

# **GlieDErMANn : defacement as autobiography**

Autor(en): **Flesch, William**

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GlIEDErMANn: DEFACEMENT AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist” argues with some passion against Schiller’s concept of “the perfect aesthetic society”, a society formed, Schiller says, like a “well executed English dance, composed of many complicated figures and turns [...] Such a dance is the perfect symbol of one’s own individually asserted freedom as well as one’s respect for the freedom of the other”<sup>1</sup>. In an essay on Kant and Schiller de Man makes the argument most explicitly – Schiller finds a terrible echo in Goebbels’ *Michael*, where the Führer is likened to an artist molding a plastic society: “Politics is the plastic art of the state”. This idea de Man derives from Schiller: in an “aesthetic education” “Schiller would be taught, because it is a popularization, a metaphorization of philosophy. As such, the aesthetic belongs to the masses; as we all know, and this is a correct description of the way in which we organize those things, it belongs to culture, and as such it belongs to the state, to the aesthetic state, and it justifies the state, as in” Goebbels’ novel<sup>2</sup>. In the Kleist essay de Man makes the same argument, one that implicitly, if ironically, valorizes his own role in education as an opposition to aesthetic education. “The politics of the aesthetic state are the politics of education” (p. 273) he writes, and locates the political stakes this way: “The ‘state’ that is here being advocated [by Schiller] is not just a state of mind or soul, but a principle of political value and authority that has its own claims on the shape and the limits of our freedom” (p. 264).

De Man uses Kleist to tease out the implications of Schiller’s writing. Kleist puts forward a series of parables, all tending to contrast aesthetic gracefulness with the anguished self-mutilating self-consciousness that

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1 *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 263.

2 Forthcoming in de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, University of Minnesota Press.

belongs to the human life it organizes. In the parable that de Man considers last, the dancer Herr C. describes for the narrator the gracefulness of marionettes as far outstripping that of any human dancers; this comes as less of a surprise since he has just shocked the narrator's sensibilities by describing amputees with artificial legs who dance with an astonishing grace *because* of their prostheses. De Man's comments on this parable are important, since they make his strongest case against a Schillerian aesthetic ideology:

We have travelled some way from the original Schiller quotation to this mechanical dance, which is also a dance of death and mutilation. The violence which existed as a latent background in the stories of the ephebe and of the bear now moves into full sight. One must already have felt some resistance to the unproblematic reintegration of the puppet's limbs and articulations, suspended in dead passivity, into the continuity of the dance: "all its other members [are] what they should be, dead, mere pendula, and they follow the law of pure gravity."

The passage is the harder to assimilate since it has been preceded by the briskly told story of an English technician able to build such perfect mechanical legs that a mutilated man will be able to dance with them in Schiller-like perfection. [...] The dancing invalid in Kleist's story is one more victim in a long series of mutilated bodies that attend on the progress of enlightened self-knowledge, a series that includes Wordsworth's mute country-dwellers and blind city-beggars. The point is not that the dance fails and that Schiller's idyllic description of a graceful but confined freedom is aberrant. Aesthetic education by no means fails; it succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible. (pp. 288-89)

These sentences are powerful. They uncover the violence hidden beneath an aestheticism formed through its repression, "the potentially violent streak in Schiller's own aesthetic theory" (p. 280). As always, de Man's tone expresses no shock at his own shocking conclusions, but something more like a resigned patience with the untopplable ruses of aesthetic ideology. It is this tone which distinguishes de Man from Benjamin, to whom de Man's defenders have been comparing him. Benjamin too spoke of the violence attendant upon what he called "the aestheticization of politics". But his tone was of impassioned resistance, not de Man's world-weary demystification.

It is de Man's tone that contributes most to his power as a writer. (His philosophical, political, and aesthetic ideas are not so extraordinary or original as to deserve the unique hagiography, or the notoriety, which his tone has earned for him.) That tone (which I think he learned from Blan-

chot though I would say that he lacks Blanchot's depth), is almost always impersonal. The passage above is typical, with its talk of how far "we" have travelled, or the resistance that "one" must feel.

In his prefaces, it is true, he does speak about himself, usually affecting amused embarrassment, as though surprised that his fragmentary essays should have cult status. But in his essays he maintains the impersonal tone intact; he never speaks of his own life, of himself in any way, unlike his Yale colleagues. The impression he gives, the impression he sought to give, was one of pure intelligence, uncolored by empirical life. What has become in de Man a jargon term – "reading" – means engaging in something like a purely transparent opacity, opacity untinted by anything extraneous to its own inherent difficulty.

