

Paul de Man's Silence

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In Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick*, which Paul de Man published in Belgium in his own translation into Flemish in 1945, at the conclusion of the Second World War and three years before his emigration to the United States, the narrator, on his way to board the ship on which he has arranged to sail, is accosted by a stranger who mysteriously insists that the narrator does not know all he should—or all there is to know—about the captain of the ship. Do we ever know all we should—or all there is to know—about the figures who have an impact on us, those who spontaneously stand out as metaphoric captains—leaders, mentors, or role models? “‘Look here, friend,’” says *Moby-Dick's* narrator to the unsolicited informer, “‘if you have anything important to tell us, out with it. . . . Ah, my dear fellow, you can't fool us that way—you can't fool us. It is the easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret in him.’”¹

It looks today as though Paul de Man himself—a controversial yet widely admired and highly influential thinker and literary critic, who died in 1983 as the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale—had such a secret. It was recently discovered that his formerly unknown youthful activities included writing, in 1941 and 1942, a literary column for *Le Soir*, a major Belgian newspaper that had been seized by the Nazis in

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, vol. 6 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, 1988), p. 93; hereafter abbreviated *M-D*.

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1940 and that functioned consequently under Nazi supervision as a pro-German, collaborationist journal. What are we to make of this discovery?

1

History and Ethics

The responses to this discovery, in the press and elsewhere, seem to focus on the act of passing judgment, a judgment that reopens with some urgency the question of the ethical implications of de Man's work and, by extension, of the whole school of critical approach known as "deconstruction."

The discourse of moral judgment takes as its target three distinct domains of apparent ethical misconduct:

1. the collaborationist political activities in themselves;
2. de Man's apparent erasure of their memory—his radical "forgetting" of his early past;
3. the silence that de Man chose to keep about his past: the absence of public confession and public declaration of remorse.

The question of ethics thus seems to be linked to the separate questions of the nature of political activities, of the nature of memory, and of the nature of silence. It is judged unethical, of course, to engage in acts that lent support to Germany's wartime position; but it is also judged unethical to forget; and unethical, furthermore, to keep silent in relation to the war and to the Holocaust. The silence is interpreted as a deliberate concealment, a suppression of accountability that can only mean a denial of responsibility on de Man's part.

I will here argue that de Man's silence has an altogether different personal and historical significance, and thus has much more profound and far-reaching implications than this simplistic psychological interpretation can either suspect or account for.

Although the question of ethics is indeed a fundamental and an urgent one, the hasty trials in the press are in danger of grossly oversimplifying matters, blinded as they are not only by the difficulty of

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understanding the experience of another, but also by the ease and the misleading comfort of a retrospective historical illusion. "It is easy," writes Edouard Colinet, one of de Man's colleagues from the Belgian period, "when you are not occupied by a foreign army, to tell how you should have behaved in those circumstances or, if you know the end of the story, to lay out a possible long-term policy. This was not our situation."² It is easy to pronounce lapidary judgments from within today's belated and anachronistic clarity, with the self-complacent self-assurance of history's hindsight. As Primo Levi puts it, "In countries in which the elementary needs are satisfied, today's young people experience freedom as a good that one must in no case renounce: one cannot do without it, it is a natural and obvious right, and furthermore, it is gratuitous, like health and the air one breathes. The times and places where this congenital right is denied are perceived as distant, foreign, and strange."³

In fact, the easy judgments made on de Man's historical misjudgments provide not insight but relief: in passing judgment on de Man, we distance and disown his dangerous closeness to us, in an attempt to distance history, the Holocaust, as past, *his* past, which, as such, remains foreign and exterior to our present. We blind ourselves to the historical reality of that past by reducing its obscurity to a paradigm of readability—an easily intelligible and safely remote Manichaean allegory of good and evil: "Yale Scholar Wrote for Pro-Nazi Newspaper" (*New York Times*, 1 December 1987 [New York edition]). "Popular history," writes Primo Levi, "and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they, . . . winners and losers, . . . the good guys and the bad guys, respectively, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted" (*DS*, p. 37). De Man was "Nazi": in denouncing him as one of "them," we believe we place ourselves in a different zone of ethics and of temporality; "we," as opposed to "they," are on the right side of history—a side untouched, untainted by the evil of the Holocaust. But the very nature of the Holocaust was precisely to belie this opposition between "we" and "they." As Primo Levi testifies, "The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us" (*DS*, p. 38).

2. Edouard Colinet, "Paul de Man and the Cercle du Libre Examen," in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, Nebr., 1989), p. 429; hereafter abbreviated "P."

3. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1988), p. 151; hereafter abbreviated *DS*.

Paradoxically, when we cast de Man as “Nazi” in a self-righteous bipartition of “the good guys” and “the bad guys,” we profoundly *forget* what the Holocaust was like, while at the same time we accuse de Man, precisely, of *forgetting*, judging it unethical in his case. But to vindicate the necessity of remembering the Holocaust by deciding that we can henceforth dismiss or forget de Man is to limit our remembering of recent history only to a screen memory. In reality, we are all implicated—and in more than one way—in de Man’s forgetting, and in his silence. A certain noisiness about the Holocaust does not diffuse the silence but deepens it, while deafening us to the complexity of our implication in it. To talk about the Holocaust from a position of self-righteousness and rightness is to deny the very essence of the Holocaust, which was to render this position unavailable.

This is not to say that judgment is not necessary; but, in Primo Levi’s words, “It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it meant to act in a state of coercion. . . . I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment” (*DS*, p. 44). The moral implications of the Holocaust are such that our task today is to find ways, precisely, to *rearticulate* the question of ethics outside the problematic—and the comfort—of a judgment that can be delegated to no human tribunal.

The crucial ethical dimensions of a historical experience like de Man’s need to be probed by being measured up against the incommensurability of that experience. No doubt, in being taken in by the seduction and deception exercised by Germany at the beginning of the Second World War, the twenty-year-old Paul de Man made a grave mistake in judgment, in failing to foresee and to assess the disastrous impact of the Nazis as soon as they took over Belgium. But the question is: given this fatal political mistake, given such a radical failure of vision, such a lapse of consciousness experienced early in one’s life, how can one *wake up*? What would waking up mean? And what can one consequently do, for oneself and for another, not simply with the deadweight of the past but, specifically, with the mistake and with one’s own awakening? I will suggest that de Man’s writing is precisely motivated and informed by these central questions, and that the moral his writing implicitly propounds is that of an unyielding ethics, of a rigorous commitment to these questions in a constant intellectual and moral effort whose overriding concern is: how *not to compromise* a truth which, he now knows, no one can own but to which he can continue to wake up, how not to compromise the action and henceforth the process, the endeavor, of awakening.

As far as we as readers are concerned, the ethical question with respect to the information that has come forth therefore resides neither

in a verdict nor in the trivializing academic wonder—could an evil man have propounded wise ideas?—but in an attempt at understanding how precisely de Man's writings *do* in fact relate to the moral implications of contemporary history. The reductive notion of the writing as a “cover-up” or as a psychological defense against the past paradoxically situates *us* outside these moral and historical implications. It thus fails to grasp what is essentially at stake: how de Man articulates *our silence*; how today we are all implicated in de Man's ordeal and in his incapacity to tell us more about it; how, having faced what he faced, de Man chose an inevitable syntax and an inevitable understated (silent) language.⁴ The question that should be addressed in light of de Man's history is, therefore, not how we can dismiss or forget de Man, but why we *must* relate—why we cannot escape from—de Man's writings: how his later writing, the mature work, is inextricably tied up with a historical event that, whether we like it or not, whether we have forgotten it or not, is still a crucial and immediate part of our present; how both de Man's silence and his speech articulate, and thus can help us understand, the ways in which we are still wounded by the Holocaust, and the ways in which we harbor the unfinished business of this recent history within us.

To try to shed light on the way in which de Man's work does address the trauma of contemporary history, let me first review the facts of de Man's wartime experience. What is the particular historical and biographical context of de Man's position at the beginning of the Second World War?

2

The Seduction of Apocalypse

A series of disasters preceded, in de Man's life, the outbreak of the war. When he was seventeen years old, his brother Hendrik died in a bicycle accident at a railroad crossing; a year later his mother committed suicide on the anniversary of his brother's death. Consequently, Paul de Man's uncle, also named Hendrik, became a sort of adoptive father to his nephew, meeting him weekly for lunch with his own son, Jan de Man.

Now this uncle was a charismatic intellectual and political authority in Belgium, the author of a number of influential books on Marxism

4. My gratitude goes to Dori Laub, M.D., who helped me to articulate this perspective on the basis of his clinical experience with survivors and of his professional insight into trauma; and to Cathy Caruth, who afforded critical perspective and whose rigorous feedback on de Man's writings was particularly valuable.

and on socialist theory. He had also been a successful politician and a minister in several Belgian governments. On the eve of the war, a number of factors conspired to sway this prominent politician in a pro-German direction. Having been a veteran of the First World War and having consequently become a zealous pacifist; having studied in Germany and been an admirer of German culture and philosophy; on the other hand, having been all his life a Marxist militant in favor of a socialist revolution, Hendrik de Man was led to believe that this social revolution, which the Western democracies had failed to achieve, could be brought about by means of the strong leadership of German National Socialism, under whose hegemony a unified Europe, in which Belgium would keep its independence and neutrality, would allow for the implementation of a radical social reform and renewal. After Belgium's invasion by the German army in 1940, Hendrik de Man, as president of the Belgian Workers' Party, issued a public manifesto urging his followers to cooperate with the Germans. "The role of a leader," reads the manifesto, "is not to follow his troops, but to lead them by showing them the way. Here is what I ask you to undertake:"

Be among the first rank of those who struggle against poverty and demoralization, for the resumption of work and the return to normal life.

But do not believe that it is necessary to resist the occupying power; accept the fact of his victory and try rather to draw lessons therefrom so as to make of this the starting point for new social progress.

The war has led to the debacle of the parliamentary regime and of the capitalist plutocracy in the so-called democracies.

For the working classes and for socialism, this collapse of a decrepit world is, far from a disaster, a deliverance.

Despite all that we have experienced of defeats, sufferings, and disillusion, the way is open for the two causes that sum up the aspirations of the people: European peace and social justice.

Peace has not been able to develop from the free understanding of sovereign nations and rival imperialisms: it will be able to emerge from a Europe united by arms, wherein the economic frontiers have been leveled.

Social justice has not been able to develop from a system calling itself democratic but in which money powers and the professional politicians in fact predominate. . . .

For years the double talk of the warmongers has concealed from you that [the Nazi] system, despite everything in it that strikes our mentality as alien, had lessened class differences much more efficaciously than the self-styled democracies, where capital continued to lay down the law.

Since then everyone has been able to see that the superior morale of the German army is due in large part to the greater

social unity of the nation and to the resulting prestige of its authorities. In contrast, the plutocracies offer us the spectacle of authorities deserting their stations and the rich crossing the border by car without worrying about what happens to the masses.

