



Allegorical Interpretation of Reading in the Light of Paul de Man

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ABSTRACT

A deconstructive theorist, Paul de Man had a powerful influence on a generation of the most elite students of literature in the United States. Paul de Man was part of a group of deconstructionists in America known as the Yale Group. The best known of these were Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller. Paul de Man's work (*Allegories of Reading*) has turned to allegory as the paradigmatic instance of rhetoric and rhetorical language, of the sign whose meaning cannot be fixed but is continually deferred, both calling for and resisting interpretation. As a sign of deferred or absent meaning, allegory has once again occupied a critical position, this time as the trope of tropes, by its very name ('other-speaking') announcing itself as the definitive mark of the contingency of language and its referential claims. And conversely, all reading, all critical practice, is allegoresis, that is, allegorical interpretation. This paper attempts to examine allegorical interpretation of reading in the light of Paul de Man.

KEY WORDS: Paul de Man, Rhetoric Language, Allegory, Reading.

INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to "solicit" or shake post-structuralism today is compelled to contend with Paul de Man, whose exemplary emphasis on the act of reading may actually teach us a good deal about how to "solicit." Since the critique of representation occupies a prominent position in such a project, we could begin our reading of Paul de Man by looking at his conception of *allegory*. I use "allegory" in a sense that has little to do with English or German pre-Romantic usage of the term. Jameson (1986:65-88) summarizes the significance of allegory for contemporary theory:

If allegory has once again become somehow congenial for us today, as over against the massive and monumental unifications of an older modernist symbolism or even realism itself, it is because the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol. Our traditional conception of allegory - based, for instance, on stereotypes of Bunyan - is that of an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences; this is, so to speak, a one-dimensional view of this signifying process, which might only be set in motion and complexified were we willing to entertain the more alarming notion that such equivalences are themselves in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text.

Allegorical Interpretation of Reading

This not only interrogates the idea that a text's reading must be "adequate" to a referent, but also helps de Man perform a thoroughgoing critique of totalizing interpretive models which he invokes synecdochically with the words "metaphor" and "historicism." Derrida's (1982:294 -326) argument regarding representation, which de Man would endorse, has helped problematize the notion of "adequacy" in the interpretive paradigms of literary criticism and literary historiography, although it problematizes adequacy of representation. De Man's conception of allegory does not, I shall argue, account for the *historicity* of the text. What I explore in this paper is the question of whether it is the neglect of historicity that in fact *enables* de Man's theory of allegory, and if so, whether this turning away still allows us to use the strengths of de Man's critique of representation. By historicity I mean what Nietzsche would call

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effective history, history "working" in our times. Also marked by historicity would be those conjunctures of past and present that Walter Benjamin calls "constellations" (Niranjana 1988).

The act of reading crucial to de Man's idea of literary theory is, he claims, one that is being "systematically avoided" by contemporary critics bent on ignoring the tension in the text between "grammar" and "rhetoric." De Man's notion of reading comes out of his concern with allegory, which he would salvage from its devalued position in post-Romantic criticism by suggesting that it undermines the totalizing movement of metaphor, a figure he often equates with the symbol. For de Man, allegory is both "enigmatic and inescapable," a "unique and plural touchstone by which all readings and literary and philosophical corpuses are measured" (Derrida 1986:36). Derrida also points out that in de Man's work allegory always precludes "any totalizing summary," for it is "not simply one form of figurative language among others; it represents one of language's essential possibilities; the possibility that permits language to say the other and to speak of itself while speaking of something else; the possibility of always saying something other than what it gives to be read, including the scene of reading itself (*ibidem*:11).

