge her implication in evil, and this set of stanzas closes with a chilling celebration of war – "Temps du meurtre, ô temps pur!" – as an unmasking of the death that had been dissimulated during a corrupt peacetime.

Now Rachel can be seen for what she is, not a victim but a drunken Amazon, "plus sombre que la mort et comme elle, brulante", and abruptly Rachel confronts this image of herself mirrored in a blood-red fiery sky. This is the poem's turning-point, a moment of specular apotheosis that is also Rachel's salvation: the instant she sees herself "la mort reçoit sa face" and when death recognizes itself it is, says the poet, by the grace of God no longer Death. The poem ends with Rachel transformed, singing of the promise of peace in an apocalyptic landscape still bloodied with war: "il pleut toujours le sang sur mon temps déchiré;/ Mais un jour il sera le ciel en vérité"[20].

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20 Hubert Dubois (1903-1965) was to publish another poem during the Occupation similar in its apocalyptic setting, in its contempt for pre-war decadence and in its voicing of an acceptance of Belgium's defeat: *Le Chant dans les ruines,* Bruxelles, Editions de la Toison d'Or, 1944. I have been unable to discover whether or not Dubois was prosecuted for collaboration, although reviews of his works in the 1950s suggest that he may have been. One critic, reviewing his career, after referring to "La poésie au bois dormant", writes of him: "Que cette prescience trop lucide se soit ensuite égarée dans le temporel, sous la poussée d'événements extérieurs, importe peu sur le plan supérieur où nous entendons à présent juger une oeuvre qui a finalement retrouvé son vrai sens. [...] C'est que nous avons dépassé, par une étrange purification, le massacre et les ruines" (André Gascht, "Le danseur du sacré", *Le Thyrse,* Bruxelles, 1953, pp. 496-97). The last sentence alludes discreetly to Dubois' wartime publications, titles that are sometimes included in, sometimes omitted from his post-war bibliographies. (My thanks to Ortwin de Graef, Tom Keenan and Chantal Kesteloot for their help in locating copies of Dubois' poems and of writings about him.)

Like "The Sacrifice" (as Empson read it), this is a poem in which the plaintive and unjustified voice of a fallen woman is redeemed. On the evidence of his seeking out and citing the verses from *Lamentations* in 1956, I would guess that the memory of his involvement with Dubois' text was stirred when de Man came upon Empson's discussion of Herbert. More interesting than this historical footnote, however, is the fact that none of the various aspects of Dubois' poem that I have been drawing attention to – the figure of the victimized but also guilty mother who is both abjected and recuperated, the ways in which sexual, familial and socio-political elements are blended in the poem's plot and imagery, the fable's turning on a scene of specular reversal – had, in 1942, found its way into de Man's review of "Le Massacre des Innocents". Neither the lurid setting nor the particular actions of Rachel and her accusers is commented on; instead, de Man insists on reading the poem as a rigorous movement of thought, a "logical reflection" aimed at bringing out "principles and abstract tendencies". The fundamental element of Dubois' poetics, de Man claims, is "the word with its rational content"; the miracle of the poem – and de Man is unstinting in his praise – is that Dubois can make his thought come alive "without recourse to any of the standard poetic artifices – allegory, symbol or metaphor", relying rather on "that most difficult of forms, the direct expression of his thought". And that thought is, as de Man summarizes it, comprehensive and generous in its elevation, ethical in its content:

> Complaint and lamentation cannot be justified, even in a situation as pitiable as this. For all that is happening now is not the blind and pitiless action of destiny, but the consequences of a fault, or an accumulation of moral faults, committed down through the ages. The utility of such an ordeal is to oblige people to become conscious of this guilt, to make the masses see that they have acted badly. Consequently, the more severe the punishment, the greater the hope of at least witnessing the growth of those true values which should allow life to be lived harmoniously, in the place of the false facilities which have led to his catastrophe.

