

Allegory, Pathos, and Irony: The Resistance to Benjamin in Paul de Man

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ABSTRACT

Paul de Man's writings on allegory are significantly influenced by the work of Walter Benjamin. Nevertheless, Benjamin is conventionally perceived as semireligious and pathos-laden, whereas de Man is described as secular and emotionless. A close reading of selections from the two authors' works (in particular Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and de Man's *Blindness and Insight*) complicate this distinction, and the stereotypes supporting it. Both de Man and Benjamin help us to question the accepted borders between the emotively charged and the detached, the sacred and the profane, the redemptive and the nihilistic—hence their controversial yet unflagging resonance in contemporary culture.

In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it.

—Walter Benjamin¹

I intend to take the divine out of reading.

—Paul de Man²

One of Paul de Man's most original contributions to contemporary literary theory is a new formulation of the concept of allegory. De Man was perhaps the last great scholar of the twentieth century to deal with allegory, and he took upon himself the very difficult task of both giving a systematic definition of the concept and using it as a reading strategy. In order to fully understand and appreciate de Man's work on allegory, it is essential to consider it in relation to Walter Benjamin's writings on the subject. I propose to show how and where Benjamin's influence is present in de Man's reflections on allegory, and how de Man both absorbed and resisted this influence.

After some general considerations regarding de Man's reading of Benjamin, I will analyze some passages of the last chapter ("Allegory and Trauerspiel") of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*; I will then consider the first part ("Allegory and Symbol") of de Man's essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality." Finally, my conclusion deals with the second part of that essay, "Irony."³ I focus on these texts because they are the more complete and structured among the works on allegory written by the two authors, who are both famous for the fragmentariness of their criticism. I will attempt a stylistic reading in order to identify the traces—or perhaps one should say the symptoms—of Benjamin's presence, especially in de Man's critical lexicon. I therefore inevitably give preference to a limited, horizontal reading of language and style, instead of a vertical reading of the wider theoretical and cultural implications of Benjamin's and de Man's writings. Nevertheless, it is important to note that de Man and Benjamin are typically associated with two very different kinds of criticism, which can be characterized by a potentially endless series of rather vague yet intriguing binary oppositions: secular vs. nonsecular, apathetic vs. pathetic, neutral vs. radical, technical vs. poetic, and many others.⁴ While questioning these simplistic distinctions on a rhetorical level, one must keep in mind the wider issues concerning traditional academic classifications, and on an even larger scale contemporary transformations of intellectual and ideological paradigms. Even though the complexity of these topics exceeds the limits of my essay, I hope it will still be of some use for those engaged in more challenging tasks.⁵

Although Benjamin wrote *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in 1924 and 1925, the text, along with the full corpus of Benjamin's works, was not fully rediscovered by American criticism until the sixties.⁶ Even if de Man was a cosmopolitan scholar, holding teaching positions in the United States and Europe,⁷ "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (first published in 1969) may be considered one of the most significant responses to this rediscovery. Surprisingly, given his slightly atypical yet authoritative position in American academia, at least before the shocking posthumous revelation of his antisemitic writings of the 1940s,⁸ de Man published only two books in his lifetime: *Blindness and Insight* (1971 and 1983) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979).⁹ In these two collections, Benjamin is quoted very rarely and almost incidentally: twice in the second edition of the first book (in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," where the quotations are in fact not much more than bibliographical references), and only once in the second book. In de Man's posthumous works, on the other hand, Benjamin is quoted often. At first glance there may seem to be two de Mans. The early de Man (from the sixties to the end of the seventies) is a more or less formalist reader interested in rhetoric and language, who gradually but relentlessly rejects the pathetic nuances of "a kind of existential philosophical mode of discourse . . . used . . . by critics like Blanchot or philosophers like Heidegger," whereas the late de Man (in the eighties)

is a politically aware thinker, more and more interested in Marx and deeply inspired by Benjamin's critical model.¹⁰

In fact, however, this distinction is erroneous, for if one reads carefully the quotations made by the late de Man, they are often slightly ironic, if not subtly negative: sometimes Benjamin seems an example to avoid, rather than a master to follow. For instance, in the brief "'Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" (the last of six Messenger Lectures delivered at Cornell University in February and March 1983, before his death in December 1983), which is now included in the 1986 volume *The Resistance to Theory*, the author writes:

You have the critical perception, you have the possibility of carrying on in apocalyptic tones, you have the particular eloquence that comes with that (because one can only really get excited if one writes in an apocalyptic mode); but you can still talk in terms of hope. . . . Benjamin would be an example of this combination of nihilistic rigor with sacred revelation.¹¹

