H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul De Man, Andrzej Warminski. *Aesthetic Ideology (Theory and History of Literature).* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. v + 196 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2203-0; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2204-7.

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Published on H-NEXA (January, 1997)

THE RESISTANCE OF READING

Paul de Man became quite a controversial figure outside the specialized field of literary theory after his death in 1983. This was due to the posthumous disclosure by a Dutch graduate student, Ortwin de Graef, revealing that de Man had written articles for papers under Nazi control in occupied Belgium during the Second World War. De MaňÒs articles appeared in *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen*, *Het Vlaamsche Land* and *Le Soir*. Much discussion has centred on the subject of whether he was, in fact, a Nazi sympathizer–with theorists and anti-theorists becoming engaged in highly polemical exchanges about the issue.

This review dwells on the issue for two reasons. Firstly, because in an involved, informative and explanatory thirty-three page introduction, the editor, Andrzej Warminski, makes no mention of this fact. One can appreciate the attempt to disassociate this scholarly and highly intricate piece of explanatory writing from such polemical issues; however, some discussion of the wartime writings might have contextualized the essays more fully. Secondly, whatever can be made of the intentionality and motivation of the wartime writings, there is no doubt that they do tend to reflect an organicist view of society and culture, a view underpinned by aesthetic influences–especially in terms of seeing German cultural influence as predominant–with de Man's rhetoric straying onto the "dangerous ground of 'blood and soil,' of cultural identity as rooted in a sense of predestined (organic) development and growth."[1] In my opinion, the present collection can only be fully understood given this knowledge of the young de MaňÒs writing.

The aesthetic is seen by de Man as a central factor in any kind of organicist approach to politics and culture. As a suasive force, which reconciles contraries and brings about a fusion of different entities, the aesthetic can be seen as a powerful political force. In my opinion, there can be little doubt but that de Man, having experienced the seductive power of Nazi ideology, spent a lot of his subsequent academic career deconstructing the premises that constituted this ideological position. In this collection, he traces the seminal position of the aesthetic to readings, or rather misreadings (as he sees them), of the work of Kant and Hegel; and, it is his essays on these two central philosophers that constitute the core of this collection.

Three of the essays deal with Kant: "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," "KanťÒs Materialism," and "Kant and Schiller"; while two deal with Hegel: "Sign and Symbol in HegeľÒs Aesthetics" and de MaňÒs "Reply to Raymond Geuss," on the subject of his reading of Hegel. He sees aesthetic ideology as stemming from misreadings of both thinkers, misreadings that deny what he calls the ˆÑmateriality of languageˆÒ or ˆÑinscription.' By this he means the rhetorical and uncontrolled aspect of language which offers resistance, through tropes, ambiguities and metaphorical deviations, to aesthetic and systematic totalizations. Many of these late essays, and those in *Allegories of Reading* and *The Resistance to Theory* are devoted to teasing out, through close readings which focus on the epistemological influence of rhetorical tropes, the aporias and antinomies inherent in seemingly monadic totalities, receptions and systems. Most of these readings, especially those of the Romantic and post-Romantic tradition, are valorized by the aesthetic ideology that is the subject of this book; and ultimately this quasi-organicist ideology can be traced back to Kant and Hegel.

Both philosophers place a huge onus on the category of the aesthetic in their respective philosophies. In his introduction, Waters explains how the category of the aesthetic is central in Kant "as a principal of articulation between theoretical and practical reason" (p. 3), and in Hegel as "the moment of transition between objective spirit and absolute spirit" (p. 4). Both Kant and Hegel place the aesthetic at a nodal point in their attempts to bring together subject and object, mind and matter, the noumenal and the phenomenal. As de Man notes, for Kant "the investment in the aesthetic is there-

fore considerable, since the possibility of philosophy itself, as the articulation of a transcendental with a metaphysical discourse, depends on it" (p. 73). He goes on to read both philosophers in terms of how language, especially the rhetorical use of language, problematizes the aesthetic desire for fusion. The notion of the Kantian sublime posits a move beyond the possible fusion of concepts and intuitions, beyond real world knowledge, that can be grounded in practical reason. However, since the sublime is an aesthetic category, it must involve some sense of phenomenal cognition. It can gestureˆÑbeyondÒ the antinomies of sensuous experience, but this can only be articulated through a language which, in its materiality, refuses, because it is unable, to transgress beyond subscribed limits. As de Man puts it, albeit in a slightly different context, "it depends on a linguistic structure that is not itself accessible to the powers of transcendental philosophy" (p. 79).