Allegory challenges the Romantic and post-Romantic valorization of the symbol which indicates a privileging of what Derrida would call the "transcendental signified." De Man's own critical practice tries to deliver literary theory from the constraints of historical and hermeneutical models, which for him are manifestations of "Western metaphysics" (De Man 1979). I use "metaphysics" here to refer to Western philosophy, which, in Jacques Derrida's work, is shown to have privileged throughout its history presence over absence, speech over writing, unity of meaning over "dissemination." I do not intend to suggest, however, that de Man's project is identical to Derrida's. De Man does deal, however, with both "literary" and "philosophical" texts, and frequently indicates that the borderline between the two discourses cannot be clearly drawn. In the preface to *Allegories of Reading*, de Man says that he used the term "deconstruction" before Derrida's texts became popular in Anglo-American academia. Of course, de Man's sense of the word is slightly different from Derrida's but de Man says he would gladly incorporate the meaning the word has come to have.

Gasche (1981) and Gearhart (1983:63-81; 1984:234-284) provide perceptive discussions of the differences between de Man and Derrida. Western philosophy has according to de Man, repressed or covered up the "aporia" between constative (or referential) and performative (or figural) language. This repression is conducted in the interests of the unity of meaning, a unity that needs to be deconstructed in order to recover figurality. The power of philosophical language can be subverted, says de Man, by showing how language itself is "figure," a notion which he says destabilizes the thrust toward totalization of meaning. De Man's work suggests further that literature is the supreme example of figural language. In an operation he sees as paradigmatic for the critique of metaphysics, de Man mounts an attack on the model of literary history predominant in contemporary criticism (a model he sees as "genetic" and therefore a manifestation of a "totalizing" historicism) and on the kind of literary interpretation that strives for adequacy of representation. His main concern is to develop a literary theory that performs "the methodical undoing of the grammatical construct" and produces the "literariness" of the text (De Man 1982b:3-20). In other words, de Man's reading of a text produces its "allegory," but it is one that is always an allegory of its own reading. According to the parameters he sets up for his project, de Man would claim to be "unreadable." By this token, one can either not read him at all "read" him in a style approximating his own, or else read him against himself. For expository reasons, I shall follow the third option, undertaking what de Man would criticize as a "genetic" reading to trace his preoccupation with allegory from the relatively early essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969) to *Allegories of Reading* (1979) and some of the later essays. De Man (1984) had written on Romanticism before 1969. But none of the essays deal extensively with the notion of allegory. Some of the essays in *Allegories of Reading*, however, were first written in the early 1970's (Singleton 1969). I shall also indicate how a rhetorical reading of de Man's work, that is, a search for the "hinges" of his text, would give us a series of what seem to be metacritical statements. It is not always possible to determine whether de Man is "blind" to the way these statements function in his text.

However, these statements, which are usually drawn from the text de Man is examining, merit close attention, since he appears to be using them to support his own readings. For de Man, the "key to the critique of metaphysics" seems to be conception of the rhetoricity or figurality of language. His description of allegory or "figure" appears, as I suggested earlier, to depend on a critique of "historicism," and on a series of elaborately conceived, constantly shifting distinctions between terms like grammar and rhetoric, truth and error, metaphor and metonymy, trope and persuasion, constative and performative utterance, symbol and allegory. One of de Man's earliest discussions of allegory is to be found in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," his account of the Romantics' privileging of symbol over allegory. It is the historian of Romanticism, suggests de Man, who is attracted by the appeal to totality made by the symbol and records it as being the supreme Romantic image, in opposition to allegory, which is seen as non-organic and limited in meaning. A fundamental concept of the aesthetics of Romanticism adopted by Anglo-American critics is the metaphor, which they would define (under the influence of Coleridge) as "a dialectic between object

and subject, in which the experience of the object takes on the form of a perception or a sensation" (*ibidem*:178). The metaphor indicates a synthesis, the mode of which is "defined as 'symbolic' by the priority conferred on the initial moment of sensory perception" (*ibidem*).