Or, in a 1981 article on Bakhtin's "Dialogue and Dialogism," in the same collection, de Man explains with a light touch of sarcasm the reasons behind Benjamin's recent literary success:

Literary theory . . . a rather barren area of endeavor constantly threatened by the tedium of its techniques as well as by the magnitude of the issues, offers poor soil for the heroes and the hero-worship that it rather desperately needs. So when a possible candidate for such a status comes along, he is likely to be very well received, especially if he is safely and posthumously out of reach. . . . A fairly recent example is, of course, the case of Walter Benjamin.¹²

Nevertheless, as Jan Rosiek points out,

De Man's own knowledge of Benjamin goes back at least to the mid-60s, where we find the first explicit reference in a 1964 review. One might argue that Benjamin's influence can be detected even in de Man's Ph.D. dissertation, *Mallarmé, Yeats, and the Post-Romantic Predicament* (1960), as it is structured on the basis of a distinction between the natural image and the emblem.¹³

In fact, Benjamin's "Allegory and Trauerspiel" and de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality" seem to have several similarities. The texts have two enemies in common. The first is the romantic concept of symbol as the immediate perfect union of form and meaning, distinguished from, and superior to, the fragmentation of allegory

and its temporal development. The second enemy is the persistence of this concept in modern and contemporary aesthetics, in which symbol and allegory are often confused. According to Benjamin and de Man, the two figures are profoundly different. Both de Man and Benjamin stress instead the connection between allegory and temporality, in opposition to the instantaneity of symbol. Time leads allegorical signs to fragmentariness, arbitrariness, and discontinuity and demystifies the instantaneous fullness, naturalness, immobility, and organicity of symbol. If symbol is supposed to be a natural union of sign and meaning, allegory shows the distinctness of sign and meaning and their conventional relationship. Benjamin writes about German baroque *Trauerspiel*, while de Man focuses on romantic writers; nevertheless, Benjamin starts his monograph with a critique of the romantic definition of symbol (159) and often invokes baroque literature and romantic literature, as well as baroque allegory and romantic allegory, stressing their common opposition to classicism:

The desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script . . . leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics. . . . The written word tends toward the visual. It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script. In it the baroque reveals itself to be the sovereign opposite to classicism, as which hitherto, only romanticism has been acknowledged. And we should not resist the temptation of finding out those features which are common to both of them. Both, romanticism as much as baroque, are concerned not so much with providing a corrective to classicism, as to art itself. (175–76)

Both Benjamin and de Man discuss allegory as a rhetorical trope and an interpretative strategy.¹⁴ Their two texts are not only studies of allegory, but also polemical and metacritical surveys of other erroneous critical positions. On the one hand, the two works are erudite studies of allegory, synchronic with their subjects, the German baroque and the romantic writers. On the other they are diachronic, focusing on many other sources outside the historical context of their main subjects. Beyond being showpieces of erudition, they are also in a way militant pamphlets, speaking out not only against the confusion of symbol and allegory and the predominance of symbol over allegory, but also against every possible naturalness of the linguistic sign.

These are the most evident similarities between the two texts; a close reading will reveal other connections. On several occasions Benjamin analyzes symbol and allegory in their different relationships with time, and gives various definitions of the two terms using examples from classical times up to the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to modernity. “The measure of time for the experience of the symbol,” he writes, “is the mystical instant. . . . On the other hand, allegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic” (165). Symbol, which is associated with brevity, does not change, he notes,

whereas allegory is always changing: “The allegorical must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways. The symbol, on the other hand . . . remains persistently the same” (183). The different temporalities of symbol and allegory produce the specific semiotic structures of the two modes. Symbol is connected with idealization, whereas allegory deals with the crude materiality (“*facies hippocratica*”) of history (166). Symbol refers to a “bright world,” whereas allegory is its “dark background” (161). The equation or confusion of symbol and allegory, the interpretation of allegory as a kind of symbol, is a “classicistic commonplace” (214).

