Sogang University, Seoul

Dan Disney

Sublime writers, sceptical re-readers: toward recuperating Paul de Man's problematics of reading

Abstract

Paul de Man's transgressive, trans-genred theoretical writing style is complex and difficult, but his theories equip postmodern reader-writers with critical positions to read, write, and think from. However, when applying the theorist's re-reading strategies to his own essay, 'Phenomenality and materiality in Kant', creative writers must speak back to de Man when he attempts to reframe the sublime as a purely linguistic principle. In opposing de Man's rhetorical claims, creative writers are likely to argue that rather than a linguistic principle, the sublime remains a phenomenological event.

Keywords: Paul de Man, the sublime, creative writing

The resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language.
– Paul de Man, 'Resistance to Theory' (1981)

Ask classrooms of Creative Writing students for their impressions of the theoretical attitudes of late postmodernity, and responses range from groans to incorruptible silence. What is it about these discourses which fails to appeal to fledgling creative writers – who are each busy discovering complex textual inventions with which to make their own appeal to reading communities. In an era of studied indifference toward the jargons of the late twentieth century's theoretical avant-garde, many creative writers may be surprised to learn they already exercise a gamut of skills embedded in those theories so steadily resisted. Paul de Man's critical program is exemplary of an approach to reading and writing which is difficult, useful, and all too often ignored.

De Man's prolixity enamours him to few, yet creative writers able to make sense of his critical writings stand to augment positions they read, write, and indeed think from. The theorist labels himself 'a philologist and not a philosopher' (de Man 1986: 118) and re-examines the origins of the 'science of language' reified in that classical model from antiquity: the *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Investigating what de Man terms an 'uncertain relationship between grammar and rhetoric' (de Man 1986: 14), new ground is broken when the theorist reminds readers that tropes are no longer part of the study of grammar (as they once were), but are rhetorical. De Man implies that language is not fixed, but is instead essentially tropological (that is, figured with metaphor, metonym, simile, synecdoche, and irony). After de Man, reading is neither stable nor stabilizing, and no text is fixed because no language can be.

Under the weight of this insight, all reading ‘implies the persistent threat of misreading’ (de Man 1983: 285).

The implications extend beyond Wimsatt and Beardsley’s intentional fallacy; de Man’s attack on the New Critical way of approaching literature delimits the possible meanings of any genre’s texts. Read alongside Whitman’s truism, that ‘to have great poets we need great readers too’, de Man’s strategies challenge the idea of how critical and creative writers make knowledge products; provisionality, contingency, and pluricentricity are implicit to any style that follows after de Man. Literary critics necessarily become meta-rhetoricians, but de Man also opens horizons of ficto-criticism, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics, and individualistic trans-generic writing styles. Perhaps in the aftermath of his deconstructive program, it is not just reading but also writing that carries a persistent threat – of miswriting? – which is to say that once-valorized, enshrined modes of ‘Writing’ are thrown into doubt. After de Man, proto-writers re-read, re-think, and re-format generic typologies, to make new kinds of texts confabulated through inverting, displacing, and combining how ideas are matched to language. The emphasis is exploring and extending genre.

Reacting against what he perceived to be the New Critics’ logocentrism, in his essay ‘Semiology and Rhetoric’ de Man insists literature has been misapprehended as ‘a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic (is) the person who opens the lid in order to release into the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside’ (de Man 1979: 5). De Man repositions the act of reading by ascribing a ‘priority of *lexis* over *logos*’ (de Man 1979: 45), and it remains the responsibility of orthographically-sensitive readers to interrogate whether languages’ literatures make their meanings literally or figuratively (or whether it is ever possible to tell the difference). Under this critical light all genres are re-read as literary, and no text may claim a generically-affirmed relationship with truthfulness. For creative writers, this truism may seem fundamental to the techné of making organically-unified texts. No writer has a box of inventor-god truths to be set into each new piece of writing; creative texts don’t happen this way because language is not stratified with truths seen only by an elite group writing for the later edification of others (we might recall Plato’s allegory of the cave), but is instead a malleable material with its own internal structures which (de Man appreciates) invites experimentation and innovation.