At the same time that the writers on Romanticism, for example, M. H. Abrams and Earl Wasserman, privilege the subject's perception, they also assert that nature (the object) is seen by the Romantics as having priority over the self (the subject). De Man agrees with those commentators who believe the subject-object tension is part of a "pseudo dialectic." This dialectic comes out of "the assumed predominance of the symbol" in Romantic diction, a predominance that de Man would question. Putting into question the predominance of symbol over allegory in Romantic/post-Romantic criticism will lead us, suggests de Man, to the Romantics' rediscovery of an allegorical tradition. In a reading of Wordsworth and Coleridge, de Man indicates that the "asserted superiority" of symbol over allegory is a "defensive strategy" that allows the Romantics to hide from the knowledge of the self's "authentically temporal predicament" (*ibidem*:191). This predicament is evoked by allegory, the figure that is "a relationship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance" (*ibidem*:190).

Having suggested that for the Romantics "the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous," de Man then forges a connection between allegory and irony, implying that they - and all figural language - share a similar structure, where "the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning." De Man seems to be making the reductive assumption that the sign has a literal meaning in the first place. Although it is not clear whether de Man is treating allegory as a sign, or as a sequence of signs, this definition does point forward to both *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and the concept of literature/ literariness they elaborate. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man elaborates the notion of parabasis/anacoluthon as figure/trope, a notion that informs his conception of allegory and is, therefore, crucial to his later readings of 19th century writers. Parabasis, according to Schlegel (as de Man quotes him), is a disjunction, a disruption of the continuum -such as the author's persona interrupting a narrative to address the reader - that could also be called irony. The term comes from theory of drama, and refers to a choric interference in the action. In the central essay in *Blindness and Insight*, de Man (1971:102-141) uses *both* Derrida and Rousseau to make his point about the "literary" text, which is "any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature; that is, of its 'rhetoricity'" (*ibidem*:136). According to de Man, critics achieve an insight through a negative moment in their thought which "annihilates" the premises leading up to the insight. The vision of criticism, therefore, is "blind." And this blindness is "the necessary correlative of the rhetorical nature of literary language" (*ibidem*:141), a rhetoricity that also structures the language of criticism and philosophy.

De Man even suggests here that although the blindness of a text is what makes it literary, a text without blind spots, like Rousseau's, is more "mature" and more "radical" than Nietzsche's or Derrida's, since it is able to account fully for its own undoing. As de Man has it in "Literary History and literary Modernity," literature's specificity "is defined by its inability to remain constant to its own specificity" (*ibidem*: 159); it is "a form of language that knows itself to be mere repetition, mere fiction and allegory" (*ibidem*:161). Traditional literary history, according to de Man, cannot account for the literary *aporia*, literature's simultaneous existence as truth and error. De Man (1979:131) defines "aporia" as that which allows for "two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view." De Man's continued polemic against the "genetic pattern of literary history" is at the centre of the Nietzsche essays in *Allegories*. De Man's view of "history," however, is curiously monolithic. He insists that historical explanation is a flight from language; historiography, for him, is always genetic (searching for origins) and teleological (moving towards a closure). For de Man, the genetic principle "*necessarily* underlies all historical narrative" (*ibidem*:82, italics mine). Even Nietzsche's own denunciation of Romanticism, says de Man, still labors within the genetic, totalizing, teleological pattern of what Nietzsche himself would call monumental history. Already in *Blindness and Insight*, de Man had suggested that allegory, far from being representational, was therefore an intralinguistic figure. De Man is suggesting, of course, that a conception of allegory dependent on the critique of "metaphysics" has to be intralinguistic, and consequently, a historical. Examining the relationship in the medieval trivium between grammar, rhetoric and logic, de Man (1982:14) claims that "literariness" is a use of language "that foregrounds the rhetorical over the grammatical and the logical function . . ." The resulting "tension" between grammar and rhetoric informs de Man's notions of reading, deconstruction, and allegory.