For de Man too, the “supremacy of the symbol” over allegory is a “commonplace” and an error (189). De Man tries to situate this confusion within the modern history of literature, and therefore operates in a historical, more delimited way than Benjamin. He also resorts more frequently to quotations from the texts, therefore writing in a more philological way than Benjamin. De Man’s discussion of the relationship between symbol and allegory starts in the eighteenth century and focuses on early romantic writers; from here he develops a historical and philological analysis of the symbol’s supremacy in modern aesthetics from the eighteenth century to the twentieth in three literary traditions: German (188–90), English (191–98), and French (199–208). Interestingly, de Man connects the literature of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism with the critical account of those periods: the contemporary North American criticism of Romanticism in particular seems pervaded by glaring contradictions and aporias. The writers and their critics, with few exceptions, he claims, share the same fascination with the presumed totalizing capability of the symbol, as the etymology of the word “symbol” indicates. For de Man, the symbol claims the status of an organic entity, and the literary criticism that valorizes it claims to be an organic rational form of discursivity. As Jonathan Culler points out: “By opting for the symbol one expresses a faith that poetry can create forms in which the particular is indissolubly fused with the general, in which objects . . . give forth . . . an inexhaustible meaning organically present within them.”¹⁵

In the writers analyzed by de Man, in fact, the completeness or naturalness of the symbol is supposed to have an intrinsic supremacy over the fragmentariness and arbitrariness of allegory not only in literature but also in aesthetics; it is this supposed supremacy that leads to the confusion between the two terms in both literature and literary criticism. Still, de Man shows how deep the presence of allegory is (especially in matters of spatial and geographical representation) in authors such as Rousseau and Wordsworth, and how deep the blindness of criticism is in its misreading of symbol. The commonplace of the predominance of the symbol is also the commonplace of the symbolic reading of Romanticism scholars, who do not recognize allegorical structures in the writers they analyze; the presumed symbolic naturalness of Romanticism is in reality corroded by the arbitrary and conventional structure of allegory. Rousseau, especially, is in de Man’s reading a deeply allegorical author, for whom characters,

places, and images (notwithstanding their referential misreading by scholars) are linguistic signs, with no reference to a reality outside language and literature. “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification,” de Man stresses, “allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, *renouncing the nostalgia and the desire* to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (207, italics mine).¹⁶

This last quotation reveals perhaps the main difference between Benjamin’s and de Man’s ideas of allegory. For Benjamin, baroque allegory is a form of mourning, whereas in de Man it does not carry the same melancholic nuance. Both Benjamin and de Man stress the fundamental link between allegory and time, or temporality, in the relationship between allegorical signs and meanings; the allegorical temporal dialectic demystifies and breaks the illusory, symbolic, and static coincidence between word and world. Both authors stress the powerful beauty of allegorical fragmentariness and its capacity to demystify the supposed symbolic totality. Yet there are differences between the two writers: Benjamin employs a pathetic and mimetic lexicon (probably mimetically with the subject it analyzes, such as on page 205, where “pathos” is considered a characteristic element of the baroque drama), which insists on decay and demons, ruins and death, *memento mori* and ghosts, skeletons and corpses, darkness and fall. De Man, by contrast, (apparently) empties the description of allegory of all pathos, never going beyond the borders of literary history and rhetoric, except to situate allegory in the dialectic between the self and the nonself: there is (apparently) no room in de Man for nostalgia, nor for melancholy.

Benjamin stresses the link between allegory and death; significantly, the first page of “Allegory and Trauerspiel” (159) starts with a long quotation from *Theatre of Death, or Funeral Orations* by Christoph Männing; and a few pages on, the author stresses that the allegorical character of nature, its “death’s head,” lies under the “power of death” (166). The connection between allegory and death leads Benjamin obviously to a similar connection between allegory and (or as a form of) mourning: “Mourning . . . is at once the mother of allegories and their content” (230). Nonetheless, Benjamin’s understanding of allegory simultaneously contains, at least potentially, an element of hope and salvation. Allegory appears as a way to escape from human temporality, and as a form of preservation: “An appreciation of the *transience of things*, and the concern to rescue them for *eternity*, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory” (223, italics mine). Similar expressions recur with almost obsessive frequency—“the baroque work of art wants only to endure, and clings with all its senses to the eternal” (181), or “allegory establishes itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely” (224)—up to the very last page, and arguably one of the most lyrically intense passages, of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last. (235)