By linking their fate to the victory of arms, the democratic governments have accepted in advance the verdict of the war. This verdict is clear. It condemns the systems where speeches take the place of actions.⁵

It seems quite obvious from his wartime journalistic pieces that the young Paul was, like his uncle, equally captivated by the Nazis' seeming revolutionary promise and shared entirely, at first, his uncle's faith in the authority and the vocation of his own leadership, and consequently his conviction that collaboration with the Germans was Belgium's only chance for national survival, and that the thrust of the Nazis' rise to power held nothing more, in stock, than the exhilarating prospect of a European reunification and the promise of a cataclysmic renewal of Western culture and the Western social fabric.

Language played an important role in this political conjuncture. As a bilingual country, Belgium's history had been marked by the oppression of the Flemish by the French-speaking minority. Identifying with their Flemish origins in spite of their assimilation into the cultural dominance of French, both Hendrik and Paul de Man tended to view the Germans as linguistic allies in the liberation of the Flemish from French superiority. This Germanic cultural alliance, however, while claiming the originality and worth of Flemish, was supposed to maintain the specificity of both the French and the Flemish within a diverse European culture.

My sense is that, in speaking for the Flemish, Hendrik's claims and his political focus as a leader seemed to offer his young nephew not only a renewed relation to the *mother tongue*, beyond the loss marked by the mother's suicide, but also, in a general way, a renewed *relation to the past*, which in Hendrik's theories and actions was constantly referred to as an inspiration for a critique—and a remaking—of the present. This question of the relation of the present to the past will become particularly relevant, of course, in trying to account for the different and more enigmatic form that Paul de Man's later relation to his past will necessarily assume: both in his silence, which I take to be (among other things) his consequent refusal of a discursive relation to the past that might have any shadow of resemblance to his past relation to the past, and in his later absolute rejection both of the politically conservative and of the politically radical notion of a return to origins.

5. Hendrik de Man, "The Manifesto," *A Documentary Study of Hendrik de Man, Socialist Critic of Marxism*, ed. and trans. Peter Dodge (Princeton, N.J., 1979), pp. 326–27.

During the war, however, Hendrik's radical analysis of history and his misguided understanding of the historical opportunity for a revolutionary return to origins seemed to guide Paul de Man's historical beliefs. "The main goal of all historical labor [is] to become a guide for the critical investigation of existing conditions," writes Paul in the newspaper *Het Vlaamsche Land*. "For what would be the use of keeping in touch with the past and of fathoming all its aspects if this knowledge does not teach us to pass judgment on what is happening around us *now*?"⁶ And in his review for *Le Soir* of the work of the French historian Daniel Halévy, who analyzed France's defeat by Nazi Germany in May 1940 by comparing it to two previous major disasters in French history, Paul de Man writes: "This [comparison] is not a vain historian's game. The only resource of a nation, when its institutions have been crushed, its land invaded, and when the problem of the choice between life and death presents itself, is to return upon its past. This in any case is the task of those who have the responsibility of giving directives and of searching for programs of action."⁷

This model of a leader who turns to the past so as to reassess and to rebuild the present implicitly takes its inspiration from Hendrik's sense of his historical endeavor. What the young Paul must have found compelling in his uncle's enterprise, what lures indeed both Paul and Hendrik in the German program, is the seductive Nazi ideology of *reconstruction* and *national salvation* (the need to save one's country from economic, social, and emotional bankruptcy): an ideology that might have seemed to hold the promise of making up for personal and political disasters and that appeared to be supported by the concrete historical example of Germany's effective economic reconstruction and national revival after its defeat and devastation in the First World War.

Thus it is that in December 1940, at a point when the Second World War seemed to many to have been definitively won by Germany, five months after the publication of his uncle's manifesto, and one month before the birth of his first son (who will also be named Hendrik), Paul de Man starts writing his art column for *Le Soir*, one of the two major Belgian newspapers, which, at this point, are both controlled by the German occupation.

The Jewish Question

Of the 170 articles (literary, musical, and cultural reviews) he would contribute to *Le Soir* over the next two years, one stands out as truly

6. Paul de Man, "Critiek en literatuurgeschiedenis" ["Criticism and Literary History"] (*Het Vlaamsche Land*, 7–8 June 1942), trans. Ortwin de Graef, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, ed. Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988), p. 313.

7. De Man, "'Trois épreuves' par Daniel Halévy" (*Le Soir*, 14 Oct. 1941), *Wartime Journalism*, p. 153; my translation.

compromising (beyond the general motif of admiration for German literature and culture and the occasional propounding of a cultural renaissance in light of this identification with the Germanic model culture): an article entitled "Jews in Contemporary Literature" ["Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle"], published on 4 March 1941 in a special afternoon edition of *Le Soir* devoted to anti-Semitic propaganda, on a page entitled "The Jews and Us: The Cultural Aspects." The general subject obviously must have been assigned by the German propaganda controlling the newspaper. "All [Belgian] witnesses agree," writes Colinet, that Paul de Man fulfilled this assignment "reluctantly, fearing to lose his livelihood" ("P," p. 430).

"Vulgar anti-Semitism," writes de Man, "would willingly consider the postwar cultural phenomena (following the 1914–18 war) as degenerated and decadent, because Jewified [*enjuivés*]. Literature has not escaped this lapidary judgment: it was enough to discover several Jewish writers under Latinized pseudonyms for the whole contemporary production to be judged as ominous and polluted."⁸ But the article itself refutes this argument. Since the main contemporary writers—among whom de Man names "Gide, Kafka, Hemingway, Lawrence"—are not Jewish, Western literature has not, in fact, been penetrated by the foreign element of Jewish influence and its integrity, its impermeability to this influence, proves its vitality and health.

There seem to be two ways in which de Man's statements deviate from the straight anti-Semitic purpose of the newspaper's assignment: one is de Man's naming of Franz Kafka as one of the greatest—and non-Jewish—writers; the other is his taking issue with the so-called "vulgar anti-Semitism"'s major thesis of Jewish world dominion, and, consequently, of the necessity of defending against such dominion by eliminating the Jewish threat. But even though it argues that there is no Jewish threat, the article does seem to carry over an anti-Semitic tone in conceiving of the Jews, in opposition to an uncritical Aryan self-centeredness, as the foreign and contaminating Other, a conception that, although it takes care not to duplicate, is also not entirely in disagreement with, the Christian and the Nazi ideologies depicting Jews as the negative of truth.⁹ The

8. De Man, "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" (*Le Soir*, 4 Mar. 1941), *Wartime Journalism*, p. 45; my translation.

9. De Man thus writes: "One sees that the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe will not entail any deplorable consequences for the literary life of the West." This statement has been read as condoning the Nazi Final Solution, that is, deportations of the Jews to extermination camps. But this is an anachronistic reading. Since the Nazi plans for the deportation of the Belgian Jews were put into operation only in late July 1942, and since rumors of extermination spread through the Jewish community only after this period (August 1942), it is unlikely that in March 1941, the date when "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" was published, de Man's statement is in fact informed by the Nazi "solution" by extermination. It seems, rather, that what de Man's statement is alluding to

implication of the article, one might concede, is, much more benignly, that there is no need to defend against the Jews. But even though the only truth here claimed is that of literature (and of a literature problematically and paradoxically modeled on Kafka), still the basic underlying Christian premise of the inherent otherness of Jews to truth seems to be taken for granted as the unquestioned vestige of a Christian education, which is, presumably, unconsciously rehearsed by the new pressure, and the new channel, of the ideology of European revival and salvation. This is doubtless the most tainted piece of de Man's wartime writing.

In no other circumstance of his life did de Man propound—or consent to—anti-Semitism: not only did his intellectual and personal relationships, both during the war in Belgium, and, even more so, later in the United States, include quite crucial intimate friendships with Jews, but in 1942 or 1943, about a year after the journalistic publication of his compromising statement, he and his wife sheltered for several days in their apartment the Jewish pianist Esther Sluszný and her husband, who were then illegal citizens in hiding from the Nazis.¹⁰ During this same period, de Man was meeting regularly with Georges Goriely, a member of the Belgian Resistance. According to Goriely's own testimony, he never for one minute feared denunciation of his underground activities by Paul de Man.¹¹

3

The Turning Point

When and how did Paul de Man, who—willingly or not—was writing as an ideologist, wake up to the seductive traps, to the deception and to the dangers, of Nazi ideology?

We have no explicit answers to this question, no explicit statement on de Man's part. It seems, however, that the sequence of de Man's wartime writings, read in juxtaposition with the chronology of historical

is the political solution that had been debated since the beginning of the century in Jewish intellectual circles, that of a resettlement of Jews outside of Europe—in Palestine or in Madagascar (a colony the West would give to the Jews). There is no question here that de Man's summary argument—"to lose the Jews is to lose nothing"—is patently anti-Semitic (in compliance with the newspaper's coercive line), but not in the Nazis' murderous sense. Nothing would be lost for European literature, de Man argues, if the Jews were to leave for a resettlement in a Jewish colony outside of Europe.

10. See "P," p. 436 n.12.

11. I am indebted to Neil Hertz for confirmation of this testimony.

events,¹² does enable us to recognize a turning point and a subtle change of focus and orientation, starting in the middle of 1942.

On 1 June 1942, the policy of the yellow star is for the first time implemented: Jews in Belgium and France are required by order of the German military command to wear a yellow Star of David on their outer clothing to mark their inferior racial identity as Jews. Six weeks later, on 14 July 1942 (the anniversary of the French Revolution), Paul de Man (then twenty-two years old) publishes for the first time in the pages of *Le Soir* a review of the French resistance journal, *Messages* ("Continuité de la poésie française: À propos de la revue 'Messages'"). The review, which deals with contemporary trends of French poetry, claims the independence of literature with respect to political upheavals and defeats.¹³

A month later, in mid-August, rumors of extermination spread through the Jewish community in Belgium. About the same time, the Nazi *Propaganda Abteilung* tightens its censorship policy, requiring that newspaper articles be submitted for review before their publication.

Two weeks after this double turn of events, on 1 September 1942, the readers of *Le Soir* can read, under the signature of Paul de Man, a review entitled "'The Massacre of the Innocents': A Poem by Hubert Dubois" ["'Le Massacre des Innocents': poème de Hubert Dubois"].¹⁴ The poem de Man chose to review, written by a Belgian author, is a barely masked allegory of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. It underscores repeatedly the fact that the sacrilege of Herod's massacre of Jewish children (provoked by the prophecy of the advent of Christ) is taking place not in the past but (to use the poem's words) "in our time," in "our countries," and that the place of the original massacre, Rama, has extended itself today—this is the main thesis of the poem—to "the entire world of humans." The epigraph of the poem is drawn from Matthew 2, referring to a prophecy of the crucifixion and to the cry of Rachel bemoaning her children. The latent resistance connotation of the original French text is masked not merely by the Christian topos, but also by the reassuring symmetries of its rhymes and rhythms—by the conservative appearance of its traditional versification. I will attempt to point out its significant implicit political statements by quoting, in my necessarily awkward free and literal translation, some selected verses.

