



An Interview with Paul de Man

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An Interview with Paul de Man

Stephano Rosso

ROSSO: You have been educated in Europe and have taught both in Europe and the US: what kind of implications for your understanding of “pedagogy” did you derive from this experience?

DE MAN: I have been teaching in the United States for the last thirty years and it’s an experience which I take so much for granted that I don’t reflect on it very much any more. I became aware of it because for a time I taught alternatively at the University of Zurich, at Cornell and at Hopkins. I had then the possibility to compare the situation of teaching in Europe and of teaching here: in Europe one is of course much closer to ideological and political questions, while on the contrary, in the States, one is much closer to professional questions. So the ethics of the profession are very different. I found it difficult in Europe to be teaching material that was so separated from the

This interview was granted by de Man on March 4, 1983 after the last of the “Messenger Lectures” he gave at Cornell University. The interview was commissioned by the RAI (the Italian National Broadcasting System)—it was broadcast in Italy on June 1, 1983—and de Man had agreed to try to be as “perspicuous” as possible, since he had to be understood by listeners and not by professional readers. I have decided to leave the text in its original form in order not to lose its oral “awkwardness.” An Italian translation of part of this text appeared in *Alfabeta* 58 (March 1984), p. 12. The present text appears with the permission of the author from *Decostruzione tra filosofia e letteratura*, ed. Maurizio Ferraris and Stephano Rosso, *Nuova Corrente* 31, nos. 93–94 (1984): 303–14. I also wish to thank Raffaello Siniscalco of the Rai Corporation for permission to print this text, and Christopher Fynsk and David Randall for their advice in preparing the interview. A special thanks to Giuseppe Mazzotta, who convinced de Man to grant me the interview and to Philip Lewis, who placed his office at our disposal.

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actual professional use that students, who were mostly destined to teaching in secondary school, would make of it. So there was a real discrepancy between what one talked about and what the use value of this could be for the students. So it had a very special feeling of alienation to me, very differently from here, where since one teaches future colleagues, one has a very direct professional relationship to them—which however has its own ideologies and its own politics, which are more the politics of the profession, the relationship of the academic profession to the American political world and society. I ended up finding the function of teaching in the United States—the function of an academic as distinct from the academic function—much more satisfactory than in Europe, precisely because of the *contract* one has with the people one teaches. Here you can actually carry out your contractual relation to them, whereas in Europe you can't. In Europe there is a bizarre separation on two completely different levels. It's concretely visible in the fact that you stand up there, on that chair, with an abyss between you and the students, while here you sit at a table. I found bad faith involved in that ideological situation in Europe, worse than here. It is slightly more honest here, though certainly the political problem then gets transposed to the relationship between the "academic" and society at large. I found it easier to cope with that than with what one faces in Europe . . .

ROSSO: How can you explain the success of Derrida's work and more generally of deconstruction in the American academic world?

DE MAN: I think part of the success of Derrida (well, the relative success, which has to be qualified) is that, unlike most of the other French critics, he works very close to texts, he *reads* very attentively, and both American teachers and students of literature are better prepared for that sort of thing than Europeans because of the discipline of the New Criticism and of close reading. There is something in Derrida which is more familiar but on the other hand a great deal more exciting than certain techniques which are used, so that Derrida's close working with specific texts is something that makes him certainly more accessible to the American audience, both in a positive sense—in the sense that people can continue from what he does—and in a negative sense—to the extent that, by his concentration on texts and on a canon of texts which is relatively traditional, he can and