Benjamin's concept of allegory is in fact contradictory: for example, the author underlines the links between allegory in the sixteenth century and the Middle Ages (167). Some pages later he negates this relationship, connecting medieval allegory with Christianity, and baroque allegory with the ancient Egyptians and Greeks (171); further on, he defines baroque allegory as a synthesis of the antique and the medieval (223). In fact, Benjamin's allegory appears to be both ancient and Christian, both secular and nonsecular, and, significantly, the author often mixes a secular vocabulary with a religious one. For instance, he writes that "the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque" is a "*secular explanation* of history as the *Passion* of the world" (166, italics mine). The dark side of allegory is rescued, as if in a sudden "about-turn" (232), by a subsequent positive-redemptive movement. That is why, concluding his work, Benjamin quotes for the second time some lines of verse by Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, in which the darkness of allegory is eventually transformed into an image of salvation: "Ja / Wenn der Höchste wird vom Kirch-Hof erndten ein / So werd ich Todten-Kopff ein Englisch Antlitz seyn" ("Yea, when the Highest comes to reap the harvest from the graveyard, then I, a death's head, will be an angel countenance"; 232). "In the end," writes Rosiek, "the symbols of transience and inevitable death, skulls and all, metamorphose into the allegory of resurrection."¹⁷

There is no escape from temporality in de Man; allegory neither holds any religious connotation nor indicates any form of temporal preservation or resurrection. For instance, while Benjamin chooses as an example of allegorical expression the Italian *trionfi* (195), in which the religious content is fundamental, de Man chooses the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (218), a completely secular form of expression. In fact, de Man tries to isolate the materialistic side of Benjamin's allegory from any possible redemptive movement. This critical strategy, which one might consider also a resistance, is evident whenever he quotes Benjamin. De Man writes, for instance, that "allegory is material or materialistic, in Benjamin's sense, because its dependence on the letter, on the literalism of the letter, cuts it off sharply from symbolic and aesthetic synthesis" (68). Nonetheless, referring once again to Benjamin, the scholar writes that "the conflict between what language means . . . and the manner in which it produces meaning is suspended in what he refers to as pure language . . . this apparent transcendence does not occur in the realm of art but in that of the sacred" (62).

De Man understands allegory first as a rhetorical process, in which a temporally shifting relationship between linguistic signs separates the literary text from the

phenomenal world and confines it in the realm of language: “It remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it” (207). This process of semiotic regression continues *ad infinitum*, separating the text from the world. Second, and most importantly, de Manian allegory is connected with irony. The entire second part of “The Rhetoric of Temporality”—“Irony”—is dedicated to the demonstration of the similarity, or the sameness, of the temporal experience of allegory and irony:

Irony comes closer to the pattern of factual experience. . . . Essentially the mode of the present, it knows neither memory nor prefigurative duration, whereas allegory exists entirely within an ideal time that is never here and now but always a past or an endless future. . . . Yet the two modes, for all their profound distinction in mood and structure, are the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time. (226)

According to de Man, allegory and irony show the same separation between sign and meaning: the sign, like a spiral from its center, progressively loses its connection to meaning. In contrast with the synecdoche of the symbol, part of a whole and an instantaneous representation of a whole, the temporally shifting spiral of allegory-irony is the total demystification of any linguistic organic totality whatsoever. In “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,” for instance, de Man writes that:

To the extent that language is always cognitive and tropological as well as performative at the same time, it is a heterogeneous entity incapable of justice as well as of *justesse*. . . . The (ironic) pseudoknowledge of this impossibility, which pretends to order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence, is what we call allegory.¹⁸

The scholar even contends that true ironists such as Schlegel or Kierkegaard find rescue from this spiral—which has its end in madness and death—only in faith. De Man’s secularism decidedly rejects this option, as the author declares in a revealing interview with Robert Moynihan:

I intend to take the divine out of reading. The experience of the divine is one that is totally conceivable, but which I don’t think is compatible with reading. One of the best theoreticians of irony, Friedrich Schlegel, after having said about irony some of the most astute things that anybody has ever said about it, including Kierkegaard, and, I guess, Plato to some extent, did indeed go over to a certain mode of belief and adopted a religious life. He did not after that continue as a reader. The things he then still wrote which have to do with reading don’t compare with what

he did before. Generally, the act of faith is not an act of reading, or for me is not compatible with reading.¹⁹