Moments of autobiography then would be as precious as they are rare; the Kleist essay contains such a moment, and de Man's students must have treasured this exception to the anti-autobiographical rule. And this is not just any exception. De Man actually purports to describe his own fall from grace, as an illustration of the fall from grace Kleist describes. The text holds a mirror up to de Man and shows his face. And at what a moment: his fall from grace! This must be interesting just because the end of the essay puns manically on the word "Fall". But in light of the recent revelations, this description of a fall from grace must be interesting indeed:

We can all remember personal versions of such a fall from grace, of such a loss of innocence. (I for one remember trying to drive down a Swiss street after having just read, in a local newspaper, that for every 100 metres one drives one has at least thirty-six decisions to make. I have never been able to drive gracefully since.) (p. 277)

Of course the joke is in the deflating example. Nevertheless, the example is not perhaps entirely jejune. Why a Swiss street? Why the reference not to just reading, or just learning the fact, but to reading a newspaper? Kleist's story of course appeared in the *Berliner Abendblätter*, so that the whole of "Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist" consists of a response to reading a newspaper. Not a Swiss newspaper, however, but a German one, and perhaps the fact that de Man's fall from grace supposedly occurred after this canonically neutral reading is meant itself to neutralize whatever culpability might actually consist in for de Man. For de Man's culpability was not that he wrote in a neutral Swiss newspaper, but in a collaborationist Belgian one, whose name, *Le Soir*, echoes that of the



German *Abendblätter* Kleist wrote for, whose name might now be more appropriate for *Le Soir*.

Is this overreading? Maybe, though there's still the question about the specificity of the example. Why not any street – why a Swiss street? And driving in Switzerland is itself a necessarily charged context, since de Man's uncle Hendrik de Man died there when a train crashed into his car. He had taken refuge in neutral Switzerland from the sentence passed on him by the Belgian government after the war. Hendrik de Man was the person who counselled Leopold II to capitulate to the Nazis, and as the head of the Labour Party he urged collaboration (and probably got Paul his job with *Le Soir*). He died on June 20, 1953, probably a suicide, as Tom Keenan suggested to me: Paul's brother Hendrik had died in a bicycle accident, also at a railroad crossing, on the same date in 1936 (hence perhaps the significance of *thirty-six* decisions), and his mother Magdalena committed suicide on the date of the first anniversary of her elder son's death, by hanging herself. De Man apparently found her body<sup>3</sup>; this is a far likelier candidate for de Man's first loss of innocence. I think Kleist's newspaper article evoked that hanging body for him: "Caught in the power of gravity, the articulated puppets can rightly be said to be dead, hanging and suspended like dead bodies: gracefulness is directly associated with dead [*sic*]<sup>4</sup>, albeit a dead cleansed of pathos" (p. 287). It is after all the contrast between these dead puppets, or at least the gracefulness of the dance, and the "heavy breathing" (p. 279) of the real self that is forced into the dance (most vividly under fascism) that de Man is intent to underscore.

De Man, in his response to the anonymous accusation sent to Harvard, strangely identified Hendrik de Man as his father, rather than his uncle. There has been some speculation about this (adoption?). Certainly this identification makes the family more suffocating. The deaths of the "father" Hendrik, the son Hendrik and the mother Magdalena Maria implicate Paul more closely than he otherwise might have been if Hendrik is only an uncle. The uncle replaces his own brother as father, and so the fraternal relation is as specular as the generational relation. The next generation mirrors fraternal specularity, and so the living Paul mirrors

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3 Neil Hertz has said that this isn't certain.

4 The essay is taken from a transcript of a lecture de Man delivered at Cornell; apparently there was a vote among the transcribers as to whether de Man said "dead," or "death" here and immediately after. I hear it as "death", but will acquiesce to that vote.

his dead brother Hendrik, and so mirrors his father's brother Hendrik as well. The father and the son die at railroad crossings, on the same date: another specular relation. The son's brother must now be part of the chain of specularity. In other words, he may be the surviving son, but he might as easily have been the dead son Hendrik, double or mirror image of the dead father, whose death in turn mirrored his son's. Thus, the allusion to the possibility of repeating the suicidal road accident of both brother and uncle (responsible for the deaths of mother and aunt as well) makes for a charged moment in de Man's essay.