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has indeed been attacked for being too close to textual works, and addressing more problems of textual interpretation than problems of a political or of a more general nature. Frequently, the difference between Foucault and Derrida and the attempts to bring the two together focus precisely on this question of close reading of texts, so that his success is ambivalent and is also a cause for criticism. It is also a little bit in those terms that the relationship between Derrida and what is called American “Derridism” or “Derridianism” is often discussed. It is often said—and this is true to some extent—that whatever is audacious, whatever is really subversive and incisive in Derrida’s text and in his work is being taken out by academizing him, by making him just one other method by means of which literature can be taught. And there is an element in Derrida which lends itself to that, because we can find in Derrida exemplary ways of reading, an awareness, for example, of rhetorical complexities in a text which are applicable to the didactics, to the pedagogy of literary teaching, and as such there is an impact of Derrida which is, in a sense, purely pedagogical. As far as I’m concerned I’m often mentioned as the one who is much responsible for that, since my work is, in a sense, more pedagogical than philosophical: it has always started from the pedagogical or the didactic assignment of reading specific texts rather than, as is the case in Derrida, from the pressure of generally philosophical issues. I can see some merit to that statement, except for the fact that I don’t think it is possible, in Derrida, to separate the classical didactic pedagogical element, which is undeniably there, from the subversive aspect of his work. To the extent that Derrida has this classical discipline in him, his subversion is particularly effective, much more so, I think, in this case, than in the case of somebody like Foucault, who directly addresses political issues, but without an awareness of the textual complexities that lead up to it, although Foucault has an almost intuitive awareness of them . . . So, personally, I don’t have a bad conscience when I’m being told that, to the extent that it is didactic, my work is academic or even, as it is used as a supreme insult, it is just more New Criticism. I can live with that very easily, because I think that only what is, in a sense, classically didactic, can be really and effectively subversive. And I think the same applies there to Derrida. Which doesn’t mean that there are not essential differences: Derrida feels compelled to say more about the institution of the university, but that is more understandable within the European context, where the university has such a predominating cultural function, whereas in the United States it has no cultural function at all, here it is not inscribed in the genuine cultural tensions of the nation . . .

ROSSO: Can you say something more about the differences between your work and Derrida’s?

DE MAN: I'm not really the right person to ask where the difference is, because, as I feel in many respects close to Derrida, I don't determine whether my work resembles or is different from that of Derrida. My initial engagement with Derrida—which I think is typical and important for all that relationship (to the extent that I can think or want to think about it at all) which followed closely upon my first encounter with him in Baltimore at the colloquium on "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man"—had not to do with Derrida nor with me, but with Rousseau. It happened that we were both working on Rousseau and basically on the same text, by sheer coincidence. It was in relation to Rousseau that I was anxious to define, to try to work out some . . . not discrepancies . . . but some change of emphasis between what Derrida does and what I'm doing. And there may be something in that difference between us that remained there, to the extent that in a very genuine sense—not as denegation or as false modesty (though whenever one says "not out of denegation" one is awaking the suspicion to be even more denying than before . . . so you can't get out of that bind . . .)—my starting point, as I think I already told you, is not philosophical but basically philological and for that reason didactical, text-oriented. Therefore I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it's doing. I know this is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and as such there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau. In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that "the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive" rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text. The difference is that Derrida's text is so brilliant, so incisive, so strong that whatever happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. He doesn't need Rousseau, he doesn't need anybody else; I do need them very badly because I never had an idea of my own, it was always through a text, through the critical examination of a text . . . I am a philologist and not a philosopher: I guess there is a difference there . . . I think that, on the other hand, it is of some interest to see how the two different approaches can occasionally coincide, at the point that Gasché in the two articles he has written on this topic (and which are together with an article by Godzich certainly the best things that have been written on it) says that Derrida and myself are the closest when I do not use his terminology, and the most remote when I use terms such as *deconstruction*: I agree with that entirely. But, again, I am not the one to decide on this particular matter and I don't claim to be on that level . . .

ROSSO: Do you agree with Lentricchia when, in his *After the New Criticism*, he speaks about a strong influence of Sartre on your work? And how was your first encounter with the works of Heidegger?