It is possible to define Benjamin's notion of Baroque allegory as melancholic or nostalgic, but destined to redemption from time and death, and de Man's allegory as serene and ironic, but condemned to temporal imprisonment and death. Nevertheless, it is maybe in this connection between allegory and irony that de Man both resists and revitalizes Benjamin: with the introduction of irony as a sort of double of allegory (Benjamin too indicates this possibility in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 188), de Man's version of allegory enriches the apparently neutral linguistic and rhetorical connotations of its structure with pathetic nuances or—as described by Hertz—with “a particular way of combining analysis and pathos, of blending technical arguments about operations of rhetoric (often presented in an abstract, seemingly affectless idiom) with language . . . whose recurrent figures are strongly marked and those themes are emotively charged.”²⁰ De Man's irony, like Benjamin's allegory, is a dark experience of time within language: exposed to potentially endless duplication, the ironic sign loses its meaningfulness in a spiral, ambiguous shifting that leads to gnosiological undecidability. De Man quotes some passages, especially by Jean Starobinski and Peter Szondi, in which irony is seen as a cure for melancholy—“Irony can be considered a cure for a self lost in the alienation of its melancholy” (217)—only in order to strongly negate this idea as a mistake. According to de Man, irony is an endless, disruptive process that completely separates language from reality. This absolute separation not only makes any coherent critical analysis impossible, but also exposes human beings to the end of consciousness that is madness. The author writes:

Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness. Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation. . . . Once this mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily on the verge of madness. (215)

This emotionally dense lexicon, this pathos—in words such as “*vertige*,” “dizziness,” “madness,” “mask,” “authentic being”—is distinct from the rest of the essay. The passage is also the most contradictory one in de Man's text, for if the perpetual regressive movement of irony-allegory is precisely the negation of any “authenticity” and originality (in the sense of original depth, starting point, and so on) outside the spiraling realm of language, here de Man seems to believe in the existence of an “authentic [mode of] being” outside language: madness. In fact, also under the apparently rationalistic and serene surface of the first part of the essay, “Allegory and Symbol,” de Man reveals his pathetic drive. It is the theme of authenticity or truth

that recurs several times in relation to allegory, which, revealing the “authentic voice” (205) or the “true voice” (207), the “authentic experience of temporality” (226) of early romantic writers, contains an “authentically temporal destiny” (206). In a symbolic way indeed, allegory is even the “light” covered by the “veil” of symbolical style (208).

Though the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger is clear, the analogies with Benjamin’s idea of pure language also seem to play an important role in this quest for authenticity in an author, such as de Man, who usually rejects as undecidable any distinction between authenticity/nonauthenticity, truth/falsehood, and so on. In “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,” for instance, de Man significantly describes allegory as “the purveyor of demanding truths,” and as a way to state “the furthest-reaching truths about ourselves and the world.”²¹ If there is illusion and falsehood, there must be a place from which someone is drawn aside, namely the “true” allegorical, nonreferential nature of language: no more indecision and suspension, but an (idealistic?) polarization between Truth (the totally arbitrary nature of language) and Falsehood (the illusory seduction of the referential-symbolic coincidence between word and thing). In fact, even though de Man suppresses the redemptive movement of Benjaminian allegorical language, the damning movement of his own ironic-allegorical language forms its dark counterpart. The two processes, though moving in opposite directions, share the same vanishing point: the concept of language as an entity that mingles with the mystical—as a redemptive horizon in one case, a threatening abyss in the other. In fact, if one compares the last pages of Benjamin’s essay with de Man’s pages on irony, the overlaps in the critical lexicon are evident. Benjamin too writes about the “dizziness” of “bottomless depths,” and even of “blindness” determined by the “nonexistence” of the allegorical elements (223). Whereas the author maintains his critical style in a moderated philological tone in the first part of “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” which is dedicated to allegory, he uses a poetical, emotional, and highly pathetic lexicon in the second part, which treats irony. De Man’s readers have been understandably surprised by this turn. Hartman writes that “de Man’s eloquence concerning this vertigo is unsettling in a critic who renounces affect,”²² and Mileur stresses the “uncharacteristic hyperbole”²³ of the passage on irony.

Various commentators have seen Benjamin’s allegory as mystical, nostalgic, and pathetic but redemptive, and de Man’s allegory as secular, apathetic, and neutral but linked to death and silence. This opposition seems too simplistic. Gellrich opposes Benjamin’s “ruins” to de Man’s “silence” (150).²⁴ Rosiek stresses the contradictions in Benjamin’s text, between allegory as “immanence” and as “resurrection,” but eventually points out the importance of the second type in Benjamin’s allegorical model, and concludes that “allegory [in de Man] renounces the quest for redemption and accepts the radical implications of Heideggerian *Sein zum Tode* . . . by demonstrating the unreliability of symbolic promises.”²⁵ Flores writes that “while Benjamin