In "Semiology and Rhetoric," the distinction first made by John Austin between constative and performative utterances is aligned by de Man with the distinction between grammar and rhetoric, or the referential and the non-referential. Joseph Riddel (1986:89) suggests that de Man's critical language employs a strategy of paleonymy, using old concepts in "new and not yet defined or definable senses." Rodolphe Gasche (1981:36-57) sees in *Allegories of Reading* a critique of the notion of the "speech act" itself. It should be pointed out here that de Man does not

redefine Austin's concept of illocution, and consequently his use of the term (and his use of the performative constative distinction) seems to contradict Austin's.

One wishes de Man would somehow "signal" his points of departure. For de Man, literariness dwells in "the aporia between constative and performative" functions of language. Our acceptance, and our understanding, of this claim depends on an acceptance of de Man's distinction between constative and performative, a distinction that implicitly argues for a notion of the performative as "intralinguistic" (like allegory) and a notion of the constative as "referential." De Man would also treat "performance" as analogous to "figure," which for him is intralinguistic, and which he sometimes uses as a synonym for allegory. De Man's distinction between performative and constative is analogous to the one between rhetoric and grammar. In aligning rhetoric (which for him is literature) with the intralinguistic, he questions the claim of literature to speak of a world "other" than its own, raising issues of referentiality in language as well, especially because he advocates that philosophical, critical and literary discourses be seen as continuous with one another: "Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction; it may differ from critical or discursive writing in the economy of its articulation, but not in kind" (De Man 1979:17).

We must remember that de Man derives these "metacritical" statements from his readings of diverse texts, both "literary" and "philosophical." His method of appropriation is quite unique: he follows the "stuttering" narratives of a Proust, a Nietzsche or a Rousseau to the point where deconstructed text becomes deconstructor's weapon, where residual statements ("strategies that tended to remain unnoticed") not only undo the text that supports them but are also assimilated into de Man's own arsenal. Thus we can, perhaps, equate these "residual" statements with de Man's own "metacritical" statements. If a narrative were capable of continuing the contradictions of its own reading, says de Man (*ibidem*:72), it would have "the universal significance of an allegory of reading." From a description of Proust's attempt to reassert "the superiority of the 'symbolic' metaphor over the literal, prosaic metonymy," de Man (*ibidem*, italics mine) concludes authoritatively that "any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading . . . it will *always* lead to the confrontation of incompatible meanings between which it is *necessary but impossible* to decide in terms of truth and error." The "incompatible meanings," de Man seems to be saying, reside solely in language; allegory is intralinguistic, and therefore in de Man's scheme, a historical.

Throughout his work, de Man develops his contrast between the "allegorical" and the "historical." Allegory is, for de Man, "an endlessly repeated gesture" (*ibidem*:118), the repetition being one of a potential confusion between figurative and referential statement" (*ibidem*:116). The "historical" pattern, on the other hand, is always "revelatory of a teleological meaning." For de Man, the problematization of representation always seems to lead to a privileging of "figure," which is intralinguistic, and, as always, he is careful to indicate that this affirmation comes from the text he is reading (in this case, Nietzsche) and not necessarily from his own critical discourse. He goes on to suggest that the "necessary subversion of truth by rhetoric" is "the distinctive feature of all language" (*ibidem*: 110). In a series of substitutions, de Man has introduced truth in the place of grammar. Later, he extends the chain of substitutions to include deconstruction, which he aligns with rhetoric (and uses in place of the term "allegory" or the term "literature"). Especially because metaphor occupies such a prominently negative position in de Man's thinking (as an analogue of the "symbol" that is opposed to allegory), it is fascinating to watch him do in his writing exactly what he says is done by Rousseau or by Nietzsche; he performs "analogical, metaphorical substitutions" (*ibidem*:122), describing "seductive similarities where they do not exist" (*ibidem*:239), thus reproducing what he sees as the "aberrant totalizations characteristic of metaphor."