DE MAN: In factual terms, just to get the facts straight, like all people of my generation, that is people who were twenty years old when the war began, Sartre was very important. What interested me most in Sartre were literary critical texts that appeared in *Situation 1* and specifically the text on Ponge, that on Jules Renard, within which Sartre does very close textual work and talks about texts in a way which then was quite new. (There was also an earlier article by Sartre which had to do with point of view . . . an attack on Flaubert.) I remember those articles very well and I've been much impressed by them. They are however articles which are very comparable, let's say, to the New Criticism. They are articles which are very formalistic and which are close reading in a very technical way, which Sartre, later on, did not pursue. I was at the same time, however, much more influenced by all people who generally came from the tradition of Surrealism, specifically Bataille, Blanchot, even critics like Bachelard who were working in a very different vein than Sartre. And in the slight opposition which became visible, for example, in the debate that developed between Sartre and Blanchot—in Sartre's piece on "Qu'est-ce que la littérature" which was very much read and discussed, to which Blanchot then wrote a kind of answer which was called *La littérature et le droit à la mort*—I felt myself, if you can put it in those simple terms, more on the side of Blanchot than of Sartre. So, certainly I was not simply influenced by Sartre, but one would have to put many names next to Sartre and this would be again typical of my generation: there would be other names and it would only be some aspects of Sartre.

In the specific case of Heidegger, I began to have some awareness of his work during the war and soon afterward, first through a monograph by a Belgian philosopher called De Waelhens, who during the war published a book on Heidegger. Then, whatever influence I got from that, it did not come through Sartre. I always felt that the use made of Heidegger, and also to a lesser extent of Husserl, in Sartre missed the mark, and on the occasion of the publication of texts like Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," which was much discussed at that time, and which was, in a sense, polemical to Sartre, there too I felt closer to whatever Heidegger was saying. So it seems to me slightly farfetched to speak of a specific influence of Sartre . . . But Sartre,—even Derrida told me that about himself—for many of us was the first encounter with some kind of philosophical language which was not just academic. So it was the fact that Sartre wrote essays like *L'imaginaire*, *L'être et le néant*, which were technical philosophical books, while at the same time being a literary critic, at the

same time being somebody who expressed strong opinions on political matters—that somewhat mythological bicephalic dissent of the philosopher—had a very strong attraction; I don't think anybody of my generation ever got over that. We all somehow would like to be like that: it takes about a whole life to get over this notion, and I suppose the attraction of people like Bataille, whose relationship to the political (because they were very political) was more complex, more mediated, than in the case of Sartre, was a way to resist the obvious attraction of Sartre's flamboyant presence on the scene—Sartre and Camus, to a lesser extent, but especially Sartre to the extent that he was both a philosopher and an actively engaged political man. But one lost some of the confidence in that figure fairly soon, I think, in terms of certain obvious possible weaknesses in Sartre's work, both on the literary and on the philosophical side.

ROSSO: One can notice, in the bibliography of your works, a tendency to neglect contemporary literature: for example you don't look interested at all in a debate somehow fashionable, the debate about the notion of "postmodernism" . . .

DE MAN: The difficulty for me is that the "postmodern approach" seems a somewhat naively historical approach. The notion of modernity is already very dubious; the notion of postmodernity becomes a parody of the notion of modernity. It is like the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, the New Criticism, the New New Criticism, etc. It is a bottomless pit that does attempt to define the literary moment in terms of its increased modernity (this happens in the work of Hassan, too). It strikes me as a very unmodern, a very old-fashioned, conservative concept of history, where history is seen as a succession, so that the historical model that is being used at that moment is very dubious and, in a sense, naive, very simple. This applies more to the theoreticians of literature who feel the need to align their work with contemporary work in fiction, who have the slight intimidation which critics sometimes feel in relation to so-called creative authors and who would like to be in harmony with them. I am sure some of that exists in Europe. For me a model like that of Blanchot remains very revealing because he was a critic who was also a writer, and who was not concerned at all as a critic to justify himself as a writer, or as a writer to concern himself as a critic. Interestingly, in the same man you don't have the same subject, you don't have any intention to coordinate whatever is so-called creative without for that matter being in relation to the other, and he could bring them together in some later texts without any difficulty. There was no feeling of inferiority of the critic toward the writer. And that model which is frequent in France, and which is the model that you have in Mallarmé, is closer to me than the notion of the critic who wants a little bit "to cash in," so to speak, on the certain