This is powerfully wishful writing, as any formulation of the "utility" of sacrifice, the salutary or expiatory or compensatory value of suffering, is bound to be. Equally wishful, I believe – and obscurely related to the wish for sacrifice to serve some purpose – is de Man's odd insistence on the rational, direct, non-figurative nature of Dubois' poetic language. In a closed sacrificial economy, there would be no leftovers, no pains unaccounted for, nothing that couldn't be subsumed under a governing aim; in

the closed economy of the text of reason, the sort of text de Man emphatically wants Dubois' to be, the "standard poetic artifices – allegory, symbol or metaphor", with the possibilities for ambiguity or equivocation attendant on their use, must also be ruled out. And it is just these questions – of sacrifice, of figurative language, of a lurid thematics – that surface again when de Man reads Empson, and which are there taken up in a significantly different way.

But there is something else missing from de Man's discussion of Dubois' poem, and missing, so far, from our own consideration of it: the word "Jew". Like other readers of de Man's writings for *Le Soir,* when I first came across the headline on the *Chronique littéraire* for September 1, 1942, "Le Massacre des Innocents", I read on to see if it represented the sort of subversive gesture I had occasionally found elsewhere in de Man's articles. I knew that the deportation of Belgian Jews had begun in the summer of 1942 (I subsequently learned that raids resulting in mass arrests had taken place in Antwerp in mid-August); it seemed possible that de Man's choosing to review this particular poem at that particular time was a surreptitious act of protest and solidarity, an encoded naming of the crime he saw taking place around him. Other readers have entertained that possibility[21], but I found this hoped-for interpretation didn't survive my reading of the article or, later, of Dubois' poem. Both poem and review, although each acknowledges the horrors of wartime Belgium, shift the responsibility for those horrors away from the Nazi occupiers – in Dubois' case, onto the pre-war sinfulness Rachel is made to represent; in de Man's, onto a more diffusely characterized "accumulation of moral faults committed down through the ages" or "repeated crimes against the human person". Neither Dubois nor de Man appears to make any attempt, coded or not, to differentiate the degrees of suffering felt by various elements of the population, unless the simple title of each text, "The Massacre of the Innocents", could be counted on to be read with such a message in mind. I'm not convinced it could and find both poem and review disconcerting to read. If either is in any way about

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21 Shoshana Felman, for example, in "Paul de Man's Silence" (*Critical Inquiry,* 15, Summer 1989, pp. 704-44), argues for the "latent resistance connotation" of the poem and of de Man's review of it (pp. 714-15). That seems mistaken. Other readings of Felman's, however, in particular her use of de Man's discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* to illuminate his own refusal to speak of his wartime activities (pp. 729-34), strike me as persuasive and valuable contributions to the current debates.

the Belgian Jews, it would seem to testify to a blank disregard for what was happening to them in 1942, or – if the concern was there but forced to dissimulate itself – to what from our current perspective looks like astonishingly bad timing[22].