Did de Man know it was a charged moment? I think he did, since "Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist" makes another analytical move of a sort exceedingly rare in de Man's writing. Not only does it contain an autobiographical moment, it also uses *biography* (in Empson's phrase) to elucidate Kleist's essay. De Man's style of close reading almost always eschews this referential moment; but this essay, even as it announces the fictionality of reference, "the dubious status of referentiality" (pp. 272-73), actually engages in a referential argument. I am going to be quoting the whole of this argument, paragraph by paragraph, over the next few pages. I begin simply by establishing the thematization of biography and autobiography in a text which itself contains a highly unusual autobiographical moment:

The only explicit referential mark in the text is the date of the action, given as the winter of 1801. Now 1801 is certainly an ominous moment in a brief life rich in ominous episodes. It is the year when Kleist's self-doubts and hesitations about his vocation culminate in what biographers call his "Kant crisis." It is also the year during which Kleist's engagement to Wilhelmine von Zenge begins to falter and during which he is plagued by doubts similar to those which plagued Kierkegaard in his relationship to Regina and Kafka in his relationship to Felice. Between the two events, the Kant crisis and the forthcoming breach of promise with Wilhelmine (the final break occurred in the spring of 1802), there seems to be a connection which, if only he could understand it, would have relieved Kleist from his never resolved self-desperation. To uncover this link would be the ground of any autobiographical project.

The link actually and concretely existed in the reality of Kleist's history, but it took a somewhat circuitous route. (pp. 283-84)

I too will be taking a somewhat circuitous route in this reading, but it's a route that de Man actually invites. It may not require more than thirty-six decisions per hundred meters. De Man has asked whether Kleist himself can say "with full authority, that his text is or is not autobiographical" (p.

283). The “autobiographical project” which seeks to uncover a hidden link is hence as much de Man's as Kleist's. To contribute to Kleist's biography is for de Man to engage in something like a form of autobiography, and we've seen already that he has done just that. This provides a counterweight to the complaint many make against de Man, that his arguments for the non-phenomenality of history, for history as untotalizable iteration, enumeration, and stutter, made for a kind of special pleading, for an anticipatory self-exculpation. “The reality of [...] history”: that phrase has resonance in de Man now that it didn't in 1984, but that resonance is not beside the point. For once, de Man is narrating history, and not just evoking its materiality.

Not that Kleist is a mirror image of de Man (or vice versa); but de Man's text thematizes the narcissism that Kleist describes. Kleist's speaker (whom de Man calls K solely on the basis of the initialed signature H.v.K., as though one were to call the person who initials the letters P.d.M. at the base of his articles in *Le Soir M*) – Kleist's speaker tells C the story of a young man he knew. Drying himself in front of a mirror both the speaker and the young man noticed his resemblance to the famous statue of the boy pulling a thorn from his foot. (This statue is “to be found in German collections”, as de Man stresses [p. 278]; why this stress? Some allusion to cultural hegemony must be intended here, and again the wartime writing inflects this stress.) The resemblance delights the young man, but the speaker, in a challenge to his narcissism, denies seeing it. The young man can never again reproduce his unconscious grace, and this is for the young man the moment when self-consciousness means a fall from grace.

De Man charts in some detail the non-binary specularly that his parable evokes: “what the young man confronts in the mirror is not himself but his resemblance to another. [...] The structure is not specular but triangular. [...] As for the teacher's motives in accepting to enter these displacements of identity, they are even more suspect than those of the younger person” (p. 278-79). This analysis of triangular specularly must invite the comparison not only between de Man and Kleist, not only between Kleist and the situations of de Man's own past (such as the breach of contract to his first wife, when he committed bigamy), but also between Kleist and other specular figures for de Man. One such figure would be the pseudo-father Hendrik, for whom Heinrich von Kleist might stand.

I suggest that *Heinrich* von Kleist is for de Man another name for *Hendrik* de Man, mirror image of his son Hendrik, and of his triangulated son Paul. This at least is what de Man's essay, with its own extraordinarily ingenious use of biography, invites us to consider. Intentionally? Randomly? That's undecidable. But the random difference between the random and the intentional is the Mallarmean point at issue in all of de Man's work. You can't totalize that difference, even under the anti-totalizing name of the random – you can't be sure that what seems random is not in fact densely overdetermined. “Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist” repeats just this lesson, in the continuation of the long passage I started quoting above:

The link actually and concretely existed in the reality of Kleist's history, but it took a somewhat circuitous route. For when Kleist next met his bride-to-be, in 1805, in Königsberg, she was no longer Fräulein Wilhelmine von Zenge but Frau Professor Wilhelmine von Krug. Dr. Wilhelm Traugott Krug was Kant's successor in the latter's chair in philosophy at the University of Königsberg. Kleist, who had wanted to be, in a sense, like Kant and who, one might conjecture, had to give up Wilhelmine in order to achieve this aim, found himself replaced, as husband, by Krug, who also, as teacher philosopher, replaced Kant. What could Kleist do but finish writing, in the same year 1805, a play to be called – what else could it have been – *Der zerbrochene Krug?* (p. 284)