. . . discovers mourning in allegory, de Man discovers the overcoming of nostalgia or mourning."²⁶ Still, at the same time Flores points out the ambiguity of the concept of demystification in de Man's text: if demystification is possible, he suggests, it is also possible to overcome the discontinuity of the allegorical signs thanks to a language, somewhere, that is nonmystified. While both Benjamin and de Man point out the dialectic structure of allegory, both of them end up in an incomplete dialectic and a critical aporia: Benjamin's allegory is suspended between secular and religious vocabularies, while de Man's is suspended between a linguistic, apathetic vocabulary and a late romantic pathetic one (ending up, as Gasché would have it, in a sort of "pathos of apathy").²⁷ That is why the same scholars that write about a secular de Man notice also, though incidentally, the numerous similarities between Benjamin's and de Man's lexicons. Rosiek writes that "it must be granted that theologically informed terms retain their puzzling presence in de Man's writings as they do in Benjamin's."²⁸ Knaller sees the same kind of mystical accents in both de Man and Benjamin: we are facing an "ontologization of language" in the case of Benjamin, and a "negative ontology" in de Man.²⁹

If we are willing to speak about an ontology of language in the two authors, de Manian allegory seems to be closer to ontology than Benjaminian allegory, for Benjamin tries—especially when, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he connects "historical content" and "philosophical truth" (182), and in the pages on Baudelaire in *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, now collected in *Reflections*—to connect allegorical interpretation to historical, political, and sociological interpretation.³⁰ In Benjamin, the fragmentariness of allegory also has the effect of intensifying meaning (208), whereas de Man insists only on the lack of it: if Benjaminian allegory also contains knowledge, and this knowledge can and must be attentively read, de Manian allegory is precisely the suspension of the possibility of knowledge and the suspension of reading.

According to de Man, in fact, every text is structured as a system of tropes, and in every trope there is a friction between the figural side and the grammatical side of language: every text is contradictory, or one might say punctuated by aporias, because its figural and its grammatical sides are in conflict in a continually fluctuating way. Literary criticism, inasmuch as it is itself textual, is not free from this tension between the figural and the grammatical: it is impossible to create a text with a metacritical language outside the text analyzed. It is impossible to write a text that corrects and illuminates the limits and the errors of the text being read, because both participate in the same tropological structure. To read and to analyze a text is to stress its figurality and therefore to generate another text—that is, to organize another system of tropes that deconstructs the first one, but can be further deconstructed by another tropological system, in an endless chain. Thus literary critics perpetually oscillate between two critical stages: *blindness*, or the condition of inevitable error and misreading caused

by the figural dimension of literary language; and *insight*, that is, the involuntary and negative, but fertile revelation of their own condition of error. De Man sees Benjamin as a typical example of high criticism, but one condemned to the same inevitable blindness as other less bright critics. In *Allegories of Reading*, he argues that

to write a history of Romanticism that would no longer be organic but still genetic would be very useful, all the more since no truly dialectical history of Romanticism has yet been written. Hegel's outlines of literary or art history bypass, as is well known, the contemporary moment entirely and this predictable blindness is repeated in later works that are the products of genuinely dialectical minds, such as Auerbach's *Mimesis* or Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.³¹

One is tempted to say that de Man is condemned, in his formulation of the concept of allegory, to the same critical blindness he criticizes in other writers. It is a double blindness: to the repressed influence of Benjamin, and to the tension between two opposite drives, pathos and ataraxia, in his critical lexicon.

Benjamin's and de Man's texts might therefore be read not only as critical analysis of allegory but also as allegories themselves. They allegorize a variety of issues that appear particularly relevant within the current cultural horizon, including the unavoidable conflict between "analytic rigor and poetic persuasion,"³² the often fragile separation between the secular and the nonsecular, and the impossibility of an exhaustive study of allegorical discourse. After centuries of theoretical debate on allegorical writings, both Benjamin and de Man seem to reveal once again what looks like, one might say, the destiny of allegory, which is also its etymological meaning—"to say other." Also, a really exhaustive analysis of de Man's and Benjamin's writings on allegory is in fact not only impossible, but also a foolish contradiction, because this otherness traces an area of darkness that resists dissection and maybe must be left intact. "Deconstructions of figural texts," writes de Man, perhaps self-critically, "engender lucid narratives which produce . . . a darkness more redoubtable than the error they dispel."³³ It is a productive darkness, however. It is the source of the future story of allegory.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 176.
2. Robert Moynihan, "An Interview with Paul de Man," introduction by J. Hillis Miller, *The Yale Review* (1984): 586.
3. Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 159–235; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228. Unless otherwise specified, the page numbers quoted henceforth refer to these two texts.
4. In *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), Eric Santner describes the "polar stillness" of de Man's prose (26).