Indeed, de Man’s speculative critical experiments are themselves creative in their own way: in ‘Semiology and Rhetoric’, de Man selectively re-reads a character from a popular television show, a poem by Yeats, a character in a novel by Proust, and Peircean semiology in order to synthesize his arguments. This intertextual pastiche is unapologetically erudite, and assumes a vast platform of foreknowledge – indeed, as do many commentaries on de Man. Similarly to the theorist’s dialectical ambit, these commentaries (and I include my own here) both assume a degree of foreknowledge and carry an explicit dialectical weight, which may be picked up (or left) by readers. But while there is something creative to the stylized argumentation of postmodern discourses like de Man’s work, creative writers may feel resistant to picking up conversation with theorists (and their commentators) because, unlike creative texts, these discourses are dialectical; rather than making art, this is writing which instead makes arguments.

An example of de Man’s creative argumentation arrives when the theorist proclaims deconstructive readers are sensitized to both the ‘grammatization of rhetoric’ and the ‘rhetorization of grammar’ (de Man 1979: 16). This chiasmus sets up tension between two components of the *trivium*, and proposes to systematize a style of reading rhetoric while at once deconstructing how

grammatical systems are not fixed but instead can create aporias. De Man exemplifies his proposal by quoting a question asked by once-popular television character, Archie Bunker: ‘What’s the difference?’ Bunker quips when his wife wants to know whether he will ‘have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under’ (de Man 1979: 9). When grammar is confused with rhetoric, there is a persistent threat of misreading, and it is for this reason that de Man proffers the following novel reading of the implications embedded in Bunker’s question:

(t)he grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. (de Man 1979: 10)

Is Archie Bunker asking an innocent literal question, or does he instead intend to sarcastically answer ‘*there’s no difference*’ to how his shoelaces are tied? De Man contends it is impossible to decide; using this example, he extends his speculations to include all canonical literatures, all language, as inscribed with instability.

To those who are skilled readers, this theoretical enterprise debunks the *arché* or stable origins of any text (de Man 1979: 9), and opens space for deconstructing intra-textual tensions and extra-textual intentions. Lifting the lid on language, de Man finds no fixed truths but instead locates more language; entering into conversation with de Man, this is likely to resonate with creative writers who are less in the business of channelling meaning but might more accurately be framed as inventors, wanderers, or even savages on the cusp of discovering artworks within the wilderness and wildness of language. In other words, language is not a material equipped with its own metaphysics but is instead a toolkit useful for constructing ontologies (among other edifices). The father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, calls attention to this in his essay, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’:

the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs*, *arché*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alétheia*, transcendental, consciousness, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 1978: 279-280)

In the sustained absence of those subjects performed by these cornerstone abstract nouns, postmodern discourses insist on revising conceptions of language. Truth is a linguistic production or, at best, a set of mutually agreeable terms, and this poststructural fiat may be no surprise for creative writers in the business of ‘making’ (lat. *poiesis*) or ‘going forward’ (lat. *prosa*) with language in order to invent and discover their own kinds of truthfulness.

Nearly thirty years after his death and de Man’s oeuvre remains problematic, not least because of the theorist’s early journalism. In ‘The Responsibilities of Friendship: Jacques Derrida on Paul de Man’s Collaboration’, commentator Jon Wiener reviews the Belgian-born de Man’s once little-known publishing history:

de Man wrote 170 articles for the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir*, at a time when that publication, in the words of its editors today, ‘was stolen and controlled by the occupiers, the directors and the editorial board of our newspaper having, on the

contrary, decided not to collaborate.’ *Le Soir* in those years was thus a Nazi publication, and the official postwar tribunal – the Conseil de Guerre – considered those who published in its pages to be collaborators. Even if de Man had published nothing but sports scores or recipes in *Le Soir*, he would properly be defined as a collaborator. But de Man went well beyond that, publishing praise for leading collaborators and in one article adopting an explicitly anti-Semitic position. (Wiener 1989: 798)