Rama . . .
Is no longer the Bethlehem of the Massacre . . .
Rama, in our time, like an insubordinate people

12. See the detailed chronology established by Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan, kindly communicated to me by them last summer and now published in *Responses*, pp. xi–xxi.

13. See de Man, "Continuité de la poésie française: À propos de la revue 'Messages'" (*Le Soir*, 14 July 1942), *Wartime Journalism*, pp. 250–51.

14. See de Man, "'Le Massacre des Innocents': poème de Hubert Dubois" (*Le Soir*, 1 Sept. 1942), *Wartime Journalism*, pp. 265–66.

Overflowing its shore, has reached our countries.
Rama is today the entire world of humans . . .
Rachel has a thousand voices to claim her misery . . .
Thus Rachel laments in each person today
Her pain . . .
And on the human Wailing Wall falls
A rain of red lights like blood . . .¹⁵

De Man praises “the intellectual and moral superiority of this poem,” and ventures to write, “One could easily call ‘The Massacre of the Innocents’ a meditation on the guilt which has led humanity to the awful state in which it is plunged at the present moment.” The review also refers to a human history of “repeated crimes against the human person.”¹⁶

The last of de Man’s articles for *Le Soir* appears two months later, at the end of November 1942.

An Exercise of Silence

In December 1942 de Man helps to bring to light in Brussels, at l’Agence Dechenne, the German-controlled publishing house at which he works, a volume entitled *Exercice du silence*, whose publication in Paris in the poetic journal *Messages* (associated with the French intellectual resistance) has been censored by the Germans.

Thus 1942 marks a change in de Man’s orientation, a change that, furthermore, *precedes* the turn of the fortunes of the war in the historical turning point that will take place only the following year, in February 1943, with the surrender of the German army in Stalingrad. Chronologically, this change of mind follows immediately, and thus seems to derive from, the tightening of Nazi censorship and the historical knowledge of the extermination of the Jews.

In March 1943, Paul de Man is fired from l’Agence Dechenne, three months after, and probably as a result of, his publication of the previously censored *Exercice du silence*.

This is the point at which de Man himself lapses into silence, a public silence that would last eleven years (until the reappearance of de Man’s next literary essays in the French periodical *Critique* in the early fifties). Interestingly enough, the transgressive publication of *Exercice du silence* precedes de Man’s own silence, a silence, therefore, perhaps not unrelated

15. Hubert Dubois, “Le Massacre des Innocents,” *Messages* 11 (1942); my translation. I owe many thanks to Tom Keenan, who generously provided me with a copy of this text, as well as with a folder of copies of the *Le Soir* articles and with seven other folders of documents related to this case (including a copy of *Exercice du silence*, which I will be discussing later)—documents that have served as the informational basis for my reflection and without which this essay would not have been possible.

16. De Man, “‘Le Massacre des Innocents,’” p. 265.

to the content of the publication of the French intellectual resistance he himself rescued from silence. What, then, is the nature of the silence that the publication claims to exercise?

The volume opens with a quotation from Georges Bernanos, which serves as its epigraph: "Keeping silent: what a strange word! It is the silence that keeps us." What, however, does it mean for the authors of this volume to keep silent in the very paradoxical performance of a discourse, of a writing? And what, in turn, does the silence here keep, or protect, if not the very action, and the very possibility, of resisting, of affirming—through contemporary poetry—that, as Pierre Seghers will put it, "France exists,"¹⁷ exists, that is, autonomously with respect to its invaders, independent of its occupying forces? The editorial introduction, which recapitulates the title "Exercise of Silence," opens with yet another epigraph, from Pascal: "if those keep silent, the stones will speak." Somehow, therefore, *Exercice du silence* is involved with a story that is not told in words but that the stones cry out. In its political protest through its poetical endeavor, the volume implies from the beginning that a certain way of keeping silent can make the stones speak—can intensify, in other words, a certain sort of testimony that, although unspoken, speaks for itself. I will later suggest that both de Man's silence and the testimony of his later work are informed by precisely such an exercise of silence.

But let me return to the sequence of significant events:

During his silent period and consequent to his being fired from l'Agence Dechenne, de Man devotes himself to the work of translation. (Could the work of translation—the rewriting of someone else's text, the acceptance of and attentive listening to another's language—itself be viewed as part of de Man's exercise of silence?) While his previous translations were from German and from Flemish into French, he for the first time now translates from English—and from American literature—into Flemish: *Moby-Dick* appears in Belgium in de Man's Flemish translation in 1945.

In the same year, during the collaboration trials following the war, the twenty-six-year-old de Man is asked to appear before a Belgian military tribunal and is released without charges of collaboration. Before this exonerating public sentence, de Man had been denounced, paradoxically and significantly, by both sides: in a pamphlet published by the resistance in 1943 for his writing for *Le Soir*, and by two collaborationist journals in 1943 for his publication of *Exercice du silence*.¹⁸

17. Pierre Seghers, "Signaux de Belgique," *Poètes prisonniers, Poésie 43, 14*, p. 95. At the bottom of the page, a footnote reads, "Brussels.—A palace revolution has evicted from the direction of certain editions Georges Lambrichs and Paul de Man, who defended the young French literature" (my translation).

18. The resistance pamphlet was *Galerie des traîtres*; the collaborationist journals were *Le Nouveau journal* and *Cassandre* (given in the chronology in *Responses*, p. xix).

The Belgian authorities convict Paul's uncle, Hendrik, for having "knowingly and maliciously served the design of the enemy." Because of disagreements with Belgian socialists and his growing unwillingness to cooperate fully with the Germans, Hendrik de Man had left Belgium for France in 1941, and in 1944 obtained political asylum in Switzerland. He is sentenced in absentia to a twenty-year term of imprisonment, dedicates the rest of his life to writing books, and dies in a car accident (which may have been suicidal) in 1953.

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale

Paul de Man's 1945 publication of the American novel *Moby-Dick*, which he had probably been translating during the two preceding years, during the later (silent) phase of his experience of the war, prefigures, in more than one way, de Man's future. The new focus on a non-European, American novel precedes the American part of de Man's life, his first departure to America in 1947, and his definitive departure the following year to emigrate to the United States, where he will later marry a second time and become a student of comparative literature at Harvard University.

But *Moby-Dick*, which de Man produces at the conclusion of the Second World War, prefigures not merely de Man's future choice of America as a physical and cultural destination but the radical nature of the departure, which will create an absolute break with what preceded, as he leaves behind everything connected to the Belgian past, including his own family, wife and children. In the same way, *Moby-Dick's* protagonists, Captain Ahab and the narrator Ishmael, are indeed both marked, each in his own way, by a radical departure: Captain Ahab has left his wife and children to settle his account with the whale; Ishmael goes to sea, he tells us, when he is death-drawn and depressed, as a substitute for committing suicide. "This is my substitute for pistol and balls," he says. "With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon the sword; I quietly take to the ship" (*M-D*, p. 6). Might both de Man's eleven-year-old silence and his radical departure be viewed as substitutes for suicide—suicide as the recognition that what has been done is absolutely irrevocable, which requires one in turn to do something irreversible about it? What appears to be an erasure of the past is in fact this quasi-suicidal, mute acknowledgment of a radical loss—or death—of truth, and therefore the acknowledgment of a radical loss—or death—of self: the realization that there can be no way back from what has happened, no possible recuperation. Already *Exercice du silence* had announced both literally and metaphorically the annihilation of the self, not only because the volume chose symbolically to open with a letter by Baudelaire announcing his own suicide ("I kill myself because I can no longer live, because the fatigue of falling asleep and the fatigue of waking up are both unbear-

able"),¹⁹ but because the editorial introduction, entitled "Exercise of Silence," had included the following thoughts on the death of the self and its reduction to silence (thoughts that can uncannily be read as prophesying the silent violence of de Man's imminent departure):

Nevertheless this adventure by which he [the self] had believed he was taking over, in turn has overtaken him. The possession of the world opens vacant on his death. . . . [He] cannot come into the proximity of the emergence of a (finally) crucial reality unless he has renounced marking it by the seal of his belonging, and has carefully *burnt out the dictionaries of his memory*. . . . At this point [he] recognizes that humbleness is his profession and that exile is henceforth his only condition.²⁰

Like *Moby-Dick's* narrator, de Man condemns himself to exile.²¹ "Call me Ishmael" (*M-D*, p. 3) he too might have said in the "prosopopeia"²² of the story that he had translated into Flemish but that, unlike *Moby-Dick's* narrator, *he will not directly tell*.

Like Ishmael, however, de Man survives the fanaticism of the war against the whales and the disaster of the shipwreck by uncannily and paradoxically—as Melville quite fantastically imagines it—*floating on a coffin*:

It so chanced, that . . . the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. . . . On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan. [*M-D*, p. 573]

De Man's future is foreshadowed, enigmatically and paradoxically, by *both* the destinies of Ahab and of Ishmael. He at the same time dies as Ahab and survives as Ishmael. He survives, that is, not as the same

19. "Lettre à Ancelle," *Exercice du silence* (Brussels, 1942), p. 6.

20. *Exercice du silence*, pp. 3–5.

21. In its strong sense, exile is not merely a departure but an act of self-expropriation and renunciation of one's origins. It is thus an abdication of one of the great resources of Nazi ideology, the recourse to the natural integrity and purity and to the organic unity of nation and of nationalism.

22. This opening sentence of chapter 1 of *Moby-Dick* is a reference to Isaac's half-brother, Abraham's son by the bondservant Hagar, who was disinherited and thus, having to leave his father's land, condemned to exile (Gen. 21).

Prosopopeia, a figure of address (the way in which, for instance, the sentence "Call me Ishmael" is actively addressing an implicit listener or reader), will become one of de Man's favorite rhetorical figures, a key term in his theoretical vocabulary, and a key concept in his later writing about autobiography.

but as a radically transformed Other: what survives is not the memory of Ahab but the witnessing by Ishmael of the fact that Ahab's quasi-suicidal death provides no resolution to the struggle, because Ahab at the end becomes entangled with, and thus forever tied to, the very body of the stricken whale. "‘Oh, lonely death on lonely life,’" mutters Ahab in his last breath.

"Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee. . . . Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!" [M-D, pp. 571–72]

Nazi ideology had seemed to offer a way out of political dead ends, a clear historical direction, a black-and-white solution, a cataclysmic resolution. But Ishmael remains not with a solution but with the irreducible ambiguity of the apocalyptic struggle. Ishmael's vision, or his vantage point, is thus different both from that of Ahab and from his own before the shipwreck and his own solitary survival.