The specular structure that de Man's essay has already invoked makes a dizzying appearance here. De Man doesn't tease out all the possible connections – how could he? But it matters that Kleist is in a sense a witness to a narcissistic relationship from which he is excluded: Wilhelmine marries Wilhelm, and not (Bernd *Wilhelm*) Heinrich von Kleist.

Do I need to say that Wilhelm Krug – William Jug – is not so very different from William Flesch – William Flask? Especially since Kleist, in the essay de Man alludes to approvingly at the very end of “Aesthetic Formalization”, writes of political action – *the formation of nations* – as discharging *randomly*, like a so-called “Kleistische Flasche” (later known as a Leiden Jar) (Kleist, cit., II, p. 321).

De Man at any rate would have seen there another moment of narcissistic specularity in the text, as Kleist alludes to the random appearance of his own name as a determinate image of the random. And there's something a little random, a little wild, or *zerstreut* about de Man's allusion to this text, since it nowhere contains the terms – *Beifall*, *Einfall*, *Zurückfall* – that de Man seems to be quoting from it (p. 290). This is another invitation to be suspicious, and to think that what matters is that

Kleist writes there of Kleist, in this case Ewald von Kleist, its inventor, and may seem to de Man in some sense accidentally but inextricably bound up with the mirroring play of the accidental, with what excludes all his intent either to belong or to cease to belong<sup>5</sup>.

On de Man's reading, at any rate, he is also excluded from the mirrored substitution of K sounds, to which he should belong, when Krug, and not Kleist, replaces Kant. De Man too spent the last years of his life writing about Kant, as well as Kleist, and seeing in Schiller a bastardized and aestheticizing substitution for Kant. So that de Man mirrors something like the oblique mirroring that the narrator of "Über das Marionettentheater" describes in his relationship to the narcissistic young man.

That triangular specularity also haunts the relationship among "Über das Marionettentheater", *Der zerbrochene Krug*, and de Man. *Der zerbrochene Krug* begins with a description of Judge Adam's fall from grace, a literal one which leaves him bloody, but which his assistant Licht reads, as I have been doing, genealogically (because of the descent of the name), and so allegorically:

*Licht:* Ihr stammt von einem lockern Ältervater,  
Der so beim Anbeginn der Dinge fiel  
Und wegen seines Falls berühmt geworden;  
Ihr seid doch nicht –?  
*Adam:* Nun?  
*Licht:* Gleichfalls –?<sup>6</sup>

The pun on falling here (in the word *Gleichfalls*) anticipates de Man's analysis of the word at the end of his essay: "when, by the end of the tale, the word *Fall* has been overdetermined in a manner that stretches it from the theological Fall to the dead pendulum of the puppet's limbs to the grammatical declension of nouns and pronouns (what we call, in English, the grammatical *case*), then any composite word that includes *Fall* (*Beifall*, *Sündenfall*, *Rückfall* (§ 46 [of Hegel's *Encyclopedia*]), or *Einfall*) acquires a disjunctive plurality of meanings" (p. 289), much like the overdetermined plurality of allusion I have been following de Man in tracing. The importance of *Der zerbrochene Krug* may be seen further in

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5 What may also matter in that essay is that it lapses into French to tell a fable from La Fontaine in which the improvising fox randomly comes up with an innocent scapegoat to be sacrificed in his stead and in the stead of his ruler the lion, whose dirty work among the lesser animals he has to do.

6 *Sämtliche Werke*, Munich, Knauer, 1962, p. 211.



the fact that the broken jug had on it (among other things) a picture of Brussels, now destroyed. Its importance to “Über das Marionettentheater” comes from its anticipation of another of the later text's themes. Judge Adam is clubfooted, and hence a clear avatar of the boy with the injured foot that the narcissistic young man sees himself doubling in “Über das Marionettentheater;” but Adam claims (somewhat like C.) that his *Klumpfuss* is more graceful than his other foot. Adam – like de Man (at least in this essay) – turns out (like the swollen-footed Oedipus) to be the object of the judgment that he symbolizes: the crime being tried in his courtroom, the destruction of the jug and the shattering of its picture of Brussels, was committed by him. Judgments directed at others now turn out to be self-judgments. And de Man, in *Allegories of Reading*, had already hinted at the importance of such a self-reflective reading: “in the plays of Kleist, the verdict repeats the crime it condemns” (p. 245). What Adam fears throughout is that he will end up in the position of another guilty judge, one Judge Pfaul (readable as a portmanteau of Paul and Fall?). And given his continual invocation of the reading and misreading of Kantian judgment, de Man, who reads and judges these texts would have to see himself in the position of the aesthetic ideologists he condemns:

Wär's wahr, gestrenger Herr? Der Richter Pfaul,  
 Weil er Arrest in seinem Haus empfang,  
 Verzweiflung hätt' den Toren überrascht,  
 Er hing sich auf? (p. 220)

De Man attempts to take control of his encounter with Kleist, perhaps, by taking control of the letters in the passage: as though he is more able to articulate and disarticulate Kleist's fate than Kleist himself. As in Stevens' *The Comedian as the Letter C*, the play of K-sounds, of course, is part of the point in the passage, not only in the proper names, but also in the language which asserts that a *link actually and concretely existed* between the *Kant crisis* and the breach of promise; but this *link* is linked also to the *break* between Kleist and Wilhelmine von Zenge; link and break form a kind of Derridean *brisure*, even if this is *conjecture* and even if it *took a somewhat circuitous* route.

But how does this bravura display of signifiers help de Man's reading of “Über das Marionettentheater”? Does it? My account of the narcissistic nature of Krug's relationship to his wife and to his predecessor might shed some light on Kleist's story, but de Man does not himself make that



point. What link does *his* circuitous conjecture look like it constitutes or at least evokes? The next paragraph promises an answer. Is there one? I continue the quotation:

All this, and much more, may have been retained, five more years later, in 1810, when he wrote *Über das Marionettentheater*, in the innocuous-looking notation: winter of 1801. But he may just as well have selected this date at random, as he wrote city of M\_\_\_\_\_, like Mainz, although he was to go to Mainz only in 1803. Who is to say that this notation is random while the other isn't? Who can tell what terrible secrets may be hidden under this harmless looking letter M? Kleist himself is probably the one least able to tell us and, if he did, we would be well-advised not to take his word for it. To decide whether or not Kleist knew his text to be autobiographical or pure fiction is like deciding whether or not Kleist's destiny, as a person and as a writer, was sealed by the fact that a certain doctor of philosophy happened to bear the ridiculous name of Krug. A story that has so many K's in it (Kant, Kleist, Krug, Kierkegaard, Kafka, K) is bound to be suspicious no matter how one interprets it. Not even Kleist could have dominated such randomly overdetermined confusion.

This is all very dazzling, this "dismemberment of language by the power of the letter" (p. 290); but what does it say about "Über das Marionettentheater"? To me, the link to Kleist's history is still hidden. In fact de Man means the passage as a demonstration of the impossibility of mastering the difference between the random and the determined, and not as even a conjectural account of the origin of Kleist's essay. As conjecture it falls completely apart; it explains nothing whatever.

Nevertheless, I want to continue reading it in the way it authorizes. The story, with its invocations of Kierkegaard and Kafka, "is bound to be suspicious". But this anachronistic story is of course de Man's, not Kleist's. So de Man is effectively challenging his readers to see his own essay as suspicious.

Well, what terrible secret does hide under "this harmless looking letter M"? De Man might as well have alluded to the harmless looking letter G in "Herr von G ...", the nobleman who owns the bear that stars in the last anecdote of Kleist's story. In fact, the link might have been better, since all the K's that de Man cites are persons, while M is a place. This is all the more striking, since in his list – "(Kant, Kleist, Krug, Kierkegaard, Kafka, K)" – de Man seems (intentionally? randomly?) to have left out the other proper name he'd earlier mentioned: Königsberg (does this perhaps faintly recall King Leopold, and so require repression?). Why then the attention on M, perhaps short for Mainz? I think

that the parallel set up between K and M (limbed letters nearly graphical rotations of one another) cements the connection: von Kleist/de Man. (I don't know whether the de Mans derived their name from Mainz, but the pun is certainly there, and de Man points to it.)

What does de Man think of the possibility of this kind of conjectural interpretation? Is it a ruse, or is it accurate? I do not claim that the clues the text is littered with are none of them red herrings. But the allusion to his own life is clear, whether intended or not, whether random or not. Indeed, not even de Man could dominate such randomly overdetermined confusion, and so he must perforce approve of this conjecture. But I think he did more than approve – he planted the clues in order to turn his reading of Kleist into its own allegory.