Rousseau's text, claims de Man (*ibidem*:145) in his discussion of metaphor as the totalizing figure par excellence, "describes conceptualization as substituting one verbal utterance ... for another on the basis of a resemblance that hides differences which permitted the existence of entities in the first place." In other words, conceptualization is similar to the creation of metaphor, a figure that he characterizes as a disfiguration: "Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning" (*ibidem*: 151).

De Man points out that language ironically is made possible by the erring metaphor; this observation in turn allows him to substitute for the "double process" of conceptualization the narrative pattern of allegory. From the study of Rousseau's theory of language, de Man (*ibidem*:155) derives his own proposition that "conceptual language ... is a lie superimposed upon an error." Rousseau's genealogical fable concerning the word "man," a fable that involves a metonymic substitution (the "naming" of man as "giant"), suggests to de Man that this concept is the result of the "deceitful misrepresentation of an original blindness" (*ibidem*), and is, therefore, "doubly metaphorical" (*ibidem*:154). The "second metaphor," says de Man (*ibidem*:153), is equated by Rousseau with "the literary . . . and the rhetorical." The dizzying substitutions de Man carries out have turned "metaphor," which - analogous to the symbol - was the totalizing image- par excellence, into "second metaphor" or allegory. In the other Rousseau essays, de Man continues to use in this contradictory sense the figure (that is, metaphor) which he had earlier denounced as involving a sense perception. He speaks of "the curiously unreadable metaphor of reading" and of how "all readings

are in error because they assume their own readability" (*ibidem*:202), thereby concealing the "radical figurality of language."

If the metaphor of reading in Rousseau is a "deconstructive narrative," says de Man, then narratives to the second or third degree can be called allegories: "Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading ... " (*ibidem*:205). Metaphor, which has to decide between symbolization and signification, referentiality and figuration, is used by de Man as the trope which is itself a kind of metonymy for language. Like metaphor, language has to *totalize* in order to arrive at a meaning. De Man (*ibidem*:210, italics mine), however, makes frequent references to "the aberrant *proper* meaning of metaphors against which the allegory constitutes itself.." It is difficult to see what the "proper" meaning could be in the scheme that de Man derives from Rousseau's linguistics, a scheme in which connotation is "wild" and reference "can never be a meaning."

In the "Excuses" chapter of *Allegories*, de Man once again returns to his concern with "parabasis." Now he describes it in terms of a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two "rhetorical codes," those of "performative rhetoric" and "cognitive rhetoric;" this distinction seems to replace or allude to or repeat/ reproduce the one between performative and constative utterance. Then discontinuity between the codes, says de Man, becomes "irony" or "permanent parabasis" when it is "disseminated" over all points of "the figural line" (*ibidem*:300). Irony, thus accorded the status of a meta-trope, not only "enforces the repetition" of an aberrant tropological system but also undoes allegory, which is itself deconstructive of all "tropological cognitions," and thereby undoes "understanding" itself.

To approach de Man's statement about irony from a different angle, let us consider for a moment his essay on Pascal (Greenblatt 1969). Here he declares that "allegory is the trope of irony," though this is to say "something that is *true enough* but not intelligible" (*ibidem*:12). Seizing on his own observation that Pascal's text shows how "one is the trope of zero" but zero is not subject to "real definition," de Man uses this notion, in a technique we have seen throughout *Allegories of Reading*, to say allegory is the trope of irony but irony cannot be defined. The alternative is compulsive repetition of the pattern, insistent and aberrant reading, allegorization of the allegory.

I have argued that although de Man's notion of allegory performs a valuable critique of representation, it does not have a rich conception of history or historicity. De Man's allegorical readings, therefore, cannot account for either the historical construction of a text or its specific deployments in different historical situations. The hegemonic version of American post-structuralism, of which de Man has been a major exponent, seems indeed to have a "defective cornerstone" (De Man 1982a:761-775; Krupnick 1983:139-153). The allegorical tension which de Man would place at the center of all language and all literature ultimately results in the creation of a realm uncontaminated by the contradictions and flux of the "world" and of "history."

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