"‘And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,’" reads, quoting from Job,²³ Melville's conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, opening the epilogue of Ishmael's narrative. In the same way, de Man, like Ahab wrestling and forever tied up with the whale, survives, like Ishmael, in order to henceforth *position* both his silence and his later discourse precisely in the very core of Ishmael's doubleness of vision, in his inside knowledge of the compellingly seductive and radically delusional quality of the event, and in his later vision of the entanglement and the complicity, of the bankruptcy of all conventional historical divisions and the blurring of all boundaries. It is no longer possible to distinguish between heroes and knaves, regeneration and destruction, deliverance and entanglement, speeches and acts, history

23. In these words from Job 1:16, a witness and the sole survivor of a catastrophe comes to inform Job about the loss of everything he once owned or had, including his wife and children. Borrowing these very words, Ishmael, in turn, as the sole survivor and the only witness to the shipwreck, is "escaped alone," and his testimony (the text of *Moby-Dick*) will be marked by this radical "aloneness" of his position as a witness. "No one bears witness for the witness," writes Paul Celan. And yet, the witness is "escaped alone to tell thee," to tell, in other words, what he alone can henceforth tell, to testify, precisely, for the muteness of a corpse sunk in the ocean. With what language, with what silence, will Ishmael be able to speak for, speak *from within*, the very *dumbness* of that corpse, and yet, to also say the enigma of his own survival in a coffin covered with inscriptions, which thus keeps him afloat not merely on the figure of the grave but on the life-giving figure of a *writing*? "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

and faith, idealistic faith and (self-)deception, justice and totalitarianism, utmost barbarism and utmost civilized refinement, freedom of will and radical enslavement to historical manipulations and ideological coercions. Indeed, in his afterlife as Ishmael, in his later writings and his teaching, de Man, I would suggest, does nothing other than testify to the complexity and ambiguity of history as Holocaust. Like Ishmael rejoining life by floating on a coffin, like Ahab struggling and forever tied up with the whale, de Man will bear witness, in his later writings, to the Leviathan of a historical complexity with which his testimony will remain forever wrestling, in an ongoing testimonial struggle to which, the writings testify, there is no end and from which, they tell us, there is no possible escape.

4

Theory and Testimony: The Later Writing

Why, then, did de Man not choose, like Ishmael, to *tell his story* if—as I am here suggesting—his afterlife was dedicated to bearing witness to its lesson?

Because the story is not simply over, known or given, in a totalizing overview of what had happened in the past; and because the act of bearing witness can itself be—as de Man has learned from his war experience—an illusory endeavor. The young Paul de Man who was writing for *Le Soir* believed himself to be a *witness* to the history of his time, of which the journalistic writings were meant to be the testimonial records, as their very titles indicate: “Testimonies on the War in France” [“Témoignages sur la guerre en France”] (25 March 1941); “French Literature before the Events” [“La Littérature française devant les événements”] (20 January 1942); “Narratives and Testimonies” [“Récit et témoignages”] (3 February 1942); “Biographies and History” [“Biographies et histoire”] (17 February 1942); “Testimonies on Our Time” [“Témoignages de notre temps”] (10 March 1942); and so on. However, I would suggest that once de Man realized the utter fallacy and aberration of his “war testimonies,” the act of bearing witness could no longer be repeated as a simple narrative act but had to turn upon its own possibility of error to indicate—and warn us against—its own susceptibility to blindness.

In his only explicit statement about his past—a letter to the Harvard Society of Fellows written in 1955—de Man explained that he stopped writing for *Le Soir* “when nazi thought-control did no longer allow freedom of statement.”²⁴ But what de Man in fact discovered in the later phase

24. De Man, letter to Renato Poggioli, Director of the Harvard Society of Fellows, 26 Jan. 1955, in *Responses*, p. 476.

of the Second World War, and what he bears witness to in his mature work, is not the simple factual tightening of Nazi censorship in 1942, but the way in which his former journalistic witnessing had all along been inadvertently in some way predetermined by the unrecognized coerciveness of the Nazi rhetoric of promises. Retrospectively, de Man discovered the inescapable, pervasive way in which ideological coercion is surreptitiously built into language, into the very discourse one is inadvertently employing and the very writing of which one believes oneself to be the author.

"I cannot tell," writes Ishmael, "why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment" (*M-D*, p. 7). In the same way, de Man discovers that his wartime witnessing of history and the part that *he* performed—his political convictions, his nationalistic faith, his belief in a new Europe, and his very journalistic dedication—were in turn "thought-controlled" and thus preempted as a testimony by the very grammar of their language.

The later writing, therefore, cannot simply "tell the story of the war," since it has to tell how the war story it had once told was historically voided of meaning, how witnessing does not provide narrative knowledge, since one cannot be sure, in one's position as a witness, either if one is in reality perceiving what one believes oneself to be perceiving or if one is in effect speaking in (if one has not already lost) one's own voice. The later testimony, in other words, is not that of (the belated narrative of) the returning speaking witness but rather that, precisely, of the failed witness, of the witness, that is, who failed to be and who has returned mute. "I must repeat," writes, from a different position, Primo Levi:

we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. . . . Those who . . . have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, . . . they are . . . the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. [*DS*, pp. 83–84]

Incorporating the silence of the witness who has returned mute into his very writing, de Man's entire work and his later theories bear implicit witness to the Holocaust, not as its (impossible and failed) narrator (a narrator-journalist whom the war had dispossessed of his own voice) but as a witness to the very blindness of his own, and others', witness, a firsthand witness to the Holocaust's historical disintegration of the witness.

Such second-degree testimony is complex and can no longer be direct. Because it seeks above all to preserve the distance necessary for the witnessing (the inner distance of the radical departure), it requires not the involved proximity of memory (that of the submersion of the witness) but the *distancing* of this submersion through the reflectiveness of *theory*. For it is, I would suggest, precisely de Man's *theories* that inscribe the testimony of the muted witness and that address the lesson of historical events, not (as some would have it) as a cover-up or a dissimulation of the past, but as an ongoing, active *transformation of the very act of bearing witness*. Here again, de Man could borrow Primo Levi's words:

An apology is in order. This very book is drenched in memory; what's more, a distant memory. Thus it draws from a suspect source and must be protected against itself. So here then: it contains more considerations than memories, lingers more willingly on the state of affairs such as it is now than on the retroactive chronicle. [DS, pp. 34–35]

History as Holocaust is mutely omnipresent in the theoretical endeavor of de Man's mature work. The war's disastrous historical and political effects are what is implicitly at stake in the text's insistent focus on, and tracking of, an ever-lurking blindness it underscores as the primary human (and historical) condition. De Man's entire writing effort is a silent trace of the reality of an event whose very historicity, borne out by the author's own catastrophic experience, has occurred precisely as the event of the preclusion—the event of the impossibility—of its own witnessing; an event that could thus name the very namelessness, the very magnitude, the very materiality of what de Man will constantly refer to as the ever-threatening *impossibility of reading*.

The naïve historical question from which we started out—should the *Profession de foi* be called a theistic text?—must remain unanswerable. The text both is and is not the theistic document it is assumed to be. It is not the simple negation of the faith it seems to proclaim, since it ends up by accounting in a manner that cannot be refuted for the necessary occurrence of this faith. But it also denounces it as aberrant. A text such as the *Profession de foi* can literally be called “unreadable” in that it leads to a set of assertions that radically exclude each other. Nor are these assertions mere neutral constations; they are exhortative performatives that require the passage from mere enunciation to action. They compel us to choose while destroying the foundations of any choice. They tell the allegory of a judicial decision that can be neither judicious nor just. . . . One sees from this that the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.²⁵

25. De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), p. 245; hereafter abbreviated AR.

The Referential Debt, or the Purloined Ribbon

In his important essay on Rousseau's *Confessions*, strategically placed at the conclusion of *Allegories of Reading* as de Man's last statement and ambiguously entitled "Excuses (*Confessions*)," de Man addresses posthumously, I would suggest (or in anticipation), the question so persistently asked today both by his critics and by his admirers, of why he has not satisfied the former's sense of justice and/or cleared the latter's conscience, by giving both the satisfaction—or the reparation—of a public confession or a public declaration of remorse that would have at least proven his regret, his present repentance of past errors.

"Excuses (*Confessions*)" was entitled in its first version "The Purloined Ribbon," in an allusion to (and perhaps a critical rewriting of) Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter.'"²⁶ The essay discusses an episode from Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which Rousseau narrates a scene of youthful guilt in which he stole a ribbon, and then—to clear himself—gratuitously accused the servant Marion for having stolen it, an accusation that resulted in the firing of the maid. I would suggest that de Man's discussion of "the purloined ribbon," and of Rousseau's avowal of his "primal scene" of guilt, which de Man treats as a "paradigmatic event, the core of [Rousseau's] autobiographical narrative" (*AR*, pp. 278–79), as well as the episode itself of the purloined ribbon and of Rousseau's gratuitous denunciation of the maid, can be read as an implicit evocation of the absent (purloined) referent of de Man's own past, the purloined referential letter of his wartime journalistic writings and, specifically, the truly compromising journalistic statement he now recalls, perhaps, as his gratuitous "denunciation" of the Jews.

Of course, de Man did not, properly speaking, "denounce" the Jews. But his statement on the Jews was published in a context, and spoken in a historical situation, that, *de factum*, made it into a denunciation. Similarly (though on a lesser and more trivial scale), Rousseau's intention, in uttering the name of Marion, was not to *accuse* her but to *clear* himself. But in both cases, the verbal act (of naming, and of pointing to, the Other), turns out to have disastrous consequences unpredictable by either of its authors. The resonance between Rousseau's text and de Man's past thus lies not so much in a one-to-one resemblance between Rousseau's act and de Man's act, but in the structural resemblance of a primal scene of guilt that links an act of speaking with the unpredictable and devastating consequences of this act. Rousseau's confession must have retrospectively captured de Man's attention not simply in reference to de Man's own history but, specifically, in reference to *the turning point* in that history: de Man's eventual historical discovery of his own unexpected and un-

26. See Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore, 1988), pp. 28–54. De Man, of course, must have read the original French version of this essay in Lacan's *Écrits* (Paris, 1966).

suspected involvement with—and complicity in—a historical false accusation amounting to an actual “Massacre of the Innocents.” Through its reflection on the consequences of the purloined ribbon and of Rousseau’s speech act of accusation, “Excuses (*Confessions*)” thus implicitly outlines a meditation on the purloined letter of the journalistic collaborationist writing.

Behind de Man’s text, there is, in addition to Rousseau, a whole network of associated texts that are elliptically—and yet consistently—present, that create in turn a whole network of unarticulated textual and historical associations. One of these, as I have suggested, is Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” insofar as it is replicated by de Man’s initial title for the piece, “The Purloined Ribbon.” But it is Lacan’s French title that is significant: the French name under which Lacan has recapitulated and rendered notorious Poe’s text (according to Baudelaire’s translation)—“La Lettre volée” [“The Stolen Letter”]—might have been oddly evocative, for de Man, of the pejorative political name by which the Belgian newspaper in which he wrote during the war, *Le Soir*, came to be known once it had been seized and taken over by the Nazis—a pejorative name that was meant to designate the usurpation of the paper from its rightful, independent Belgian owners in its period of forced collaboration with the Germans: *Le Soir volé* [*The Stolen Evening*].