De Man has always seemed to his followers a super-reader. One can excuse the desire then to interpret the allegory of reading that de Man reads into Kleist: the allegory of the super-reader. C. tells Kleist's narrator of his trip to Herr von G.'s estate. Herr von G. has two sons, the elder of whom challenges C. to a fencing match. C. wins, and the son peevishly announces that he has an opponent for C. that C. will never match. And indeed C. does not match his opponent, the chained bear. This prelude de Man does not consider, although it has interesting consequences for the allegory of reading he is about to set up. C. goes from winning a fencing match to losing it, and in de Man's terms this means that something like a switch in position is occurring between reader and writer, engaged in "the fencing match of interpretation" (p. 290): fencing with the bear "I was almost in the state of the young Herr von G"<sup>7</sup>. Interesting too is the minutely described situation: G. makes no appearance in the story; but he has two sons, of whom only the elder matters to the anecdote. The familial pattern may be typical, but it also recalls the oddly triangulated specularly I've been ascribing to de Man's relation to his own family.

At any rate, de Man's interest is in the way the chained bear can infallibly tell feint from thrust. C. is absolutely unable to touch the bear, and not only that, he is unable to get the bear to react to a feint. He never hits the bear, but he doesn't even get the secondary pleasure of getting the bear to evince a mistaken and unnecessary defensiveness. The bear's imperturbability C. finds absolutely frustrating, the way he could do what no human fencer could, and utterly ignore feints, "his eye on mine, as though he could read my soul in it" (p. 830).

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7 Kleist, p. 830.

De Man sees in this bear “the figure of a super-reader who reduces the author to near-nothingness” (p. 281), and goes on to say that

the relationship between author-reader and reader-reader now becomes in a very specific sense antagonistic. For [in a hermeneutic, as opposed to imitative, model of text] the meaning that has to be revealed is not just any meaning, but the outcome of a distinction between intended and stated meaning that it is in the author's interest to keep hidden. (p. 281)

So that super-reading uncovers links or meanings that an author hides. De Man continues, with a justification of red-herrings as a way for the author to maintain control over his (or her) hidden meanings: “Hence the need to mislead the reader by constantly alternating feints with genuine thrusts: the author depends on the bewilderment and confusion of his reader to assert his control” (p. 282). Is this a fair account of de Man's own will to power over the reading of his texts? Yes and no – it's both genuine and feigned. As is the next sentence, where de Man once again elides the difference between writing and reading as a difference between biography and autobiography: “Reading is comparable to a battle of wits in which both parties are fighting over the reality or fictionality of their discourse, over the ability to decide whether the text is a fiction or an (auto)biography, narrative or history, playful or serious” (p. 282). Again, this account of reading Kleist reading invites what it also attempts to foreclose in a reading of de Man reading.

The bear is a reader who makes reading superfluous. He can always tell a feint from a thrust, and so experiences none of the resistance that constitutes reading: “The entire hermeneutic ballet is a display of waste: either we master the text, and then we are able but have no need to feint, or we don't and then we are unable to know whether we feint or not. In the first case, interpretation is superfluous and trivial, in the second it is necessary but impossible” (pp. 282-83). Yet something odd has gone on here, signaled a few lines earlier in fact: “Kleist puts his own text *en abyme* in the figure of the super-reader or super-author made invincible by his ability to know feint from” thrust (p. 282). Super-reader *or* super-author. The switch in position that I mentioned above occurs here, because suddenly in de Man's text, the bear is associated with author and not only reader. In what follows, the bear annihilates not the author (reduced to “near-nothingness”) but the reader, who knows less about his (or her) own reading of the text than the author who controls it. That reader turned writer is of course de Man, specular image of Kleist. What

more apt description for his current position (or that of his spokespersons) than de Man's description of the possibility that the author has become a super-reader, de Man as super-man? De Man is a super-reader and so becomes a super-author; and then look what happens if you follow the specular logic of this reading, by replacing "Kleist" with "de Man" in the following quotation, so that anyone who criticizes *de Man* becomes only part of "a harrassed pack of snipers beaten in advance":

And how about Kleist's own text? By staging the figure of the super-reader, has he himself become like the bear and achieved the infallible discrimination of genuine seriousness – "der Ernst des Bären" – reducing his commentators to a harrassed pack of snipers beaten in advance? Can *he* say, for example, that his text is or is not autobiographical? (p. 283)

Why the military term "snipers"? Does it matter, in view of the later revelations about de Man's past, that Kleist had been a Prussian officer? That Wilhelmine von Zenge was the daughter of a Prussian officer? Is the fencing match of interpretation one more allegory for Paul de Man's war? He continues his reading in a way that seems to suggest this, precisely by attempting to ward it off, by arguing that we cannot ever read as infallibly as a reading like mine might seem implicitly to claim to be doing. But at the same time he goes on to hint that Kleist is not quite in control of his own text. I continue the long passage that is the focus of this analysis:

Not even Kleist could have dominated such randomly overdetermined confusion. The only place where infallible bears like this one can exist is in stories written by Heinrich von Kleist.