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22 Yet another, more sinister interpretation needs to be considered. There is a possibility that, in writing about Dubois' poem when he did and as he did, de Man was participating, intentionally or inadvertently, in a campaign to counter the sympathy and pity non-Jewish Belgians were expressing for the Jews during the summer and fall of 1942, as the brutality of the Nazis' treatment of them became harder to ignore. In his detailed history of the ordeal of the Belgian Jews, Maxime Steinberg cites passages from the collaborationist press inveighing against "toute fausse pitié" and denouncing those Belgians who were moved to protect the Jews (cf. pp. 159-162 of *1942: Les cent jours de la déportation des Juifs de Belgique,* Tome II of Maxime Steinberg, *L'Etoile et le fusil,* Bruxelles, Vie Ouvrière, 1983-87, 4 vols.). Having read these pages, I was curious to know where Steinberg would place de Man's review. I wrote him, enclosing copies of the review and of Dubois' poem, and received the following reply, which I transcribe at length as a document to be added to those appearing in *Responses*: "[...] Du point de vue de l'historien, la question de Man ne se pose pas dans les termes d'une alternative morale; il ne lit pas non plus l'article rétrospectivement. La question est de savoir si le 1er septembre 1942, le lecteur du "Soir" découvre dans "Le Massacre des innocents" une allusion, quelle qu'elle soit, à la tragédie juive en train de [se] jouer en Belgique occupée. De Man, quant à lui, n'est pas "innocent". Il suit l'actualité de l'occupation, y compris sa persécution antisémite. Son article de 1941 sur "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" n'appliquait pas seulement une grille de lecture antisémite à l'histoire littéraire. L'antisémitisme de de Man était aussi politique: l'article persuadait le lecteur qu'il n'y avait pas lieu de s'inquiéter des mesures que préparait l'Occupant. La conclusion de 1941 est significative: de Man s'attache à y démontrer qu'une solution du problème juif qui viserait à la création d'une colonie juive isolée de l'Europe, n'entraînerait pas, pour la vie littéraire de l'Occident, de "conséquences déplorables".
A tout le moins, l'auteur du "Massacre des innocents" n'était pas disposé à "déplorer" la prochaine déportation des Juifs. Publiant son article alors qu'elle venait de commencer, il y a moins d'un mois, sur un rythme paroxystique (le convoi VII part précisément le 1er septembre), le critique littéraire ne la déplore pas. "La métaphore" du poète s'adresse, selon de Man, à "l'homme capable de sublimer la souffrance qui tord journellement l'humanité en guerre, capable de voir, malgré une immense pitié, que cette douleur est salutaire parce qu'elle fait expier des crimes répétés contre la personne humaine". Le propos est caractéristique de pessimisme idéologique de la "droite révolutionnaire" ralliée, dès 1940, à l'Ordre nouveau. Le sentiment reflètait alors l'air du temps dans un pays défait – dans tous les sens du terme. En 1942, l'opinion est, du point de vue allemand, franchement "hostile" à l'Occupant. Le sentiment public est dans l'attente d'un débarquement imminent et la tentative avortée des Anglo-Canadiens du 19 août à Dieppe n'entame pas l'optimisme du public. Dans son pessimisme, de Man exprime le 1er septembre un sentiment qui n'est plus porté en dehors de la mouvance d'Ordre nouveau. En cet été

1942, le sentiment populaire se dresse contre l'Occupant et se prête d'autant mieux à dénoncer la "guerre à l'outrance que les Boches livrent aux malheureux juifs". Un témoignage, et non des moindres, donne la mesure du sentiment public: les déportations de l'été, écrit encore en 1942 le cardinal Van Roey dans sa correspondance vaticane, "ont été exécutées avec une brutalité et même une cruauté qui ont révolté profondément la population belge". Le pouvoir militaire d'occupation, inquiet de la "sensation", s'emploie à ce que l'action antijuive en cours "éveille le moins possible l'attention du public et ne suscite pas de sympathie pour les Juifs dans la population". La section de propagande, service politique placé sous la tutelle des militaires, ne commet pas l'erreur psychologique d'attirer encore plus l'attention en faisant donner la presse censurée contre le sentiment populaire. Les militants les plus frénétiques de l'antisémitisme se gaussent, en revanche, de ces "bênets de goïm toujours prêts à s'émouvoir lorsqu'il s'agit d'un métèque au nez crochu": auxiliaires ardents de la police SS, ils s'efforcent de prémunir leur mouvance contre "l'enjuivement" qui gagne l'opinion belge.

"Le Soir" n'appartient pas à la presse radicale d'Ordre nouveau. Le journal "volé" est resté, au temps de la censure allemande, dans sa fonction de "grand" quotidien de la capitale belge. Le journal ne participe pas, au moment de la déportation, aux timides tentatives d'intoxication qui se manifeste dans la presse la plus militante. L'article de de Man ne s'y inscrit pas. Le lecteur habituel du quotidien n'y trouve pas la moindre allusion aux Juifs. La "métaphore" du poète est une référence bien trop lointaine, même pour le lecteur catholique de 1942. Au reste, le public ne conçoit pas encore cette "barbarie nazie" qu'il dénonce en termes de "massacre des innocents". Le mot de génocide n'existe toujours pas parce que la chose reste inconcevable. L'écho qui en parvient de l'Est touche à peine des cercles restreints, en cet été 1942. A l'Ouest, la "barbarie nazie" reste, aux yeux de ses contemporains, le scandale de l'arrestation massive d'hommes et de femmes, d'enfants et de vieillards voués à être déportés vers l'Est mystérieux. Le public ne soupçonne nullement le "massacre" de ces "innocents" pendant "les remous" de l'été 1942.