Lacan’s uncanny question with respect to *La Lettre volée*—“To whom does a letter belong?”²⁷—could in fact be reiterated as a political question with respect to *Le Soir volé*: to whom does a newspaper belong? And how, conversely, does one paradoxically become the *owner* of a political false accusation whose historical significance one does not entirely own, but which was nonetheless historically put into effect by the very context in which one was writing, the context of the stolen, or the purloined, newspaper?

“Political and autobiographical texts,” writes de Man, “have in common that they share a referential reading-moment explicitly built in within the spectrum of their significations, no matter how deluded this moment may be in its mode as well as in its thematic content: the deadly ‘horn of the bull’ referred to by Michel Leiris in a text that is indeed as political as it is autobiographical” (*AR*, p. 278). De Man’s first footnote, at this point, refers us to Leiris’ autobiographical work, *L’Age d’homme*,²⁸ and comments simply, “The essay [by Leiris] dates from 1945, immediately after the war” (*AR*, p. 278 n.1). Leiris’ is, with Lacan’s, the second major text elliptically present throughout de Man’s text: if Lacan’s text deals with the tracking of secrets (purloined letters), Leiris’ text is a contemporary

27. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” p. 41.

28. See Michel Leiris, *L’Age d’homme: précédé de “De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie”* (Paris, 1946); trans. Richard Howard, under the title *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility* (New York, 1963); hereafter abbreviated *M*.

model of the genre of autobiography that, like Rousseau's, designates itself as a "confession." Now, what does Leiris mean by the "horn of the bull," a figure that de Man borrows both to designate and to implicitly *date* the "referential reading-moment" he has in mind as what "political and autobiographical texts have in common"—their common reference to a moment of historical reality—"no matter how deluded this moment may be" in its reading by others and/or in its reading by itself, in its own self-presentation and self-perception?

Leiris compares the act of writing to the ritual drama of bullfighting. Both take place on the "'terrain of truth' which is the bullfighting term for the arena. . . . Just as the matador . . . gives the measure of his value when he finds himself face to face and alone with the bull . . . so . . . man discovers himself confronting a reality" (*M*, p. 37).

The bull's horn comes to represent, in Leiris' allegory of (autobiographical) writing, the material effects of referential reality, and specifically three aspects of these effects:

1. the inescapable materiality of one's past;²⁹
2. the irreducible reality of the confrontation, through the writing, with a real danger deriving from a real event;³⁰
3. the political and ethical effects of *writing* as itself *an act*, an act that provokes change and that thus itself has material consequences:

To write a book that is an act—such is, broadly, the goal that seemed to be the one I must pursue. [*M*, p. 155]

Thus spoke Leiris in 1939, on the threshold of the war. This was doubtless also the intention of de Man as journalist: to *intervene* historically and politically—writing for the newspaper was meant to be an *act*. "Thus to complicate a fact certainly is: to act," writes de Man forty years later in "Excuses (*Confessions*)" (*AR*, p. 281). The converse, however, is also true: the facts complicate and subvert the act. When Leiris recapitulates his autobiographical text after the war (1945), the *fact* of the *interruption* of the war is inscribed (very like a bull's horn) in the very core of his

29. "To use materials of which I was not the master and which I had to take as I found them (since my life was what it was and I could not alter, by so much as a comma, my past, a primary *datum* representing for me a fate as unchallengeable as for the *torero* the beast that runs into the ring)" (*M*, p. 160).

30. "Is not what occurs in the domain of style valueless," writes Leiris, "if it remains 'aesthetic,' anodyne, insignificant, if there is nothing in the fact of writing . . . that is equivalent . . . to the bull's keen horn, which alone—by reason of the physical danger it represents—affords the *torero's* art a human reality . . . ?" (*M*, p. 152). At a distance of six years, after the interruption of the Second World War, Leiris returns to this question by framing his early thought with an ironical and critical (historical and political) perspective, since the reality of the endangering event—the horn of the bull that penetrates and wounds the writing—is no longer that of the (imaginary or theatrical) bullfighting, but that of the magnitude both of the struggle and of the destruction of the Second World War.

autobiography as, indeed, a *complication*, a *disruption*, of his previous notion of the *act*.

This was the preface I was writing . . . on the eve of the “phony war.” I am rereading it today in Le Havre, a city . . . to which I am bound by so many old ties (my friends . . . ; Sartre, who taught here and with whom I became associated in 1941 when most of the writers remaining in occupied France united against the Nazi oppression). Le Havre is now largely destroyed, as I can see from my balcony, which overlooks the harbor from a sufficient height and distance to give a true picture of the terrible *tabula rasa* the bombs made in the center of the city. [M, p. 152]

The historical perspective embodied in the image of the devastated city, a perspective out of which Leiris inscribes the splitting—the internal interruption and division—of his initial autobiographical project, is very like the perspective out of which de Man writes his “Excuses (*Confessions*)”: the perspective of a memory contemplating (and reflecting on) the materiality of a *tabula rasa in the very center*. The *tabula rasa* is, however, not the simple erasure of an event but its actual inscription. In much the same way as Leiris’ autobiography is, de Man’s “Excuses (*Confessions*)” is materially transpierced by the bull’s horn of the war experience. Indeed, the irony and the *self-distance* with which, after the war, Leiris nevertheless returns to—both to subvert and to insist on—the initial question of the writing as an act, is in turn mutely spoken, or adhered to, by de Man. “At this point,” says Leiris, “I am far from utterly immediate and dismaying events such as the destruction of a great part of Le Havre, so different today from the city I knew”:

I am far, indeed, from that authentic horn of the war of which I see, in the ruined houses, only the least sinister effects. . . . Perhaps I should be less obsessed by my desire to make literature into an *act*, a drama by which I insist on incurring, positively, a risk. . . . There would nonetheless remain that essential “engagement” one has the right to demand of the writer, the engagement . . . to make his words . . . always tell the truth. And on the intellectual or emotional level, he must *contribute evidence* to the trial of our present system of values. [M, p. 162; my emphasis]

To return to de Man’s discussion of Rousseau’s *Confessions*: in what way, then, is the “horn of the bull”—the referential deadly impact of the past and of the war, of danger confronted and of writing as an act with material consequences—present in de Man’s text, and what, precisely, is the kind of *evidence* that de Man’s text is involved with—and contributes—through Rousseau’s *Confessions*?

I have suggested that the purloined ribbon might stand for the purloined letter of de Man’s journalistic past (*Le Ruban volé*, *La Lettre*

volée, *Le Soir volé*), and that the gratuitous denunciation of Marion might be resonant with the way in which de Man's 1941 journalistic text ("Les Juifs dans le littérature actuelle") might be read, by others and by the author retrospectively, as evidence of his gratuitous accusation of the Jews, and thus as evidence against him or as evidence about the nature of his past. The contemporary question of (Rousseau's actual and de Man's virtual) confession and of the referentiality of the purloined ribbon engages, thus, both the question of the factual effects of the original act of journalistic wartime writing and that of the contemporary difficulties and complexities resulting from using these texts retrospectively as evidence in an attempt to understand the past. "The distinction," writes de Man, "between the confession stated in the mode of revealed truth and the confession stated in the mode of excuse is that the evidence for the former is referential (the ribbon), whereas the evidence for the latter can only be verbal. Rousseau can convey his 'inner feeling' to us only if we take, as we say, his *word* for it, whereas the evidence for the theft is, at least in theory, literally available" (*AR*, p. 280).

The literal availability of the purloined journalistic *evidence*, however, is significant at present less for its historically dated semantic content (which so many of today's investigators, like the police in "The Purloined Letter," have set out to uncover and expose) than for the uncanny logic of the indestructible materiality of these outdated journalistic texts and by the predicament of their symbolic circulation.³¹

What, then, does de Man have to say about the literal availability of his journalistic texts and, in particular, about the bull's horn of his published slander of the Jews, implicitly evoked by Rousseau's reference to his gratuitous slander of Marion? "For one thing," writes de Man, "to excuse the crime of theft [could one read, the incriminating writing for *Le Soir volé*?] does not suffice to excuse the worse crime of slander which, as both common sense and Rousseau tell us, is much harder to accept" (*AR*, pp. 284–85).

Rousseau invokes the way in which he was operating under the deception that his discourse was merely a fiction and, as such, was removed from the real world. As for what constitutes the fiction, he points to the absence of connection between his utterance and his intention (his lack of any real hostility toward Marion) as well as to the absence of connection between his utterance and its result (the real damage caused to Marion), discontinuities that both derive, he says, from the constitutional deviousness of language and its inherent freedom with respect to its referent, its

31. Ironically enough, de Man seems to describe the contemporary scene of the belated finding of the journalistic texts and the hectic energies of their exchanges and appropriations when he writes: "Once it is removed from its legitimate owner, the ribbon, being in itself devoid of meaning and function, can circulate symbolically as a pure signifier and become the articulating hinge in a chain of exchanges and possessions. As the ribbon changes hands it traces a circuit leading to the exposure of [the] hidden" (*AR*, p. 283).

inherent, built-in mechanism of fiction-making, which he has wrongly equated with unreality and with ineffectuality.

In a similar and yet inverse way, de Man's belief in the referential truth or the testimonial purpose of his journalistic pieces is shown by history and by his later writings to have been unwittingly involved with an ideologically productive linguistic *fiction*. In the same way, Leiris describes his prewar avowed realism (his writing with the resolution "to reject all fable, to admit as materials only actual facts") as what the war will have belatedly revealed to him as only "a *fallacious compromise* between real facts and the pure products of the imagination" (*M*, p. 156; my emphasis).

That history subverts its witnessing and turns out to be linguistically involved with fiction does not prevent the fiction, however, from functioning historically and from having deadly factual and material consequences. Rousseau's speech act of gratuitous denunciation, his attempt at purloining the referential ribbon by only verbally accusing Marion, results in the actual firing of the servant. The purloined journalistic letter of de Man's gratuitous (perhaps intendedly fictitious, perhaps unwilling) accusation of the Jews is amplified and followed by the Nazis' discourse of the Final Solution and by the actual extermination of the Jews. The speech act of purloining the referential ribbon by a fictitious verbal accusation turns out to have unpredictable real effects and an awesome historical consequence and sequence in the imminent politics of the "yellow star" and in what might be called the deadly materiality of the yellow ribbon.

In underscoring the linguistic nature of Rousseau's predicament and in seeming to invoke, along with Rousseau, "the radical irresponsibility of fiction" (*AR*, p. 293), de Man does not, as some read him erroneously, claim to *disown* responsibility, but rather shows, precisely, how the very irresponsibility of fiction turns out to be, in the most serious sense, historically (and referentially) responsible. Rousseau himself indicts his own apparent pleaded innocence in a reflection that, in recapitulating, de Man implicitly turns on himself: "the absence of a purposefully harmful intent does not suffice to make a lie innocent; one must also be assured that the error one inflicts upon one's interlocutor can in no conceivable way harm him or anyone else'" (*AR*, p. 292).