De Man’s early writings were enough to put the scandal surrounding him on the front page of the *New York Times* (1 December 1987); though he had publicly defended himself in 1955 while a doctoral student at Harvard University, it was only in 1987 – four years after his death – that his early anti-Semitic texts became broadly known. Ardent supporters of de Man hit back at those who avowed the scandal constituted ‘grounds for viewing the whole of deconstruction as a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration during World War II’ (Lehman 1988: 63), and the timbre of these often hostile discourses problematizes any legacy left by de Man. One cannot talk of recuperating the theorist’s program without considering this last gasp in the Theory Wars (at the height of which, some commentators labelled theory a form of ‘constructivist anti-humanism’, see Freadman and Miller 1985: 4). At stake were epistemological foundations of Literary Studies as a discipline; were literary works to be understood as hermetic entities rewarding the close reading of words on pages, or did this logocentric approach fail to apprehend texts as test sites for shifting contests and contexts, without unitary meanings? The revelation of de Man’s early publications gave opportunity (for some) to generalize a rebuttal of all emergent postmodern modes of scholarship which sought to undertake complex, sceptical, para-philosophical styles of critiquing literatures.

One problem is that de Man’s conception of language has little relation to a world of experience or objects, but instead categorizes language as performing strict rhetorical, grammatical, and logical functions. But what, say, of ethical performances? De Man’s early writings heighten the sense that humanistic imperatives are absent from his revisionary program, and the absence of any explicit moral dimension further problematizes how to read and receive de Man. In the early 21st century, one re-reads de Man’s theories (the same way we read, for example, Heidegger’s philosophies) alongside his political work: the theorist remains a pivotal, albeit flawed figure in the canonization of deconstructive practices. After the Theory Wars, when postmodern discourses were legitimized and the theoretical avant-garde reified as a dominant mode of reading and writing about literatures, critico-creative writers were freed to explore the experimental, rhetorical extensions – de Man would call these imperatives – of language. After de Man, in the freeplay of invention and/or discovery, authors are authorized to transgress, freed from perfectionistic inspirations of elitist inventor-gods. After the rise of Demanian deconstruction, reader-writers are reconfigured as makers who move into language in order to see what happens next. As practising makers, creative writers will appreciate the tropologicality of language-as-material, the shifting *lexis* of all tropes, and the *illogos* of inspiration and invention. Creative writers are likely to be already sceptical of any suggestion that their writing is a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, a scenario in which the writer opens a lid in order to place a secret truth to be later recuperated by readers.

So far, so good: when examined, de Man’s complexifications invent a ‘problematics of reading’ (de Man 1979: ix) likely to persuade creative writers to scan any text sceptically – including, perhaps especially, their own. When

language is rendered as a provisional, contingent, and plural, material space is created for new kinds of trans- and inter-genre arguments, epiphanies, tales, reflections and inventions. But herein lies a problem which is defined by genre: creative reader-writers are likely to profoundly disagree when, in the essay 'Phenomenology and materiality in Kant', de Man re-reads the sublime as a linguistic principle. Since Enlightenment, the sublime has been historicized as a philosophical principle useful for (among other ambits) framing extra-logical creativity, and de Man sets out to quarrel with this in his essay. The father of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, sets up a generic difference between poets and philosophers as mediated by the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790):

when we judge the sight of the ocean we must not do so on the basis of how we *think* it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge which we possess (but which is not contained in the direct intuition), eg, as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir supplying the water for the vapours that impregnate the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, while separating continents from one another, yet makes possible the greatest communication among them; for all such judgments will be teleological. Instead we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye – eg, if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky, or, if it is turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything – and yet find it sublime. (Kant 1997: 130)