De Man lui, découvre dans la "métaphore" qu'il apprécie, une occasion de philosopher sur "les remous de cette époque" et d'y "lancer un coup d'oeil compréhensif et généreux". Le critique littéraire ne pratique pas – il le disait en 1941 – "l'antisémitisme vulgaire". Le sien est d'ordre intellectuel. Il l'a dispensé de porter le moindre regard "compréhensif et généreux" sur la tragédie juive dont ses yeux sont témoins. En 1942, au temps de la déportation, ce "regard" se porte dans la clandestinité.

En tant qu'historien de la solution finale en Belgique occupée, il ne me paraît pas possible d'aller au-delà de cette lecture de l'antisémitisme du jeune de Man." (Letter of 27 September 1988).

Steinberg's analysis is instructive for the care with which it weighs de Man's words – and its own. Neither exculpatory nor prosecutorial in tone, it may be contrasted with some other attempts at the historical contextualization of Paul de Man's articles. I'm thinking in particular of "Fascist Commitments" (*Responses,* pp. 21-35), in which John Brenkman, after announcing that he will adopt a "juridical stance and a prosecutorial attitude" because "the prosecutorial stance establishes the aggressiveness required of such an inquiry" (p. 21), seeks to demonstrate de Man's complicity in specific propaganda campaigns undertaken by the collaborationist press in 1941 and

Without seeking to soften this judgment of de Man's review of Dubois, it is still possible to pursue the question of how that article may have come to take the form it did. I would approach it by focussing on what I noted had been excluded from de Man's discussion of the poem – call it, emblematically, Rachel, in her three aspects: Rachel as Jew (that is, as possibly giving voice to the plight of the Belgian Jews in 1942), Rachel as *coupable mère* (that is, as embodying a complex of feelings about mothers and sons, and the real and fantasmatic exchanges between them), and Rachel as metaphor (as the central figure of Dubois' poem, standing in turn for the incomprehending, pitying reaction to war, the self-pity of its victims, the self-indulgence of the pre-war democracies, Death, Hope, and so on). It is very unlikely that de Man, in 1942, could have read "Le Massacre des Innocents" without both experiencing and bracing himself against what he would later call "the seductive powers of identification" (*AR*, p. ix), in this case the pull of Rachel, the temptation to a pitying and self-pitying, thoroughly ambivalent act of identification with a victimized women. That drama of seduction and resistance would be played out in silence: the connotative resonance of Dubois' figurative language, along with its possible bearing on the situation of the Jews, would go unrecognized and not appear in the text, suppressed along with the figure of the guilty mother. Instead language would be found to stave off that temptation, first by analyzing the poem as a "logical reflection", then in the form of a final, idealizing tribute to Dubois:

1942 by showing how "circumstances gave even de Man's most empty phrases very precise and concrete meanings" (p. 30).

Brenkman assumes that if, through archival research, he can establish the existence of a set of such "circumstances" contemporaneous with a particular article of de Man's, then he has effectively demonstrated de Man's ("fascist") engagement in that aspect of the Occupation. Steinberg, too, is interested in placing de Man's articles in their microhistorical context, but his sense of context is at once fuller and more nuanced than Brenkman's, and it allows him to discriminate differing intentions and degrees of involvement. It allows him, in this case, to state confidently that de Man's review of Dubois was not written as a contribution to an anti-pity campaign – a campaign that was indeed being waged, in one section of the collaborationist press, in 1942 – and (of equal importance) that it would not have been read as such by its contemporary audience. An investment in scrupulous analysis of this sort is finally a more trustworthy attitude for the historian to adopt than the "juridical" or "prosecutorial" stance Brenkman believes to be "required of such an inquiry".