If through the war de Man discovers both the fiction of what he took to be political reality (the change and the renewal promised by the Nazis) and the political reality of what he took to be fiction (writing about literature), what de Man henceforth calls language is not simply language as it is commonly understood to be: an alleged isolated verbal entity framed by a bracketing of history and politics. "Language" for de Man is, in that sense, almost a red herring, taken as an isolated, static term. Far from being either a foreclosed or a foreclosing concept, "language" should be understood dynamically and differentially, only in its interaction with the term "history." Language is, in matter, what resists; it is, in history, what differentiates it from itself, what designates the fact that

history is never present to itself and cannot be guided; the fact that, as de Man puts it, "history is not human,"³² that any attempt at a human guidance of history invariably turns out to be either deceptive or illusory. History is, at the same time, what designates the fact that language is, in turn, not present to itself. History, therefore, is not, as it is commonly understood to be, a mode of continuity that defines itself in opposition to the mode of fiction, but a mode of interruption in which the unpredictability and uncontrollability of fiction, acting itself out into reality, "becomes the disruption of the narrative's referential illusion" (*AR*, p. 292), in much the same way as the historical reality of the war has in effect been the historical disruption of the pseudoreferential narrative of the journalistic witnessing of history. Paradoxically enough, history is, on the one hand, a mode of interruption of consciousness' awareness, and perception, of reality, and on the other hand, a mode of unexpected continuity (the uncanny indestructible materiality) of signifiers and of their circulation, the material, purloined way in which linguistic utterances have real effects (make history), without any relation to their meaning, their intention, or their content.

The Impossible Confession

How can one belatedly *confess* to such a history without engaging, once again, in a deluded and deluding (pseudowitnessing, pseudocontinuity, pseudocognition, of yet another) referential narrative? And what would be the inescapable performative production of the linguistic utterance of such confession? "What I did not realize," writes Leiris after the war about the referential illusion, the pseudorealism of his autobiographical narrative from before the war, "was . . . that every confession contains a desire to be absolved" (*M*, p. 154).

But how can one *absolve* the mystified historical collaboration with the Nazis? If the act of the journalistic collaborationist writing was, in a sense, a lie, would not the linguistic act of the confession—in recapitulating language as a straightforward referential witness, and in claiming to relieve or "overcome guilt . . . in the name of truth" (*AR*, p. 279)—simply amplify and magnify the lie?

The question takes us to the *Fourth Rêverie* and its implicit shift from reported guilt to the guilt of reporting, since here the

32. De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 33 (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 92; hereafter abbreviated *RT*. De Man elaborates, "History is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language. . . . You can apprehend, . . . but after a certain point you can't comprehend what you apprehend. . . . The 'inhuman,' however, is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, . . . linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have" (*RT*, pp. 92, 95, 96).

lie is no longer connected with some former misdeed but specifically with the act of writing the *Confessions* and, by extension, with all writing. [AR, p. 290]

In pointing out the lie inherent in any confession, as well as the demand for absolution that every confession necessarily implies,³³ de Man's discussion of Rousseau at once enumerates and radically rejects the whole series of excuses that have been, in fact, historically used by the Nazis.

Should de Man say that he simply *followed* what was dictated by someone else, someone who ranked higher and who had more authority? Should he say that he was young, that Nazism, as well as the political faith of his uncle (after the loss of both mother and brother), was *the first thing that came across his way*, and that his journalistic statement about the Jews, like Rousseau's chance utterance of the name of Marion, was a mere unconscious "slip, a segment of the discourse of the other" (AR, p. 288), and adhere, thus, to Rousseau's excuse and explanation? "Viciousness was never further from me than at this cruel moment, and when I accused the hapless girl," writes Rousseau, "it is bizarre but it is true that my friendship for her was the cause of my accusation. She was present to my mind, I excused myself on the first thing that offered itself. I accused her of having done what I wanted to do and of having given me the ribbon because it was my intention to give it to her" (AR, pp. 284, 288). De Man, however, like Rousseau himself, does not find this effort to absolve successful, and he points out the discrepancy in the very logic of the excusing argument: "But the use of a vocabulary of contingency . . . within an argument of causality is arresting and disruptive" (AR, p. 288).

Should he say, then, in the manner of Rousseau, that he was *caught in a machine* "that seduce[d] him into dangerously close contact" (AR, p. 298), a machine of language whose functioning turned out to be beyond his power and control? Rousseau writes: "It is certain that neither my judgment, nor my will dictated my reply, but that it was the automatic result [*l'effet machinal*] of my embarrassment" (AR, p. 294). But de Man

33. About two months after the completion of the present text and its submission to *Critical Inquiry*, I had the privilege of hearing at Yale (on 16 November 1988) a lecture by Ortwin de Graef (the original discoverer of the early journalistic texts) on de Man's "Excuses (*Confessions*)," a lecture whose remarkably subtle and complex analysis of de Man's text came uncannily close to my focus here on the link between confession and absolution, which makes confession an impossible solution for de Man. Since Ortwin de Graef and myself had no knowledge of each other's work, I think the intersections between some of our conclusions on this point bear uncanny witness to the accuracy of the paths we have both chosen in de Man's text.

articulates a critical position with respect to the machine's capacity to serve as an excuse:

The machinelike quality of the text . . . is more remarkable still when, as in the Marion episode, the disproportion between the crime that is to be confessed and the crime performed by the lie adds a delirious element to the situation. By saying that the excuse is not only a fiction but also a machine one adds to the connotation of referential detachment, . . . that of the implacable repetition of a preordained pattern. . . . There can be no use of language which is not . . . mechanical, no matter how deeply this aspect may be concealed by aesthetic . . . delusions.

The machine not only generates, but also suppresses, and not always in an innocent or balanced way. . . . The addition of examples leads to the subversion of the cognitive affirmation of innocence which the examples were supposed to illustrate. At the end of the text, Rousseau knows that he cannot be excused. [AR, p. 294]

Should de Man say, then, that he *did not know*, at the beginning of the war, all the historical implications of Nazism and, specifically, that he *did not know* about the extermination of the Jews, and invoke, in the archetypal way in which the Nazis have excused themselves in court, the legal or the psychoanalytic plea of innocence by virtue of unconsciousness or ignorance?

Excuse occurs within an epistemological twilight zone between knowing and not-knowing; this is also why it has to be centered on the crime of lying and why Rousseau can excuse himself for everything provided he can be excused for lying. When this turns out not to have been the case, when his claim to have lived for the sake of truth . . . is being contested . . . , the closure of excuse . . . becomes a delusion. [AR, p. 286]

One by one, the essay rejects all the possibilities of excuse, the pleas of innocence that have historically been articulated by the Nazis. Neither does de Man accept the Christian excuse of the fact of suffering as itself an expiation of the crime or as a ground for absolution:

The injury done to Marion is compensated for by the subsequent suffering inflicted on Rousseau by nameless avengers acting in her stead. The restoration of justice naturally follows the disclosure of meaning. Why then does the excuse fail and why does Rousseau have to return to an enigma that has been so well resolved? [AR, pp. 287–88]

The essay shows how all these possibilities of excuse (of a confession asking for absolution) are *not at the disposal* of its author, who knows that

no excuse, and no confession, can undo the violence of his initial wartime writing and of his journalistic speech act: "For the initial violence . . . can only be half erased, since . . . language . . . never ceases to partake of the very violence against which it is directed."³⁴

"Excuses (*Confessions*)" thus rejects not only the historical excuses of the Nazis but any mode of possible apologetic discourse.³⁵

Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default. . . . No excuse can ever hope to catch up with such a proliferation of guilt. On the other hand, any guilt . . . can always be dismissed as the gratuitous product of . . . a radical fiction: there can never be enough guilt around to match the text-machine's infinite power to excuse. [AR, p. 299]

The trouble with excuses (with confessions) is that they are all too *readable*: partaking of the continuity of conscious meaning and of the illusion of the restoration of coherence, what de Man calls "the readability of . . . apologetic discourse" (AR, p. 290), pretends to reduce historical scandals to mere sense and to eliminate the unassimilable shock of history, by leaving "the [very] assumption of intelligibility . . . unquestioned" (AR, p. 300).³⁶ Confessions (or excuses) thus allow one, through the illusion of understanding they provide, to forgive and to forget. But de Man precisely faces, in the history that cannot be confessed, what is both unforgivable and unforgettable.

34. De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 118–19; hereafter abbreviated *RR*.

35. It is here that de Man definitely parts ways with his uncle Hendrik, who did engage in an apologetic discourse and who, in general, was keen on writing his autobiography in the guise of what (perhaps in reference to Rousseau) he himself liked to refer to as "confessions." Thus, in his foreword to *The Remaking of a Mind*, Hendrik de Man writes, in relation to the First World War: "As soon as evidence ceases to be personal, not much reliance can be placed on its accuracy. And subjective accuracy is all I claim for these *confessions*. I will make them documentarily autobiographical" (*The Remaking of a Mind: A Soldier's Thoughts on War and Reconstruction* [New York, 1919], p. ix).

In "The Age of Doom," published in its German and French versions in 1945, immediately after the Second World War, Hendrik de Man again refers to his autobiographical reflections as "a confession" when he writes, with the sort of pathos that Paul de Man will at once avoid and precisely deconstruct in "Excuses (*Confessions*):" "We are witnessing 'the end of history,' . . . I should not hesitate to call this end a catastrophe . . . the catastrophic outcome in the ordinary sense of the word—apocalyptic possibilities not being excluded—seems far more probable to me than the opposite. . . . After this *confession*, I feel more at ease to say that I should consider this book to have missed its purpose with anybody who would feel discouraged . . . by its conclusions" (Hendrik de Man, "The Age of Doom," *A Documentary Study of Hendrik de Man*, pp. 344–46; my emphasis).

36. "The scandal of random denunciation of Marion . . . could have been explained away by the cognitive logic of understanding. The cognition would have been the excuse, but this convergence is precisely what is no longer conceivable" (AR, pp. 298–99).

The interest of Rousseau's text is that . . . the confession fails to close off a discourse which feels compelled to modulate from the confessional into the apologetic mode.

Neither does the performance of the excuse allow for a closing off of the apologetic text. . . . some ten years later, in the *Fourth Rêverie*, [Rousseau] tells the entire story all over again. . . . Clearly, the apology has not succeeded in becalming his own guilt to the point where he would be allowed to forget it. [AR, p. 282]

In deconstructing, in his rigorous commitment to the truth of history, the conceptual system of all apologetic discourses and their very claim to restore an ethical balance—to be “epistemologically as well as ethically grounded and therefore available as meaning, in the mode of understanding” (AR, p. 287)—de Man keeps reiterating, and demands that we keep facing, the historical *impossibility of reading* (or the Holocaust) as an unredeemable scandal of injustice and of injury.