In 'Phenomenality and materiality in Kant', de Man performs his self-assigned role of *arché* debunker and, in extreme reaction to Kant, appends this definition to poets:

The poet who sees the heavens as a vault is clearly like the savage ... He does not see prior to dwelling, but merely sees. He does not see in order to shelter himself, for there is no suggestion made that he could in any way be threatened, not even by the storm. (de Man 1996: 81)

De Man is re-reading Kantian philosophy as creative writing, as tropological rather than categorical. When the theorist writes 'we are clearly not dealing with mental categories but with tropes, and the story Kant tells us is an allegorical tale' (de Man 1996: 86), one issue remains far from clear: is this meta-critique a foray into fact, or is it in fact itself some kind of dialectical, quasi-creative tale? If, after de Man's rhetorization of grammar and grammatization of rhetoric, the languages of philosophies are to be subject to the same deconstructions as literary texts, then de Man's theoretical writing cannot be excluded from this re-reading program; accordingly, the theorist may be said to be performing his own self-reflexive story in 'Phenomenality and materiality in Kant'. When proposing that 'instead of purely intellectual beauty, we can only produce the beauty of the imagination' (de Man 1996: 84), this cannot be read as a stable proposition but is instead a debatable claim which invites scepticism: pure, intellectualized beauty is de Man's negatively-framed desire, and his ambit is to impute a version of beauty which is transgressive, postmodern, and which conflates the poetic and the philosophical into an entirely new rhetorical style.

Herewith, and rather than a philosophical mode or a mode for philosophers (like Kant) to explain what it is that poets do (and how they see), de Man the

critico-creative theoretical writer renders the sublime a language-game available to any postmodern maker:

(w)hen the sublime is translated back, so to speak, from language into cognition, from formal description into philosophical argument, it loses all inherent coherence and dissolves in the aporias of intellectual and sensory appearance ... the sublime cannot be grounded as a philosophical (transcendental or metaphysical) principle, but only as a linguistic principle. (de Man 1996: 78)

To de Man it is all language, but this programmatic discourse goes too far: the same way he foregrounds language as rhetorical, grammatical, and logical (but not ethical), in reconfiguring the sublime as *only* linguistic, de Man fails to reconsider those extra-linguistic phenomenological processes Kant ascribes as 'blind but indispensable function(s) of the soul' (Kant 1996: 130). These individualistic creative zones must surely remain unknowable but they are also defined by genre, as is de Man's critico-creative construction of the sublime as linguistic. Surrounded by the texts he re-reads, de Man's conflationary writing strategy in 'Phenomenality and materiality in Kant' draws on ideas from Foucault, Kant, Wordsworth, and a host of others. The theorist employs the word 'between' 25 times in the essay, and this pattern of repetition signifies a gesture: de Man is working between texts to make something new, and so he is right to regard the sublime as linguistic when applying it to his own style of intertextual thinking-into-language. However, to regard this new writing style as a form of purely intellectual beauty suggests de Man's confusion of *archés*: simply put, de Man's texts cannot be poetically beautiful because his work originates between the interstices of other texts, while creative writing can proliferate without the direct interventions of precursor texts (for indirect creative influence, we might recall Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*). Indeed, when de Man opens up space for trans-generic experimentation and innovation while at the same time subjugating the role of the sublime in creative processes, this seems an eloquent complexification of the ancient quarrel between creative and critical producers. It also underscores how style, genre, form, and origin differentiate purely intellectual beauty and the beauty of the imagination.