- In “Ancestral Voices: De Man and His Defenders,” in *Responses: On Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism*, ed. Werner Hamacher et al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), William Fleisch writes about de Man’s “crystalline purity of intentionless, affectless language” (175). On de Man and affect, on the other hand, see Neil Hertz’s “Lurid Figures,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82–104; and “More Lurid Figures: De Man Reading Empson,” in *William Empson: The Critical Achievement*, ed. Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 213–42. Rei Terada’s *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) dismantles the stereotype of de Man’s “supposed emotionlessness” (170), in particular in the chapter “Pathos (Allegories of Emotion)” (48–89).
- 5 The work of Giorgio Agamben (in particular *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], and *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attel [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005]) is arguably most representative of the current interest in the (ambiguous) divide between the secular and the religious. See also Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan’s anthology *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
 - 6 For an account of Benjamin’s publishing history, see Detlev Schöttker, “Edition und Werkkonstruktion: Zu den Ausgaben der Schriften Walter Benjamins,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 116 (1997): 294–315. On the most recent editions of Benjamin’s works, and on the “dizzying variety of responses” provoked by Benjamin in Europe and in the United States, see James McFarland, “Walter Benjamin,” in *The History of Continental Philosophy. Volume 5. Critical Theory to Structuralism: Philosophy, Politics, and the Human Sciences*, ed. David Ingram, general editor Alan D. Schrift (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010), 105–31. After a description of Benjamin’s heterogeneous influence on postwar culture and society on both sides of the Atlantic, in academia as well as in popular culture—from the writings of Jacob Taubes to the music of Laurie Anderson—McFarland writes that “in the years after Benjamin’s death his memory was kept alive by his friends in exile, in particular Arendt and Adorno in the United States. . . . Adorno’s publication in 1955 of a two-volume collection of Benjamin’s essays, *Schriften*, in the Federal Republic of Germany began his reintroduction to wider audiences. Arendt edited and introduced an English translation of several of Benjamin’s major essays in 1968 under the title *Illuminations*. . . . The developing interest in Benjamin’s work in the late 1960s and 1970s coincided with the conjunction of avant-garde aesthetics, revolutionary politics, and university reform that produced the Student Movement in West Germany and the New Left in the United States” (128). De Man’s reaction to (and, at least in part, suspicion toward and resistance to) certain aspects of Benjamin’s reception should be seen in this complex context. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor McFarland for discussing these topics with me, and for the invaluable suggestions he gave me while I was completing this article.
 7. See Stefano Rosso, “An Interview with Paul de Man,” in Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 115–16.
 8. Stefano Rosso, “La polemica su de Man giovane,” *Alfabeta* 113 (1988): 5–6, and Jacques Derrida, “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (1988): 590–652.
 9. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
 10. Moynihan, “Interview,” 589. For the often announced but never realized reading of Marx, and for its connection with Benjamin, see for instance Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 107, 115.
 11. De Man, *Resistance to Theory*, 79. As Wlad Godzich writes in the foreword to the volume, at the time of de Man’s death the essay still needed to be revised by the author (xi). According to William Jewett, what we read is an edited transcript based on tape recordings and eight pages of