Why did Herr C, once he had discovered, as we can assume he had, that the bear could tell feint from thrust, persist in trying to feint? Could he not have matched the bear's economy of gestures by making all his attacks genuine, forcing the bear to take them seriously? Granted it would have been tiresome, but not more so than the actual situation, and the fatigue would have been shared. Both would have sweated instead of C alone – and, for all we know, he might have scored. Such a commonsensical solution however is logically possible only if one concedes that C is free to choose between a direct and an oblique attack. But this is precisely what has to be proven. It is only an hypothesis, and as long as it has not been verified, C can never unambiguously attack. From the point of view of the bear, who knows everything, he always feints and, as seems indeed to be the case, the bear hardly ever has to make a move at all. From C's own point of view, which is deluded, no thrust ever goes where it is supposed to go. His blows are always off the mark, displaced, deviant, in error, off-target. Such is language: it always thrusts but never scores. It always refers but never to the right referent. (pp. 284-85)



This is fast, but I gather that “he always feints” because even his thrusts may be meant only to set up his feints; then they wouldn't be real thrusts. At any rate, no attack on the super-reader turned super-author can succeed. In every way, he has anticipated his readers. This anticipation is one of the lessons of the essay on Kleist. Sniping commentaries, interested in de Man's own history, will find themselves always *prevented* by de Man. What is perhaps strangest about this is the odd good humour of the whole account. And yet this is in keeping with de Man's argument. The risk that the tone meets is the risk that playfulness will be slain in the serious defensiveness that this essay puts forward. But de Man, in this section at any rate, is just not serious, unlike the bear with whom he otherwise identifies:

Why then indulge in reading (or writing) at all since we are bound to end up looking foolish, like the fencer in the story, or to become the undoer of all pleasure and play, like the bear has become by the end of the story, when he has killed off all possibility for play by scoring whenever he deigns to enter the fray – which he does out of defensive necessity. No one is hurt, for the bear never attacks, except for the game itself, forever slain in the unequal contest between seriousness and play. (p. 283)

No one is hurt, but the potential for hurt comes out of the seriousness of readers who would ignore de Man's playfulness to the peril of all flexibility. De Man here scapegoats as overserious any reader who (like me) would do to him what he nevertheless enables her to do, simply by mirroring him. Defensive necessity would be de Man's apology for the lighthearted tone of the essay, and presumably also for the “reality [of his own] history”. De Man here undoes the difference between his absolute imperturbability as the super-reader/super-author and the levity he displays, levity capable of parrying any attempt to motivate de Man's imperturbability of tone, or iciness of style.

And yet this levity may have a source in the reality of Kleist's history as well. For under the innocuous-looking notation 1801 Kleist may be alluding to another duel he learned of at that time, a duel involving another Kleist, who was saved from death and became a poet through the deadly serious triumph of levity over seriousness. Thus once more de Man's reflections on this specular text lead to another specular moment. In this one Kleist might see himself, or a wishful version of himself, in a successful kinsman – like Wilhelmine's father a Prussian officer who (unlike Heinrich) had not quit the military. In a letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge

Heinrich writes of visiting the poet Gleim in Paris. For Gleim had been a friend of the poet Ewald von Kleist, a distant relation of Heinrich's, who "fell at Frankfurt". He writes Wilhelmine:

Kleist was at that time wounded in a duel, and lay sick in bed at Potsdam. Gleim was then the regimental quartermaster and visited the sick man, without knowing anything more about him. Ah, said Kleist, I have the most terrible boredom, since I can't read anything. I'll tell you what, answered Gleim, I want to come here from time to time and read something to you. [Henri Thomas, in his novel about de Man, *Le Parjure*, will have his narrator reading to the bedridden de Man character as well.] At that very time, Gleim had just written comic poetry, in the style of Anacreon, and read him among others an ode about death, which ran something like this: Death, why do you elope with my girl? Can you fall in love with someone else? – And it goes on in this way. At the end it says: what will you do with her? Indeed with your lipless teeth you can bite the girl, but not kiss her. – At this idea, how death with his naked, angular teeth vainly pressed into the soft red lips, in quest of a kiss, Kleist laughed so hard that through his shaking the bandage on the wound on his hand jumped off. They called a surgeon, who said, It's a good thing that you sent for me, since gangrene is developing insidiously, and tomorrow it would have been too late. – Out of gratitude Kleist dedicated to poetry the life that poetry had rescued for him<sup>8</sup>.

