

Resetting the Agenda

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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Summer, 1989), pp. 804-811

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343691>

Accessed: 14-09-2019 17:27 UTC

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On Jacques Derrida's "Paul de Man's War"

VI

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John Brenkman and Jules David Law

1

Jacques Derrida offers his recent commentary ("Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 14 [Spring 1988]: 590–652) on the early career of Paul de Man as an urgent intervention in a discussion he fears is going awry. The most pressing danger he sees in the recent revelations is that they have played into the hands of de Man's antagonists, who are now ready to denounce the whole of his career and even deconstruction itself. Against such indiscriminate critiques Derrida hurls the epithet: totalitarian. He is attempting to re seize the initiative in the discussion and to reset the terms of the debate. His agenda extends across historical, theoretical, and political questions.

He wants to affirm that a radical, indeed absolute break separates the later from the earlier de Man. He also wants to show that the young de Man, however firmly committed to fascist ideology and however much an accomplice of the Nazis occupying Belgium, at the same time regularly distanced himself from that ideology and even undermined its meanings. Moreover, Derrida boldly takes up the challenge that these revelations have cast on the intellectual movement he and de Man have shaped. Can deconstruction come to grips with the political and intellectual history of its own leading American proponent? And can deconstruction in the process make a distinctive contribution to the understanding of fascism and intellectuals' participation in it?

Critical Inquiry 15 (Summer 1989)

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Derrida has responded with two very large claims. He claims, first, that deconstruction provides the instruments of interpretation and habits of analysis without which the practices of a fascist intellectual like the young de Man cannot be understood. And, further, that the mode of philosophical and literary analysis embodied in his own and the later de Man's work is a bulwark against totalitarianism, including fascism itself.

With these claims Derrida puts the prestige of deconstruction on the line: its political significance, its power to explain political and cultural conjunctures, and its capacity for self-understanding. If these remain staked on the procedures and outcomes of his account of "Paul de Man's War," the wager will be lost.

Derrida's historical-political analysis is interwoven with an often moving testimony of his personal and intellectual ties to de Man. He does not, however, have control over the interaction of the two. The testimonial mode shows the vicissitudes of encountering texts no one could have been prepared for: the shock and recoil at recognizing de Man's fascist sympathies, the relief or quandary in coming upon statements whose content or style might, or does, occur outside such sympathies. But Derrida then confuses these vicissitudes with the argument and meaning of the articles de Man wrote. The incongruity in reading a fascist de Man is projected onto the texts; they become ambiguous, ambivalent, undecidable: "all the propositions carry within themselves a counterproposition: sometimes virtual, sometimes very explicit, always readable, this counterproposition signals what I will call . . . a *double edge* and a *double bind*" (p. 607). Derrida fails to describe the many purposes, the different polemics, and the adaptability that de Man's writings exhibit within their highly charged environment. Derrida transforms the contextual and pragmatic complexity of this fascist intellectual's practice into a balance sheet: on one side, everything that smacks of "the worst"; on the other, everything that doesn't.

2

Derrida begins his analysis of de Man's *Le Soir* articles by recounting the "impressions" left "after a first reading" (p. 598). He acknowledges

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being “disappointed” by the apparent extent of de Man’s capitulation to the Nazi occupation and his susceptibility to “the ideological contagion” of fascism—political commitments which “disconcerting[ly]” took a positive, “engaged” form rather than the “negative forms . . . of omission or of abstention” (p. 599).

Derrida then hastens to point out that this initial impression was in fact a “double” one: “Paul de Man’s discourse appeared to me right off to be clearly more engaged than I had hoped, but also more differentiated and no doubt more heterogeneous” (p. 599). Derrida does not at this point proceed to show that there was something complex, multileveled, or dynamic in de Man’s commitment to fascism. The ensuing sketch of de Man’s personal and historical circumstances in 1940–42 (pp. 599–600) assumes instead that the heterogeneous elements were somehow on the “other” side of the ledger from engagement.

Consider the factors that make for the impression of textual heterogeneity: “juvility,” “confusion,” “haste,” “flatter[y],” “temptation,” the “determining role” of the uncle, “personal inability,” the necessity of drawing on a “fund of coded and stereotyped arguments,” the “mobility of [the] situation” (pp. 599–600). To begin with, this selective description of the relevant circumstances is transparently a list of extenuating factors. Furthermore, what Derrida has arranged under the heading of “heterogeneity” are the various *circumstances* of de Man’s writings, without demonstrating that these circumstances correspond to a differentiated political *content*. How then is “heterogeneity” to be understood as a complication or qualification of de Man’s intellectual engagement with fascism?