In the testimony of a work that performs actively an exercise of silence not as simple silence but as the absolute refusal of any trivializing or legitimizing discourse (of apology, of narrative, or of psychologizing explanation of recent history), de Man articulates, thus, neither—as some have argued—an empirical (or psychological) hidden confession nor—as others have suggested—an empirical (or psychological) refusal to confess, but the incapacity of apologetic discourse to account for history as Holocaust, the ethical impossibility of *a confession that, historically and philosophically, cannot take place*. This complex articulation of the impossibility of confession embodies, paradoxically enough, not a denial of the author's guilt but, on the contrary, the most radical and irrevocable assumption of historical responsibility.

Cast in the tone of a pietistic self-examination, [the text] sounds severe and rigorous enough in its self-accusation to give weight to the exoneration it pronounces upon its author—until Rousseau takes it all back in the penultimate paragraph which decrees him to be “inexcusable.” [AR, p. 290]

At the end of the text, Rousseau knows that he cannot be excused. [AR, p. 294]

In trying to force the secret out of the journalistic evidence of the wartime newspapers (or of today's press), in trying to force de Man's biography to a *confession* he told us could not be historically articulated, we naively believe that we can simply overcome (explain away) his silence, and in this way forget our own.

We thus forget what de Man has taught us through the figure of Wordsworth—about history as “a defacement of the mind” and about autobiography as muting or as “muteness”—in a reading lesson that

might describe not merely the historical experience of his own autobiography but our own posthumous reading relation to him, our own incapacity of facing our own history both in the mutedness of his defaced biography and in the silent testimony of his writing:

It would be naive to believe that we could ever face Wordsworth [or de Man] . . . outright. But it would be more naive still to think we can take shelter from what he knew by means of the very evasions which this knowledge renders impossible. [RR, p. 92]

A certain misuse of language is denounced in the strongest of terms: "Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with. . . ." . . .

Wordsworth says of evil language, which is in fact all language including his own language of restoration, that it works "unremittingly and *noiselessly*." . . . To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are . . . deaf and mute—not silent, which implies the possible manifestation of sound at our own will, but silent as a picture, that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness. [RR, pp. 79, 80]

Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. [RR, p. 81]

5

The Task of the Translator

If history does not allow for a confession as a mode of either explanation or reparation, if confession can no longer serve as a viable language of historical accountability, how can one nevertheless attest to the "defacement of the mind" the Holocaust has been? There remains, suggests de Man, a positive necessity of accounting, a positive historical endeavor that Walter Benjamin, profoundly and suggestively, has named "The Task of the Translator." And if it is, indeed, in his last lecture (published posthumously) that de Man addresses Benjamin's essay on "The Task of the Translator," it is, I would suggest, because translation, as opposed to confession, itself becomes a metaphor for the historical necessity of bearing witness and because the "task"—which can be read as de Man's testament—describes at once de Man's endeavor in his later writings and his radically revised position as belated witness to the events of World War II. While the conclusion of the Second World War coincides with de Man's silence and with his translation of *Moby-Dick* (1945), the conclusion of his later career of writing and of teaching coincides with his last statement on "The Task of the Translator" and on the silence that at once inhabits, and threatens to disrupt, this task.

Thus, in Benjamin's example, which de Man reemphasizes, Hölderlin has literally and historically gone mad after finishing his superb translation of Sophocles. It is as though the translator, by the very power of his rendering the silence that inhabits Sophocles' tragedies, were himself exploded and aspired by that very silence.

In the process of translation, as Benjamin understands it—which has little to do with the empirical act of translating, as all of us practice it on a daily basis—there is an inherent and particularly threatening danger. The emblem of that danger is Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles:

“ . . . Hölderlin's translations in particular [says Benjamin] are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and *enclose the translator with silence*. Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work, in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become *lost* in the bottomless depths of language.” [RT, p. 84; my emphasis]

It is not a coincidence, indeed, that de Man ends his career in a reflection not merely on translation and on silence but specifically on Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin is mentioned for the first time by de Man in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” where the reference to his theory of allegory, which de Man espouses in his revision of the conventional conception both of temporality and of literary history, will later be acknowledged by de Man not as a simple influence or reference but as the inscription of a major change in his own work, a turning point in his own critical thought. In his 1983 foreword to the revised second edition of *Blindness and Insight*, a few months before the delivery of his last lecture on “The Task of the Translator,” de Man writes:

With the deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology, [“The Rhetoric of Temporality”] augurs what seemed to me to be a change, not only in terminology and in tone but in substance. This terminology [borrowed from Benjamin] is still uncomfortably intertwined with the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality that was current at the time, but it signals a turn that, at least for me, has proven to be productive.³⁷

Benjamin thus stands for *a change* de Man has undergone, and the choice of Benjamin for de Man's last lecture signifies that de Man's

37. De Man, “Foreword to Revised, Second Edition,” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed., rev., Theory and History of Literature, vol. 7 (Minneapolis, 1983), p. xii.

testament, his legacy, consists in nothing other than the imperative, and implications, of this change. I would suggest that this change, which has found its first explicit formulation in the conceptual shift marked by "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1971) and which "The Task of the Translator" will in turn discuss at the conclusion of de Man's life (1983) is the same process of change that began in 1942 during the war, with de Man's own silence, at the turning point of the interruption of his journalistic interventions and of his transgressive publication of *Exercice du silence*, followed by his translation of *Moby-Dick*.

"The Task of the Translator" has thus not only critical and theoretical, but also biographical and autobiographical, implications. And it is not by chance that these final autobiographical considerations about a change happen to take place in conjunction with the name of Benjamin, the German-Jewish critic who died as a superfluous, ironic, and accidental casualty of the Second World War. As Hitler rises to power, Benjamin, boycotted as a Jew and an undesirable writer, emigrates from Germany to France, yet continues to publish in periodicals in German. After France's declaration of war on Germany, he declines an opportunity to leave for the United States and is imprisoned for three months in a camp in Nevers. In 1940, the year in which de Man starts writing for *Le Soir*, Benjamin joins a group of refugees who attempt to escape from France by crossing the Spanish Pyrenees. Responding to an unfounded verbal threat of being turned over to the Gestapo, Benjamin commits suicide during the night; the other fugitives will escape to safety without being intercepted.

My conjecture is that not only Benjamin's philosophy but also his biography—and his death—have left a powerful impression on de Man and on his work. Benjamin's suicide might have resonated with the suicides that framed de Man's own life. Benjamin's aborted departure might have evoked de Man's own radical departure and his violent annihilation—or erasure—of his Belgian self. If the question remains open of whether de Man, like Ishmael, departed as a substitute for committing suicide, Benjamin commits suicide when he is in the process of departure and when he believes (mistakenly) this process to be disrupted.³⁸

De Man's life would thus seem to be the opposite of Benjamin's. De Man escaped while Benjamin failed to escape. De Man survived the war while Benjamin drowned in it. De Man left for the United States

38. Previous to his definitive departure following the war, de Man in fact experienced, very much like Benjamin, an aborted departure during the war. After the surrender of the Belgian army to Germany on 28 May 1940, de Man and his wife fled (along with many other Belgians) to Bagnères de Luchon in the French Pyrenees, where they spent the summer months waiting, unsuccessfully, for permission to cross to Spain, before their reluctant return to Brussels in August. Thus, in the very year (1940) and the very geographical region (French Pyrenees) in which Benjamin took his own life, de Man in turn found himself entrapped, with no possibility of escape and with the war closing in on him.

whereas Benjamin postponed and failed to reach this destination. Benjamin was Jewish; de Man published a time-piece against the Jews.

And yet, the opposition is too symmetrical to not also suggest a subtle doubling between the two life stories and between the two experiences of being totally engulfed and cognitively overwhelmed by the war. Although politically positioned on two different sides, although de Man collaborates while Benjamin is persecuted as a Jew, both Benjamin and de Man experience the events of the Second World War essentially as a mistake, as an impossibility of reading (or of witnessing), as a historical misreading that leads both men to a misguided action. The one dies as a consequence of his misreading of the war whereas the other survives in spite of it and constructs his later life as a relentless struggle with the powers of historical deception, including his own former historical misreading.

No wonder, then, if through his own translation of "The Task of the Translator" de Man implicitly has recognized in Benjamin a double and a brother (a brother who can be related to, once more, only belatedly, as a *dead brother*), since Benjamin's biography is an ironic mirror image of de Man's autobiography, and since the mutedness of both life stories, the inarticulate articulation and the articulated inarticulation of both biographies, translates something that is historically and crucially significant beyond both individuals, something essential (and inarticulable) about the history of the Second World War.

Although unmentioned, Benjamin's suicide is referentially inscribed within de Man's survival as well as within "The Task of the Translator" (both de Man's and Benjamin's), in much the same way as Shelley's death is referentially inscribed, in de Man's interpretation, within the manuscript of his unfinished poem, paradoxically entitled *The Triumph of Life*, a poem whose writing process was historically and materially interrupted by the author's accidental drowning. At a point when de Man himself is terminally ill and when his own work is about to be interrupted by his imminent death, de Man offers the following reflections on Shelley's drowning, which, I would suggest, could equally describe the inscription and the presence of Benjamin's historic death—and of the dead bodies of the Holocaust—in his own text on "The Task of the Translator":

[The] defaced body is present in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem. At this point, figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an *event which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning*. It may seem a freak of chance to have a text thus molded by an actual occurrence, yet the reading of *The Triumph of Life* establishes that this mutilated textual model exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts. . . .

In Shelley's absence, the task of . . . reinscribing the disfiguration now devolves entirely on the reader. The final test of reading, in

The Triumph of Life, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley's body. . . .

For what we have done with the dead Shelley, and with all the other dead bodies . . . is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves. . . . They have been transformed into historical and aesthetic objects. [RR, pp. 120–21; my emphasis]

De Man refuses to *dispose* of Benjamin's body, to make of Benjamin (or, for that matter, his own work) a "historical and aesthetic object"; he refuses, that is, to treat history as a totalized, settled, understood, and closed account, to engage in a semblance of historical reading of the Holocaust that would be, in fact, a speech act of disposing of the scandal of the bodies.

The task of the translator, on the contrary—in opposition both to confessional, apologetic discourse and to traditional historical cognition—is to read the textuality of the original event *without disposing of the body*, without reducing the original event to a false transparency of sense. De Man insists, thus, on the fact that the German word for "task" also means a "giving up," a defeat or failure; and that Benjamin's text is not merely about the task or the endeavor but, correlatively and essentially, about the failure, the defeat, of the translator:

One of the reasons why he takes the translator rather than the poet is that the translator, per definition, fails. The translator can never do what the original text did. Any translation is always second in relation to the original, and the translator as such is lost from the very beginning. He is per definition underpaid, he is per definition overworked, he is per definition the one history will not really retain as an equal. . . . If the text is called "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: *Aufgabe*, task, can also mean the one who has to give up . . . he doesn't continue in the race anymore. It is in that sense also the defeat, the giving up, of the translator. The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original.