This Kleist is wounded by a pistol duel, not a sword. And the military context is clear, even if its seriousness is relieved by the luridly comic text that saves Kleist's life. The grotesque undoing of prosopopoeia would, I think, have appealed to de Man.

But why did de Man choose Kleist as the occasion of parodic confession? Or why did Kleist choose him? In the last sentence of "Aesthetic Formalization" de Man coordinates history with "the fencing match of interpretation". That fencing match is not the same as the one-sided one between chained bear and attacking but powerless human. De Man performs here his own indifference to the past, precisely in the way he anticipates all criticism, and suggests that none of it can possibly hit its mark. And yet it was the same indifference to the hideousness of German hegemony that allowed de Man first to accede in and then to obliterate his part in the disarticulation of the Low Countries during World War II. These bodily terms are nearly the same as those he uses on 25 February 1941 when he praises the Belgian army for its resistance to the Germans: *praise designed to denigrate Belgium's allies*, not the Germans (and also

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8 My translation from the letter which appears in Kleist's *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Munich, Hanser, 1961, II, 656-57. This is the edition and volume that de Man uses.



to produce propaganda demonstrating that Belgium could still think herself free even though she was in chains): “Among all the armies placed on the line, the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Belgian, only this last maintained control of its movements and was not dislocated by the German attacks.” That dislocation and loss of motor control, that disarticulation, began with a military conquest spearheaded by a Panzer Division whose invasion was so precisely coordinated that it might have reminded one of a well-executed *German* dance, composed of many complicated figures and turns<sup>9</sup>. Much as the young de Man wanted to read this invasion as a mock combat, led by “highly civilized invaders”, for others it was all too serious.

The Panzer Division which most effectively disarticulated the Low Countries – or perhaps articulated them, made them limbs of Germany – was commanded by a general named Ewald von Kleist<sup>10</sup>. The French name for that division was le corps Kleist, the Kleist body. De Man became one of the willing puppets of the masters of le corps Kleist, sublimely indifferent to “the suffering that daily twists humanity at war”, an indifference for which “Aesthetic Formalization” is perhaps mirror, perhaps apology.

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9 See B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, New York, Morrow, 1948, pp. 111-136, for example this: “[General] Blumentritt revealed that on *eleven* occasions between November and April the armies received the order to ‘fall in’ – to be ready to attack in forty-eight hours. ‘Each time it was cancelled before the time expired. These repeated cancellations led us to think that Hitler was merely bluffing, and was only using the threat of attack as a means of prompting the Allies to consider his peace offer.’ But when the twelfth order came, in the month of May, events took their fatal course.” (p. 111).

10 He was a collateral descendent of Heinrich.

## Résumé

A la fin de sa vie, Paul de Man proposa ses réflexions sur la forme, le développement et les effets de ce qu'il a appelé "l'idéologie esthétique". Il fit remonter l'une des formes prises par cette idéologie en Europe à l'erreur que (selon lui) Schiller commit en lisant Kant, une erreur qu'il mit en parallèle avec celle commise par Goebbels lorsqu'il s'inspira de Schiller. "Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* représente l'un des plus importants de ces exposés. La manière dont l'essai est construit est néanmoins curieuse et semblerait dépendre d'une lecture dont l'excentricité reproduit, pour le moins, celle que cet essai découvre et analyse chez Kleist. Suivant une pratique déconstructionniste devenue courante, j'essaie de soumettre cet essai au même genre de lecture que cet essai lui-même applique à Kleist. Il semblerait, d'après cette lecture, que de Man écrit une "crypto-autobiographie" faisant allusion aux activités collaborationnistes auxquelles il s'était engagé en Belgique, de 1940 à 1943. La raison pour laquelle de Man aurait produit une telle autobiographie reste mystérieuse. Il espérait peut-être offrir, au cas où ses activités apparaîtraient au jour, une justification qui ne se découvrirait que si ces activités elle-mêmes étaient découvertes; ou peut-être peut-il lui-même être accusé d'entretenir une relation détachée, voire esthétisée, avec sa propre histoire.