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ledger, the evidence offered for the *seriousness* of de Man’s political engagement is de Man’s “extraordinary culture.” While this “intellectual maturity and cultivation” bespeaks a sense of political responsibility—“Paul de Man knew what he was doing, as they say”—Derrida immediately suggests that the responsibility was complex: “he constantly posed questions of responsibility, which does not mean that his response to his questions was ever simple” (p. 599). This description now situates heterogeneity back on the side of engagement. This move is in itself unobjectionable, except that Derrida makes it precisely at the moment where he dissolves heterogeneity into a list of mitigating circumstances that lessen de Man’s responsibility. The rhetorical effect of smuggling a now attenuated concept of heterogeneity into the category of commitment is to empty the latter of any significant political content.

Throughout the essay Derrida balks at specifying the political content of de Man’s actions. When faced with the most basic task of designating what it was de Man did, Derrida describes even the “massive and irreducible fact” obliquely: “whatever may be the overdetermination of the content or the internal strategy, a ‘literary and artistic column’ had been regularly supplied between 1940 and 1942. . . . The subjection of this newspaper cannot have escaped de Man for very long” (p. 604). This hardly counts

as a description of de Man's decision to collaborate and to work publicly for an authoritarian regime. It does not even give a plausible picture of the minimum awareness with which he must have acted. Only a visitor from another planet could have gone to work for *Le Soir* in December 1940 without recognizing that its Belgian owners had been stripped of power, that a well-known intellectual active in the fascist Rexist party had been installed as editor-in-chief, and that the paper's publication was subject to the censorship of the German military administration.

Derrida's descriptions drift into euphemism. *Le Soir's* special supplement on "The Jews and Us," to which de Man contributed and which did not itself mince words in announcing the paper's *anti-Semitism*, Derrida calls "a page devoted to Judaism" (p. 625). Derrida goes to such lengths in search of something to counterbalance de Man's participation in the anti-Semitism campaign that he verges on excusing him on the grounds that he may not have known what his editors were up to. And why, once he figured it out, did he not "end his association with the newspaper"? "Yes, but he would have had to be certain that this rupture was a better idea than his ambiguous and sometimes anticonformist continuation on the job" (p. 631). Moreover, Derrida then brackets the salient fact about de Man's article—namely, that he declared his willingness to live with the forced removal of the Jews from Europe, making that declaration at a time when the Nazis' anti-Jewish measures in Belgium had only just begun—and imagines instead that de Man could only have been sufficiently repelled by his paper's and his own position if he had foreseen the Holocaust: "He would also have had to evaluate the gravity of the last lines of this article as we are doing today" (pp. 631–32). In Belgium, in 1941, it did not require the historical hindsight of the Holocaust to oppose the anti-Jewish measures being implemented and publicly contemplated by the Nazis.

Derrida's procedures of interpretation miss the mark when it comes to his entire discussion of the crucial role that de Man's many reflections on nationalism played in his ideological commitment to fascism. According to Derrida, the writings on nationalism exemplify the bifurcated, ambiguous movement of de Man's political thinking. On the one hand, de Man exhibited "a nationalist commitment: Belgian, sometimes Flemish" and "a great respect, in a privileged fashion, with regard to German nationalism" (p. 616). On the other hand, de Man offered "abundant warnings against narrow nationalism and jealous regionalism" (p. 620) and advocated Belgian unity rather than Flemish separatism and possible annexation to Germany. Derrida presumably means to suggest that de Man's nationalism is a sign of fascist tendencies, whereas his stance against a German annexation of Belgium and on behalf of a sovereign but bilingual Belgium was—or perhaps verged on being, or went in the direction of becoming—antifascist. (We are assuming this to be Derrida's meaning; otherwise the supposed ambiguities would be completely irrelevant to

the issues at hand.) In fact, however, de Man's position is akin to that of two of the most important factions among Belgian fascist movements. The Rexist political journalist Robert Poulet argued in the pages of Paul Colin's *Nouveau Journal* that a united, sovereign Belgium should emerge after the war, allied with but not controlled by Germany. And from the end of 1941 until April 1943, elements within the most important Flemish nationalist organization, the fascist Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond, steered their movement away from its separatist aspirations, fearing that a separate Flanders would be taken over by the S.S. De Man's vision of a bilingual, binational Belgium actually foreshadowed the view ultimately espoused by the leader of the VNV, Hendrik Elias. A far more plausible hypothesis than Derrida's, then, is that de Man was using his literary column to help articulate the principles by which national sovereignty and a bilingual culture could be achieved under, not outside, German hegemony in Europe.¹