The question then becomes why this failure with regard to an original text . . . is for Benjamin exemplary. [RT, p. 80]

I would suggest that what the translator has to give up is the temptation to translate history by making sense of it, that is, by using an apologetic or apocalyptic discourse. What the translator fails to do is to erase the body, to erase the murder of the original:

All these activities . . . relate to what in the original belongs to language, and not to meaning as an extralinguistic correlate. . . . They disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated. They reveal that their

failure, which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an essential failure, an essential disarticulation which was already there in the original. They kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead. [RT, p. 84]

De Man shows in specific and striking detail how the official English and French translations of Benjamin (by Harry Zohn and Maurice de Gandillac, respectively) both misrepresent, at crucial points, what Benjamin is saying and thus again *kill the original*, and testify unwittingly to its murder:

Even the translators, who certainly are close to the text, . . . don't seem to have the slightest idea of what Benjamin is saying; so much so that when Benjamin says certain things rather simply in one way—for example he says that something is *not*—the translators, who at least know German well enough to know the difference between something *is* and something *is not*, don't see it! . . . This is remarkable, because the two translators . . . are very good translators. [RT, p. 79]

[Benjamin's] assertion is so striking, so shocking in a way, . . . goes so much against common sense, that an intelligent, learned, and careful translator *cannot see it, cannot see what Benjamin says*. [RT, p. 81; my emphasis]

The translations confirm, brilliantly, . . . that it is impossible to translate. [RT, p. 74]

The failure of the translator, including that of Benjamin's translators, is thus exemplary in that it is a *failure to see*, a failure to witness history in its original occurrence. The original is killed because there is no possible witnessing of the original event; and this impossibility of witnessing is, paradoxically, inherent in the very position of the translator, whose task is nonetheless to try to render—to bear witness to—the original.

De Man thus formulates not just his autobiographical, but, more important, his *philosophical* encounter with Benjamin's blindness and insight, with Benjamin's historical experience, and with his historic definition of the task of the translator. Benjamin articulates, precisely, *the position out of which de Man speaks* in his later writings, the position out of which de Man *translates* the Second World War as a historic incapacity of witnessing an original occurrence, a belated testimonial position he has occupied since 1942, since the period of his silence following his recognition of the failure, or the error, of his wartime journalistic witnessing. De Man encounters Benjamin precisely at this point of philosophical silence, this point of the historical disruption of his discourse out of which he joins, in turn, Benjamin's historical and philosophical relentless wrestling with the disfiguring Leviathan of history.

In this ongoing struggle, the need to testify to history as Holocaust repeatedly comes up against the impossibility of witnessing the original event; and yet, in the acknowledgment—in the historical translation—of this impossibility, *there is a witness*. It is thus that, in “The Task of the Translator,” through Benjamin’s articulation of a radical inarticulateness of contemporary history, de Man historically bears witness.

This witness, unlike a confession, is not personal; it is not directed, in the exhibitionistic way a theatrical (confessional) performance would be, toward an audience: “‘No poem,’” Benjamin has written, “‘is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener’” (*RT*, p. 78). History, like the original, is written in a foreign language, a language that the reader who relies on a translation cannot understand. A history that is “not human,” cannot, furthermore, be totally translated, or intended for, or owned by, any subject.

Things happen in the world [insists de Man] which cannot be accounted for in terms of the human conception of language. And . . . the relation [to] language is always involved when they have [happened]. . . . To account for them historically, to account for them in any sense, a certain initial discrepancy in language has to be examined . . .—it cannot be avoided. [*RT*, p. 101]

Translation is thus necessarily a *critical* activity, a mode of *deconstruction*, that is, the undoing of an illusory historical perception or understanding by bearing witness to what the “perception” or the “understanding” precisely fails to see or fails to witness. After the Holocaust, this critical subversion of the witness has become unavoidable: deconstruction is a necessary way of examining events. “A certain kind of critical examination . . . *has* to take place, it has to take place not out of some perversity, not out of some hubris of critical thought . . . , it has to take place because it addresses the question of what actually happens” (*RT*, p. 101).

The way in which the translator can bear witness to *what actually happens* in the original is, however, paradoxically, not by imitation but only by a new creation, a creation that, although it insures the literal survival of the original, is itself only the testimony of an afterlife:

[Translation] is associated with another word that Benjamin constantly uses, the word *überleben*, to live beyond your own death in a sense. The translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus assuming and confirming the death of the original. [*RT*, p. 85]

Here again, translation, insofar as it is deconstructive, insofar as it incorporates a passage through death that takes the original off center, is opposed precisely to confession, which attempts a synthesis by taking

itself (taking the self) as center, thus denying in its very mode that the center, the original, is dead. De Man himself bears witness, or translates, like Ishmael, from both the philosophical and the autobiographical position of an afterlife and of a radical exile. "Unlike a work of literature," writes Benjamin, "translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering."³⁹ "What translation does," echoes de Man, "is that it implies—in bringing to light what Benjamin calls 'die Wehen des eigenen'—the suffering of what one thinks of as one's own—the suffering of the original language" (RT, p. 84). This suffering, however, does not consist in the pathos of an individual but in the structural historical movement of the decanonization and the disintegration of the original:

This movement of the original is a wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland. . . .

Now it is this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, . . . this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife, that Benjamin calls history. [RT, p. 92]

Autobiography itself thus turns out to be, paradoxically, an *impersonal witness* to a history of which it cannot talk but to which it nonetheless bears witness in a theory of translation, which is, at the same time, its new historical creation.

This new articulation that constitutes historical translation does not afford, however, a totalizing view of history (or of the original historical occurrence) as a whole but is, on the contrary, a constant fragmentation of such a view, a continuous disarticulation of any illusion of historical closure or historical totalization. Benjamin thus writes in Zohn's translation:

"A translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must . . . incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel." [RT, p. 91]

But de Man corrects the English translation:

"Just as fragments are part of a vessel" is a synecdoche; "just as fragments," says Benjamin, "are the *broken* parts of a vessel"; as such he is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality, he says the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially

39. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), p. 76.

fragmentary. . . . The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment—so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly—and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness of it, no access to it. [RT, p. 91]

Like the shipwrecked vessel in *Moby-Dick*, historical translation keeps breaking into fragments against the whale. History, however, is neither the historical pathos of remembering a state from before the fragmentation nor the subjective, individual pathos of this fragmentation, but its objective structural determination, the structural necessity—and occurrence—of a change that is neither simply objective nor simply subjective, but that changes (or displaces) the very nature of the opposition between subject and object.

It is not this pathos of remembrance, or this pathetic mixture of hope and catastrophe and apocalypse. . . . It is not the pathos of a history . . . between the disappearance of the gods and the possible return of the gods. It is not this kind of sacrificial, dialectical, and elegiac gesture, by means of which one looks back on the past as a period that is lost. [RT, p. 86]

Translation thus itself becomes a metaphor for history, not only in that it demands the rigor of a history devoid of pathos, but in that it opens up the question of *how to continue when the past, precisely, is not allowed any continuance*. Translation is the metaphor of a new relation to the past, a relation that cannot resemble, furthermore, any past relation to the past but that consists, essentially, in the historical performance of a radical discontinuity:

Finally, translation is like history, and that will be the most difficult thing to understand. . . . it is like history to the extent that history is not to be understood by analogy with any kind of natural process. We are not supposed to think of history as ripening, as organic growth, or even as a dialectic. . . . We are to think of history rather in the reverse way: we are to understand natural changes from the perspective of history, rather than understand history from the perspective of natural changes. If we want to understand what ripening is, we should understand it from the perspective of historical change. [RT, p. 83]

The perspective of historical change is not simply what is *stated* by the translation but what is, in effect, *accomplished* by it. The translation is thus not quite a cognition but, rather, a performance of historical change to which it testifies in the very process of achieving it, of putting the change into effect: “The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of

change and of motion" (*RT*, p. 85). The testimony is itself a form of action, a mode not merely of accounting for, but of going through, a change: as opposed to a confession, the meaning of the testimony is not completely known, even by its author, before and after its production, outside of the very process of its articulation, of its actual writing. Historical change cannot fully come into cognition but testifies to its own process of occurring.

The Occurrence

In explaining how, in Benjamin, translation *happens*, de Man comments:

There is not in Benjamin, at this point, a statement about history as occurrence, as that which occurs. . . . [But] I think that what is implied, that what occurs, for example, is—translation is an occurrence. At the moment when translation really takes place, for example Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles, which undid Sophocles, undid Hölderlin, and revealed a great deal—that's an occurrence. That's an event, that is a historical event. As such, an occurrence can be textual, . . . but it is an occurrence, in the sense that it is not . . . the end of an error, but the recognition of the true nature of that error. [Benjamin] has described Hölderlin in his constant falling, and he says, "*Aber es gibt ein Halten.*" Which one tends to read as saying, "but there is a stop to this" . . . [However,] you can read it to mean, "*Aber es gibt ein Halten,*" in which you hold on . . . obstinately, to this notion of *errance*, . . . you stay with it, in a sense. Then something occurs in the very act of your persisting in this . . . you don't give in to everything that would go in the other direction. At that moment, translation occurs. In Hölderlin, translation *occurs*. . . . When Luther translated . . . the Bible . . . something happened. . . . there are, in the history of texts, texts which are occurrences. [*RT*, p. 104]

The present essay has been trying to suggest how de Man's work—in the very terms of its own statement about Benjamin—*makes translation happen*. What does the "happening" consist of? What does it mean for a translation to occur? It means that the original, or history, has been given not a voice that redeems it from its muteness and says it properly, but *the power to address us* in its very silence.

In compelling us to try to grasp, through the complexity of the relation between silence and speech, life and writing, language and reality, the nonsimplicity of reference in the shadow of the trauma of contemporary history; in compelling us to radically rethink the very notions of autobiography and history as the inescapable, nonfictional, nonpathetic, and nontrivial real texture of both literature and literary criticism, de Man's

testimony in his later writings invokes the Holocaust as the very figure of a silence, of a historical forgetting, which our very efforts at remembering—through the unwitting use of ready-made cultural discourses—only reenact and keep repeating, but which a certain silent mode of testimony can *translate*, and thus make us remember, “not,” however, as “the end of an error, but [as] the recognition of the true nature of that error.” Paradoxically enough, de Man’s work does not cancel out forgetfulness, but it gives our own historical forgetting *the power to address us*, to remind us that we have forgotten, once again, the horror, and the threat, and the murder, and the radical impossibility of witnessing, of the original.

If it is true that, as de Man points out, there are in history translations that made such a *difference* that they have had themselves the impact of historical events—if “an occurrence can be textual” and if “there are, in the history of texts, texts which are occurrences”—I would suggest that, in the history of texts as well as in that of events, the silent testimony of de Man’s work in his later writings, and the translation it makes happen, is precisely one such textual and historical *occurrence*.