> The man capable of sublimating the suffering that daily wrenches humanity at war, capable of seeing, despite an immense pity, that this pain is salutary because it expiates repeated crimes against the human person, exhibits that fundamental superiority of being that is proper to all true artistic talent.

That sentence may strike the ear now as both hyperbolic in its celebration of the artist's superiority and callous in its willed sublimation of suffering; but it is worth noting that it is also an act of fervid identification. We can take it as a reminder of the difficulty of resisting one sort of identification without falling into another. This is by no means Paul de Man's problem alone, but it is very much a problem he turned his mind to thereafter. His post-war writing can be thought of as an extended study of the stakes and the mechanisms of identification, which is another way of saying that the puzzling knot that binds uses of figurative language to specular structures and to gestures of sacrifice would explicitly occupy his attention[23].

One can see signs of this in de Man's writing immediately after the war. Notions like that of the utility of sacrifice, the compensatory rewards of suffering – notions that governed his reading of "Le Massacre des Innocents" – have disappeared from articles like "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism". There, Empson's choice of Herbert's poem as his climactic example is read not as a transcendent reconciliation of the conflicts he had been exploring but as a demonstration of the impossibility of reconciliation, hence of the delusory nature of those poetics de Man labels "salvational". De Man's language has its own pathos but his interest in sacrifice is less in its pathos than in its structure and dynamics: "sacrifice" is read as a figure of incommensurability, a thematic gesture at a linguistic problem that won't go away. That's why the first sentence of de Man's gloss on Herbert's poem – "This conflict can be resolved only by the supreme sacrifice" – is followed immediately by one shifting the emphasis away from any conceivable resolution: "there is no stronger way of stating the impossibility of an incarnate and happy truth" (*BI*, p. 237). If we were to ask why these two atheists, Empson and de Man, should meet at the foot of the Cross, de Man would say that they were led there not in the imitation of Christ but through their shared in-

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23 On the appearance of the concepts (and words) *renunciation, sacrifice, temptation, seduction,* and *identification* in de Man's writings, see Minae Mizumura, "Renunciation", in P. Brooks, S. Felman, J.H. Miller (eds.), *The Lesson of Paul de Man, Yale French Studies,* 69 (1985), pp. 81-97.

terest in radical linguistic ambiguity, in the sort of contradiction that could be thought of, in Empson's words, as "at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross". An indecision and a structure – that is, now taking up de Man's idiom, an impasse, or dead-end, or aporia, a moment of suspension or, in the lurid thematics I have been tracing, a specular encounter with a hanging figure.

A hanging "figure"? or a hanging woman? The figure on the Cross is a man, isn't he? We have seen that in Herbert's poem the answer to that is yes and no. The plangent refrain of the poem is, equivocally, that of Christ and Jerusalem. And I have been suggesting that that equivocation is a productive one, an element in the sort of ambiguity both Empson and de Man are concerned with. A final glance at the divergence of Empson's path and de Man's after their imaginary meeting in 1956 should bear this out.

Empson spent a great deal of wit and energy, most memorably in *Milton's God* (1961), but throughout his post-war writings, inveighing against what he called "neo-Christian lit. crit.", a complicity – sometimes he made it seem like a conspiracy – of theologians and close-readers to foster piety and subservience to a system of unnatural values centered on God the Father, whom Empson liked to call "the torture monster"[24]. His chief objection to this god was that he took "satisfaction" – not just satisfaction in the acknowledgment of a redeemed debt, but the sensual satisfaction of a sadist – in the crucifixion of his son, thus setting an example of finding delight in human suffering that, Empson thought, had perverted Western behavior for two millenia. This stance would seem to have obliged him to reconsider his discussion of "The Sacrifice", which he did, in 1950 and again in 1963, chiefly in response to Rosemund Tuve's criticisms. Characteristically, he both does and doesn't recant:

> I put "The Sacrifice" last of the examples in my book, to stand for the most extreme kind of ambiguity, because it presents Jesus as at the same time forgiving his torturers and condemning them to eternal torture. It strikes me now that my attitude was what I have come to call "neo-Christian"; happy to find such an extravagant specimen, I slapped the author on the back and egged him on to be even nastier [...] Rather to my surprise, Miss Tuve agreed that the poem carries

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24 Empson's quarrel with Christianity is usefully summarized by John Haffenden in his Introduction to a posthumously published collection of articles: William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1987, pp. 21-40.

> the major ambiguity, which was traditional and noble; after rejecting most of my illustrations, she seemed disposed to treat me as a pagan stumbling towards the light. Clearer now about what the light illumines, I am keen to stumble away from it. (A, p. 257)

There was a time when Empson could describe "what the light illumines", his primal scene of Christianity, in language that captured the disorientation – of feeling and thought – that his encounter with radical contradiction had provoked:

> The sacrificial idea is aligned with incest, the infantile pleasures, and cannibalism; we contemplate the god with a sort of savage chuckle; he is made to flower, a monstrous hermaphrodite deity, in the glare of the short-circuiting of the human order. (*7T*, p. 221)

By the 1950s, this flashing vision had been discarded, the "monstrous hermaphrodite deity" replaced by "the torture monster", a more comprehensible figure of the Law as a sadistic father engaged in tormenting an innocent son. Empson has stabilized the vacillation implicit in the earlier scene – a vacillation of position and of gender – that had made the scene adequate to the bewildering nature of the linguistic problem he was engaging. Of the "hermaphrodite deity" only a trace remains in the later writings. It occurs in an unpublished piece ("The Satisfaction of the Father" [c. 1972]), in the course of a summary of Thomas Aquinas' discussion of the Crucifixion: "Aquinas plainly knew", writes Empson, "that the most intimate place of the religion was a horrible one" (*A*, p. 624), a sentence in which we can hear a flickering acknowledgement of what it was that had earlier led Empson to associate radical ambiguity not only with sacrifice, but also with Satan and with "the secret places of the Muse".

I have quoted enough of Paul de Man's post-war writings to suggest that his understanding of sacrifice took a different turn from Empson's, a turn that precluded any stabilization of the concept. Consider, as a final example, the last pages of "Wordsworth and the Victorians" (*RR*, pp. 88-92) which contain, coincidentally, another endorsement of Empson's work. This time de Man cites "Sense in the Prelude"[25], the "one essay [that] stands out from the fundamentally harmonious consensus that

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25 Originally published in *Kenyon Review*, 13 (Spring, 1951), pp. 285-302, then as Chapter 14 of *The Structure of Complex Words*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1951, pp. 289-305.

unites, for all apparent disagreement, all contemporary writers on Wordsworth". Specifically what de Man admires is Empson's arguing that if one traces Wordsworth's uses of the word *sense* one discovers that "the emerging confusion cannot be reduced to any known model of trope that would control an identifiable semantic field"; "it is impossible", de Man concludes, "to make sense out of Wordsworth's sense". As a reader capable of sophisticated rhetorical analysis, Empson is then compared to Wordsworth himself who, in one of his Prefaces, had produced an analysis of the word *hangs* equally astute but with absolutely opposite results: *hangs*, de Man notes, accurately, is "by Wordsworth's own avowal, *the* exemplary metaphor for metaphor, for figuration in general", hence precisely for the possibility of making sense.