Derrida's effort to interpret de Man's political commitments as ambiguous fails to register the most obvious tension animating de Man's complex, evolving project: on the one hand, de Man was a Nazi collaborator; on the other hand, he was a Belgian fascist.

3

De Man's essay "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" indicates his willingness at the time to live with anti-Semitism so long as it would leave literature alone. This acquiescence also left de Man silent in the face of the highly public anti-Jewish measures of the occupation. How then does Derrida come to construe this essay as ambiguous and anticonformist?

Derrida's analysis of "Les Juifs" hinges on his interpretation of the first two paragraphs, whose "logic," he argues, "controls everything that follows" (p. 625). The interpretation of these paragraphs in turn hinges on the first two words, "vulgar antisemitism," which Derrida syntactically modifies to "the vulgarity of antisemitism." Thus rephrased, de Man's understanding of vulgar anti-Semitism is now "open to two interpretations":

To condemn vulgar antisemitism may leave one to understand that there is a distinguished antisemitism in whose name the vulgar variety is put down. De Man never says such a thing, even though one may condemn his silence. But the phrase can also mean some-

1. These political events are recounted in Great Britain, Naval Intelligence Division, *Geographical Handbook Belgium*, B.R. 521 (Restricted), Geographical Handbook Series (London, 1944); Paul Delandsheere and Alphonse Ooms, *La Belgique sous les Nazis*, 4 vols. (Brussels, 1946–47); and Jean Stengers, "Belgium," in *The European Right: A Historical Profile*, ed. Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), pp. 128–67.

thing else, and this reading can always contaminate the other in a clandestine fashion: to condemn “vulgar antisemitism,” *especially if one makes no mention of the other kind*, is to condemn antisemitism itself *inasmuch as* it is vulgar, always and essentially vulgar. De Man does not say that either. [Pp. 624–25]

On Derrida’s first interpretation, de Man appears to accept the existence of a valid anti-Semitism in relation to which the anti-Semitism of cultural philistinism is “vulgar.” Though we are reminded that de Man does not actually “say” this, Derrida proposes the argument that “silence” in such circumstances is “condemnable.” Inexplicably, this moral criterion disappears from Derrida’s second interpretation—in which de Man appears to leave open the possibility that anti-Semitism is categorically vulgar—even though *de Man does not say this either*. The abandonment of this moral criterion halfway through the analysis is one of two disastrous methodological errors in Derrida’s argument, the second of which concerns his construction of ambiguity. Derrida’s analysis of the putative ambiguity in the phrase “vulgar antisemitism” proceeds through a series of grammatical reformulations that propose to clarify the initial ambiguity while in fact only reconfirming it each time in an increasingly sympathetic mode. “Vulgar antisemitism” is rephrased first as “the vulgarity of antisemitism” (the construction which yields “two interpretations”), and then as “antisemitism . . . *inasmuch as* it is vulgar,” a phrase which Derrida prefers to “leave” in “all its ambiguity,” *even as he employs it to characterize the thrust of de Man’s entire article*: “The logic of these first two paragraphs controls everything that follows: it is a matter of condemning antisemitism *inasmuch as it is vulgar* (I leave this expression all its ambiguity, which is the ambiguity of the article)” (p. 625). As Derrida proceeds with his analysis of “Les Juifs,” the notion of a condemnable silence drops out of his account entirely. All that remains of the alternative structure (the “two interpretations”) is a still unclarified ambiguity on the one hand and an unverified nonconformism on the other.