- “rough manuscript notes” (73). The only text by de Man entirely devoted to Benjamin is thus, in a sense, incomplete.
12. De Man, *Resistance to Theory*, 106.
 13. Jean Rosiek, “Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory, or, How to Avoid Getting Excited—Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man,” *Orbis Litterarum* 48 (1993): 145. The title of the 1964 review is “Spacecritics: J. Hillis Miller and Joseph Frank,” reprinted in Paul de Man, *Critical Writings, 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 107–15. In the review, de Man writes about the weak impact of Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno on American criticism until the sixties (107). A section of de Man’s Ph.D. dissertation is now included in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): “Image and Emblem in Yeats,” 145–238. De Man’s 1983 preface to his collection of essays on Romanticism clearly shows the influence of Benjamin. De Man connects fragments with melancholy (viii) and history with fragmentation (ix). In the same collection, the essay “Shelley Disfigured” (93–123) is also openly Benjaminian, with several references to allegory as fragments and ruins. This essay was originally published in an anthology edited by Harold Bloom, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 39–73, which was supposed to be a sort of manifesto of the Yale critics.
 14. For a synthetic account of the history of allegory in its twin aspects of trope and interpretative strategy, see Jean Pépin, “Allegoria,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. 1: 151–65 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1984). The French scholar also stresses that the clear-cut separation between symbol and allegory is modern: in antiquity the distinction was not clear, and in the Middle Ages the terms were synonymous.
 15. Jonathan Culler, “Literary History, Allegory, and Semiology,” *New Literary History* 7, no. 2 (1976): 263.
 16. De Man often connects rhetoric with the notions of desire and seduction. See Andrea Mirabile, “Retorica della seduzione e seduzione della retorica nelle *Allegories of Reading* di Paul de Man,” *Strumenti critici* 110 (2006): 145–57.
 17. Rosiek, “Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory,” 150.
 18. De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 69.
 19. Moynihan, “Interview,” 586–87.
 20. Hertz, *Lurid Figures*, 82. See also de Man’s “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, 182–83. It is incidentally ironic that the last posthumous book by de Man carries such a Benjaminian title, implying that it is not de Manian. De Man broadly quotes Benjamin’s ideas on irony from *Der Begriff der Kunstskritik in der deutschen Romantik* (The concept of art criticism in German Romanticism). “The Concept of Irony” is also fundamental because in it de Man links his reflection on irony to Schlegel, especially to Schlegel’s formulation of parabasis as interruption; he also reveals all the philosophical influences, especially of German Romanticism, that are not evident in *The Rhetoric of Temporality*, where the German Romantic tradition of studies on irony (Schlegel, Solger, Hoffmann, Kierkegaard) is only mentioned in passing. De Man makes an explicit statement on the connection between allegory and irony: “If Schlegel said irony is permanent parabasis, we would say that irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes” (*Aesthetic Ideology*, 179; de Man quotes the Schlegel passage also in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”: “Schlegel . . . defined irony, in a note from 1797, as *eine permanente Parekbase*” [218]). Demanian irony is thus the disruptive, aporetic element that suspends any synthetic teleology within allegory.
 21. De Man, “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,” 52.
 22. Geoffrey Hartman, “Looking back on Paul de Man,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 9.
 23. Jean-Pierre Mileur, “Allegory and Irony: *The Rhetoric of Temporality* Re-examined,” *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 4 (1986): 332.
 24. Jesse M. Gellrich, “Allegory and Materiality: Medieval Foundations of the Modern Debate,” *Germanic Review* 77, no. 2 (2002): 150.

25. Rosiek, "Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory," 159. On the intersections between Benjamin, Heidegger, and de Man on allegory, see Werner Hamacher, "LECTIO: de Man's Imperative," in Waters and Godzich, *Reading de Man*, 200. On the connections between Benjamin, de Man, and Hegel on the notion of death as dialectic negation (and on Kojève's reading of Hegel, fundamental for poststructuralist scholars), see Lindsay Waters's introduction to de Man's *Critical Writings, 1953–1978*, lvi. In fact, most of the time in the posthumous works, de Man quotes Benjamin and Hegel at the same time.
26. Ralph Flores, *A Study of Allegory in its Historical Context and Relationship to Contemporary Theory* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1996), 239.
27. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 282.
28. Rosiek, "Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory," 158.
29. Susanne Knaller, "A Theory of Allegory beyond Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man," *Germanic Review* 77, no. 2 (2002): 86. Interestingly enough, "mystical accents" can be detected in other protagonists of the last century related to de Man's (early) interests. To limit myself only to French postwar culture, I think in particular of Georges Bataille, who was one of the first supporters of de Man's intellectual career (which seems particularly interesting in this context, given the connection between Bataille and Benjamin).
30. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986); see especially pp. 156 and 158.
31. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 81.
32. Hertz, *Lurid Figures*, 91.
33. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 217.

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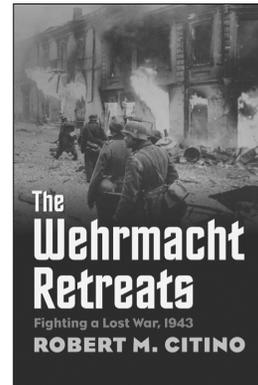
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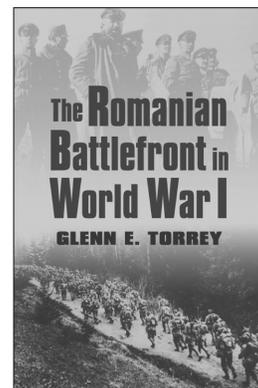
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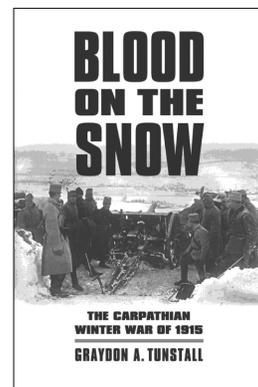
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