This difference separates creative theorist from creative writer: ultimately, the difference is sublime. De Man is working inside a bunker where he plans a series of attacks (on poetries, on Kantian philosophy), and his creative argumentation bears little relation to creative writing mediated through (albeit expanded) generic typologies and those attendant phenomenological processes. 'Phenomenality and materiality in Kant' resembles a deconstructive assault bearing the hallmarks of an antagonistic gesture toward dominance, and de Man's text is performing a dialectical function. Creative reader-writers who enter into conversation with de Man will at this point feel compelled to speak: the sublime may well be linguistic to de Man, but it may equally be pre- or extra-linguistic to others engaged in different kinds of making. Seemingly, then, the sublime is still to be defined by genre.

De Man's postmodern poetico-philologising is at its most political when the theorist appropriates Kant: 'in the experience of the sublime, the imagination achieves tranquillity, it submits to reason, achieves the highest degree of freedom by freely sacrificing its natural freedom to the higher power of reason' (de Man 1996: 86). But to valorize the imagination as tranquil thanks to the quelling of anxiety by reason is to once more misappropriate the sublime; de Man misreads Kant in order to persuade other postmodern theoretical stylists not to see the ocean as poets may do, but as de Man will have them see it. After de Man, external phenomena are given an indeterminate meaning by a

contingent language-game; this is a theorist attempting to enshrine his own idiomatic writing style at the apex of meaning-making, while at the same time re-reading canonical philosophies in a highly creative manner. Avowing the sublime is simply a matter of language, de Man's storytelling nonetheless makes the same ambit he criticizes other philosophical genre texts for making: here is a theorist seeking to explain, and therein exhaust, the sublime for his own programmatic purposes.

A key problem is that de Man never qualifies which poets he means; his generic, one-size-fits all 'poets' is simply too broad. Antagonisms, revolts, and revolutions in poetic genre have raged since Wordsworth came to be inspired by that sublime 'unfathered vapour' (*Prelude*, Book Six), and we have been 'Making It New!' since before Ezra Pound's century-old utterance. In the critically-illuminated, sceptical 21st century, poets in particular will resist de Man's theoretical re-reading of the sublime because, compelled toward language by blind but indispensable forces and by the generic fiat to innovate, poets nonetheless still perform (as Wordsworth performed) according to non-linguistic processes. Zones of creative activity are driven by chaotic and unpredictable arrivals; poetic making can engage both conscious and intuitive, reflective processes in which ideas are sought for but arrive according to their own protocols. De Man instead positions reason – rather than, say, poetic wonder, or what he calls the 'beauty of the imagination' – as desirable, and seeks to convince less sceptical readers that his selective re-readings both analyse and unify. But if intellectually-beautiful postmodern productions are in the business of unifying ideas in a manner similar to a poem then, rather than telling philosophical truths, methodical argumentation is not only redundant but tedious and uninspiring.

Herein, what has happened to the matter of 'truthfulness' in postmodern knowledge products? In *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected 'Problems' of 'Logic'*, Heidegger writes:

to the extent that the nineteenth century had to make culture the object of a cultural politics, philosophy became a curiosity, or what comes down to the same thing: the essence of truth became the most unquestioned and hence a matter of the highest indifference. (Heidegger 1994: 157)

'What's the difference?' de Man might ask, and the response from those who now read sceptically must be that this curious postmodern para-literary style is neither poetic nor philosophical, but can be read as a rites of passage toward a suite of programmatic impulses. This is not creative writing as philosophy, and nor is it a particularly persuasive rendering of how poets apprehend the world, but is instead a stylized manipulation of *lexis* into a position of authority and orthodoxy. This comes at the expense of both poetic mysteries and systematizing philosophical gestures.

When de Man concludes 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant' by privileging his own version of teleology, the 'seeing and dwelling, *sehen* and *wohnen* ... absent in pure aesthetic vision' (de Man 1996: 82), his politicized vision misreads Kant's poets as blind. In following his privileging assertions, de Man includes a vital clause: we are to see philosophy via the 'materiality of the letter'. Herewith, everything will be a matter of form but, in the aftermath of postmodernism, has style replaced content? The 'merely seeing' of de Man's sublimely-stricken poet-savage (de Man 1996: 81) is itself an interpretive retelling of Kant's tale which can be reworked and retold. In producing an authority through following his presentiments on language to a series of deconstructions, de Man's premise is that beauty is consonant with the

imagination – non-intelligence? – of creative writers. There is something not only totalising but hubristic to de Man's desire to appropriate the sublime for his own program.