Try as he can, Derrida cannot make de Man’s first two paragraphs sound anything more than ambiguous at best. The only evidence Derrida can provide for his suspicion of a lurking nonconformism in the paragraphs is his claim that they criticize the rhetoric of anti-Semitism (“‘degenerate,’” “‘polluted’” [p. 625]), but this is a blatant misreading: de Man explicitly objects to that rhetoric insofar as it is applied to modern culture and literature, not insofar as it is applied to Jews. All further evidence of de Man’s nonconformism—his eccentric literary canon and his concessions to Jewish “‘cerebralness’” and “‘coldness’” (p. 630)—is drawn from outside of the first two paragraphs, even though those paragraphs supposedly control everything else that follows. In fact, the controlling paragraph of the essay is more plausibly the final one—envisioning the forced removal of Jews from Europe—in the light of which Derrida should

have realized that the supposed ambiguity of the first paragraphs was sinister rather than coy.

4

Derrida's account of de Man's intellectual-political practice fails to capture what it meant to be a fascist intellectual. That failing irreparably compromises his efforts to identify the relation of de Man's postwar practice to his past. Derrida is led to an unsubstantiated interpretation of de Man's break with fascism and to a dogmatic account of the lessons to be learned from it.

Derrida claims that the "lessons of Paul de Man" (p. 591) provide the methodological key to understanding de Man's own personal and historical trajectory. Yet Derrida acknowledges that there are ways of reading those "lessons" which might call into question the political underpinnings and consequences of de Man's later work. Derrida describes such readings as "symptomatologi[cal]," and he refers contemptuously to critics of deconstruction who might now try to "reapply his [de Man's] categories to his own texts" and who believe that "everything is already there in the 'early writings'" (pp. 644, 642, 640–41). Yet Derrida's contempt does not demonstrate that such interpretations actually misapply de Man's lessons. They merely threaten to give a picture of a later de Man who had not broken with fascism in the precise way, and to the extent, that Derrida assumes. Derrida in fact acknowledges that some version of symptomatology is now an obligation pressed on *all* readers of de Man: "I realize that we will now be able to read all his published texts, *everyone will do so, us in particular*, the texts we already know, while trying, some will do it with *malevolence*, with an *unhealthy jubilation*, others will do it *otherwise, to find in the published texts signs referring back to that period*" (p. 635; our emphasis). In this description, what the difference between acceptable and unacceptable symptomatology comes down to is simply a question of *good or bad faith* in the application of de Man's lessons to his own texts. This is not a methodological distinction, at least so far as it is elaborated in Derrida's essay. It leaves theoretically unsolved the problem of construing and applying de Man's lessons, and thus leaves open the question of whether those lessons can constitute in themselves a critique of totalitarianism.

This impasse leads Derrida to ask if there is not a "rule" that will help establish the proper application of de Man's "lessons": "Can one, ought one to take the reading possibilities that de Man himself offers us and manipulate them as arms, as a suspicion or an accusation against him . . . ? What would be the *rule*, if there is one, for *avoiding abuse* . . . ?" (p. 643; our emphasis). Following a regressive logic, which is not peculiar to deconstruction, one can foresee that "rules," too, will become subject

to “abuse,” and that the articulation of interpretive guidelines will be opened up once again to competing constructions of evidence and forms of historical interpretation. Such struggles impel and divide intellectual communities, but it is not at all clear that de Man’s work has a privileged role to play in this process, and Derrida has advanced no arguments to support such a claim. It is for this reason that Derrida’s rejection of a critical symptomatology of de Man’s work and his certainty that a proper reading could only vindicate de Man are dogmatic.

Derrida’s whole discussion of the lessons of Paul de Man is governed by the hypothesis that de Man’s career followed a pattern of “rupture” and “radical reconversion” (p. 635). Indeed, there are emphatic differences between the work we knew and the work we are now confronted with. But the description of these differences as a product of a “conversion” fails to address the key questions: How did de Man come to interpret his own past? What was de Man’s political metamorphosis? How does it compare to that of other right-wing intellectuals in the wake of the defeat of fascism? Except in Franco’s Spain, virtually all those trajectories involved some sort of break. To determine the exact shape of de Man’s own rupture with fascism will require just the kind of empirical reconstructions that Derrida has thus far subordinated and deferred. One has to begin by acknowledging the possible range of interpretations. Does the break mark a conversion and critique, an escape and denial, or some more conflicted and partial reworking? What did de Man reject, retain, and readapt from his fascist project?

Derrida is altogether right that our own intellectual and political culture has much to learn from the shape and trajectory of de Man’s career. But Derrida cannot get at that lesson so long as he axiomatically portrays the break in de Man’s career as a conversion rather than as a historically specific process of self-reworking whose motives cannot be assumed in advance.