Having thus positioned *hangs* and *sense* at opposite poles, de Man now introduces a key word of his own, *face*, a term that, as we have seen, has been implicit in his thinking from the earliest written chapter of *Allegories of Reading* through his latest texts on prosopopoeia:

> Masque? Non. Tu es plus plein,
> mensonge, tu as des yeux sonores. (*AR*, p. 56)

The force of de Man's reading of "face" in *The Prelude* is developed out of his understanding of the tensions between the cognitive and performative aspects of language, tensions which are both stated and enigmatically enacted in the climactic sentence of his essay: "How are we to reconcile the *meaning* of face, with its promise of sense and of filial preservation, with its *function* as the relentless undoer of its own claims?" In "Lurid Figures" I discussed the strangeness of this sentence, pointing out the way its language draws at once on the lines of Wordsworth's de Man was analyzing – the Blessed Babe passage – and on Yeat's rhetorical (or maybe *not* so rhetorical) question "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (*RDR*, pp. 98-99).

But the sentence can also be juxtaposed instructively with some of the language of *Allegories of Reading* I cited earlier, for example, with de Man's characterization of "Quai du Rosaire" as combining "the audacity of paradox with a promise of beauty or even [...] of sensuous gratification on the far side of the grave" (*AR*, p. 43). The two promises (of "sense and filial preservation", and of "sensuous gratification" beyond the grave) resemble one another, but we can note a telling difference in tone between the earlier lugubrious account of "Quai du

Rosaire"'s imagery as "seductive but funereal" and the more difficult language and explicit violence with which the facing-off in Wordsworth is described.

Or we might align this allegorizing of meaning-and-function as mother-and-child with the pages on the *Social Contract* with which we began: "There can be no text without grammar: the logic of grammar generates texts only in the absence of referential meaning, but every text [read: mother] generates a referent [read: child] that subverts the grammatical principle to which it owed its constitution [read: relentlessly undoes its own claims]."

In each of these passages – from "Wordsworth and the Victorians" and from "Promises (*Social Contract*)", as in his later writing generally – the language of Demanian theory coexists in a state of high tension with the obsessive figuration I have been following. Positioning himself so as to feel the force of that tension – as if acknowledging that he could occupy no other position – was clearly productive for de Man. Its value to him can be read obliquely out of the last paragraph of the Wordsworth essay:

> [O]ne can find, in Wordsworth's text, lexical continuities which are perfectly coherent; despite the somewhat ominous overtones of the literal predicament it invokes, the word "hangs" is a case in point. Other words, such as "sense" in Empson's essay, lead instead to near-total chaos. Somewhere in between, at the interface of these contradictory directions, words such as "face" can be said to embody this very incompatibility. (*RR*, p. 92).

To embody an incompatibility: the phrase resonates with de Man's praise of Empson, years earlier, for having so forcefully demonstrated that what poetry was about was "the impossibility of an incarnate and happy truth". The difficulty and the interest of de Man's later work is in its idiosyncratic refinement of a theory and pathos of sacrifice: the "incarnation" or "embodiment" his later texts invoke is not that of a Christian god-in-man or of a Hegelian spirit-in-substance but of "incompatibility" or "incommensurability" in words. The reception of de Man's work suggests that such an understanding of sacrifice – and the strange combination of control and disorientation it exacts from its subject – may be considerably harder to take in than the sustaining paradoxes of theology.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz, Fortsetzung einer früheren Untersuchung zu den "Lurid Figures" in Paul de Mans kritischen und theoretischen Schriften, geht aus von dessen Beschäftigung mit William Empsons *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in den 50er Jahren. De Mans Lektüre von Empsons Begriff des Opfers werden verschiedene andere Texte zur Seite gestellt – eine biographische Anekdote, eine von de Man 1942 in *Le Soir* publizierte Rezension und einige seiner späteren theoretischen Schriften – im Hinblick auf einen sonderbaren, aber charakteristischen Aspekt von de Mans Prosa: seine eigenwilligen Wortspiele, in denen zentrale Konzepte wie jene der Suspensionen und Disfigurationen eng verbunden sind mit Bildern eines wörtlich-wirklichen Hängens und Entstellens. Der Autor stellt fest, dass das Erscheinen dieser "grellen Figuren" in de Mans Text mit seinen produktivsten Einsichten in die Mechanismen der literarischen Sprache einhergeht.