It may be argued with equal force that poets are driven toward language by mysterious arrivals of epiphany, and that the *arché* of poems remains unable to be surveyed, reasoned, or made logical. As Heidegger states, enjambling his line to add emphasis, tension, and surprise: 'We never come to thoughts. They come/ to us' (Heidegger 1971: 6). Poets may well wait for thinking to arrive from positions of lucid questioning emanating from sublime, non-linguistic states of responsiveness to wonder. Without the generic impulse to prosecute wonder with a reasoning style, a poet encounters the everyday (the heavens, storms, oceans; the megalopoli, technologies, transmutations) not as a savage but as a subject with imaginative faculties able to register symbolic values – the *mythos* rather than philosophies' purported *logos* – before moving next into lexical and generic considerations of how to interrogate the ordinary as arcane. The re-reading poets undertake is a scansion of culture as artefact; this sublime and gnostic knowing is not a linguistic principle but a framing of apprehension, which is often extra-logical and can knock us sideways out of accustomed modes of perceiving and indeed, momentarily, out of language.

Were de Man working as a creative writer rather than amid a suite of selected texts, his apprehension of sublime arrivals of thinking may have been modulated by different processes and productions. Aesthetic vision is so often not based on seeking to comprehend; rather than dialectical argumentation, poems can produce a kind of beauty which reflects what, who, and how we are as mysterious. De Man mistakes and mis-shapes the sublime, but his broader program equips creative writers with a space to reconsider what language is and how writing happens. Creative writers who understand language can be simultaneously literal and figural may turn attention to how their work essentializes those fleeting moments of immersion and epiphany. Fundamental to this understanding, though, is the generic and intuitive knowledge that rather than a linguistic principle, the sublime can be principal to beginning to work poetically.

Works cited

de Man, P 1996 *Aesthetic Ideology* (ed and intro by A Warminksi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press return to text

de Man, P 1986 *The Resistance to Theory* (foreword by W Godzich), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press return to text

de Man, P 1983 *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press return to text

de Man, P 1979 *Allegories of Reading: figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven: Yale University Press return to text

Derrida, J 1978 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in *Writing and Difference* (trans and intro by A Bass), Chicago: University of Chicago Press return to text

Freadman, R and S Miller 1992 *Re-thinking Theory*, Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press return to text

Heidegger, M 1994 *Basic Questions in Philosophy: Selected 'Problems' of 'Logic'* (trans R Rojcewicz and A Schuwer), Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press return to text

Heidegger, M 1971 *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans and intro by A Hofstadter), New York: Perennial Classics return to text

Kant, I 1996 *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781] (trans WS Pluhar, intro by PW Kitcher), Indianapolis: Hackett return to text

Kant, I 1997 *Critique of Judgment* [1790] (trans WS Pluhar), Indianapolis: Hackett return to text

Lehman, D 1991 *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, New York: Poseidon Press

Lehman, D 1988 'Deconstructing de Man's Life', *Newsweek* (15 February): 63 return to text

Wiener, J 1989 'The Responsibilities of Friendship: Jacques Derrida on Paul de Man's Collaboration', *Critical Inquiry* 15, 4 (Summer): 797-803 return to text

Dr Dan Disney teaches twentieth century poetries at Sogang University, in Seoul. A collection of poems, And then when the, will be published by John Leonard Press in July 2011. A suite from this collection won Second Prize in the Josephine Ulrick Poetry awards 2011 click here

TEXT

Vol 15 No 1 April 2011

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy

Text@griffith.edu.au