innovative freedom that a writer can have. I don't know if now the innovation of writers in the States or in France or elsewhere is closer or similar to whatever is being done by literary theorists. And in a fairly categorical way the question does not interest me. If it turns out to be similar, okay, but it certainly would not be—certainly not, in my case and not, I think, in the case of any literary theoretician worth his salt—by trying to pattern himself or by trying to catch what's going on for this moment in the so-called creative fiction as opposed to criticism . . . I feel perfectly at ease writing on eighteenth- or seventeenth-century authors and don't feel at all compelled to write on contemporaries. On the other hand there are all kinds of contemporaries, some I feel very close to and some I feel millions of miles removed from . . .

ROSSO: Well, just to make an example, many years ago you wrote an article on Borges . . .

DE MAN: Well, it was suggested to me . . . Certainly I would be at any time ready to write on Borges, certainly on the fiction of Blanchot, but if you ask me on what contemporary French authors . . . I could possibly think of myself writing on Calvino, though I might be wrong . . .

ROSSO: Perhaps, now, you could tell us something about the book you are writing and about the “mysterious” chapters on Kierkegaard and Marx you mentioned in the lectures, and the frequent recurrence of the terms “ideology” and “politics” we have noticed recently . . .

DE MAN: I don't think I ever was away from those problems, but they were always uppermost in my mind. I have always maintained that one could approach the problems of ideology and by extension the problems of politics only on the basis of critical-linguistic analysis, which had to be done in its own terms, in the medium of language, and I felt I could approach those problems only after having achieved certain control over those questions. It seems pretentious to say so, but it is not the case. I have the feeling I have achieved some control over technical problems of language, specifically problems of rhetoric, of the relation between tropes and performatives, of saturation of tropology as a field that in certain forms of language goes beyond that field . . . I feel now some control of a vocabulary and of a conceptual apparatus that can handle that. It was on working on Rousseau that I felt I was able to progress from purely linguistic analysis to questions which are really already of a political and ideological nature. So that now I feel to do it a little more openly, though in a very different way than what generally passes as “critique of ideology.” It is taking me back to Adorno and to attempts that have been made in that direction in Germany, to certain aspects of Heidegger, and I just feel that one has to face therefore the difficulty of certain explicitly political texts. It is also taking me back constantly

to problems having to do with theology and with religious discourse, and that's why the juxtaposition of Marx and Kierkegaard as the two main readers of Hegel appear to me as the crux, as the problem one has, in a way, to solve. I have not solved it and the fact that I keep announcing that I am going to do something about it is only to force myself to do so, because if I keep saying I'm going to do this and I don't do it, I end up looking very foolish. So I have to force myself a little to do this, both in the case of Kierkegaard and in the case of Marx. It's taking me first of all in a preparatory move, by forcing me to go back to Hegel and Kant, and I just hope that I won't remain stuck in that. So I felt ready to say something about the problem of ideology, not out of a polemical urge. What has been said about it, what now is around in the books of Jameson or of other people, is not what spurred me to do this. As I said, it has always been a major concern and I now feel this problem of language somewhat more under control. What will come out of it I just do not know because I do not work that way. What will come out, will come from the texts of Marx and Kierkegaard as I think they will have to be read. And they have to be read from the perspective of critical-linguistic analysis to which those texts have not been submitted. There has been very little on Kierkegaard along those lines and there has been even less on Marx, except, of course, for elements in Althusser that, I think, go in that direction. But I look forward to seeing what I will produce and know as little about it as anybody else . . .