He goes on to read the metaphorical signifiers through which the signifieds ofˆÑreason and imaginationÒ are described in the workings of the sublime, and proceeds to offer to sustained critique, KantÒs structures of argument. These involve an alliance between imagination and reason, in Kantian terms, as the terror felt by the imagination in the face of the power of nature moves from "shocked surprise (*Verwunderung*) to tranquil admiration (*Bewunderung*)" (p. 84). De Man traces the linguistic argumentation that brings about this process, and makes the point that "instead of being an argument, it is a story, a dramatized scene of the mind in action" (p. 86). He goes on to study the implications of the anthropomorphization of these faculties, in terms of the analytical power of the argument, noting that there is a definite ontological as well as epistemological confusion:

How can faculties, themselves a heuristic hypothesis devoid of any reality–for only people who have read too much eighteenth century psychology or philosophy might end up believing that they have an imagination or a reason the same way they have blue eyes or a big nose–how can faculties be said to *act*, or even to act freely, as if they were conscious and complete human beings? (p. 87).

By focusing on the epistemological value of the tropes of language, de Man deconstructs (to use correctly a much-abused critical term) the seemingly aesthetic totalities that have generally been read into Kantian philosophy, especially by Schiller and Kleist and the whole Romantic tradition.

This example of his methodology gives some flavour to the work in general. He subjects the Hegelian categories ofˆÑsignÒ andˆÑsymbolÒ to a similar reading, demonstrating how ˆÑsymbol,' the privileged trope in HegelÒs *Aesthetics*, is generally seen as the "mediation between the mind and the physical world of which art manifestly partakes" (p. 91). Here again, the category of the aesthetic is used to fuse the subject with its object, and here again, a deconstructive reading of the argument through which Hegel reaches this point brings out the aporetic nature of this argument. Focusing on HegelÒs statement that art is "a thing of the past" (p. 94), he goes on to argue that this is so because Hegel places impossible demands on art, and these demands are frustrated by the materiality of language, which refuses the totalization of the symbol, and makes his philosophy "an allegory of the disjunction between philosophy and history … literature and aesthetics … literary experience and literary theory" (p. 104).

These examples of his reading practice demonstrate the difficulty of de ManÒs work. They also illustrate its political force in that he demonstrates how ˆÑdeconstructionÒ can have a purchase on the ˆÑreal world,' and analyses the sheer power of the act of reading as a toll in the unmasking of ideological aberrations. For as he puts it "rhetoric cannot be isolated from its epistemological function, however negative this function may be" (p. 49). For de Man, the stakes are high, especially in terms of what can happen when the aesthetic oversteps its bounds and becomes part of the political realm.

This epistemological critique comes to its high point towards the conclusion of his "Kant and Schiller" essay, when, talking about the role of the aesthetic in politics and in education, he goes on to cite a quotation about art as the expression of feeling, which moves on to seeing the statesman as an artist as well, and the quote goes on to add:

The people are for him what the stone is to the sculptor. Leader and masses are as little of a problem to each other as color is a problem for the painter. Politics are the plastic arts of the state as painting is the plastic art of color. Therefore politics without the people or against the people are nonsense. To transform a mass into a people and a people into a state that has always been the deepest sense of a genuine political task (p. 155).

The author of this passage is Joseph Goebbels, and this, to my mind, brings de ManÒs critique of aesthetic ideology to its logical conclusion. The aestheticization of politics, the use of cultural politics allows for monstrous activities, which become situated outside the realm of epistemology, and instead, lurk within the ambit of aesthetic judgment. What happens to the people who hap-

pen to be the wrong colour (in any sense of this term) for this particular artist is obvious, and is the nub of de MaňÒs ongoing critique, which brings us full circle in terms of his writings during the Second World War.

This is a fine collection of essays. The material is difficult, and presupposes a deal of knowledge about mainstream European philosophy. Some of the arguments are quite unsettling in terms of onêÒs unthought-out presuppositions and ideas. The style is rigorous, almost ascetic in places, though a wry humour does come through.

Finally, I found this collection to be intellectually stimulating and full of insight as well as problematic points of argument. The value of the act of reading as a resistance to totalizations of any form is an issue worthy of a great book. In *Aesthetic Ideology* that book has been written.

NOTES [1]. Norris, Christopher. *Paul de Man: ˆÑDeconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic IdeologŷÒ.* London: Routledge, 1988, p.159.

[2]. For a discussion of the issues involved in de Man's wartime journalism, see: Norris, *Paul de Man*, pp. 177-98; Geoffrey Hartman, "Looking Back on Paul de Man," in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3-24; David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (André Deutsch, 1991); K. M. Newton, "Review of David LehmaňÒs Signs of the Times," in *Textual Practice*, vol. b, no. 4 (Summer, 1994), pp. 348-58 and Barbara Johnson, "The Surprise of Otherness: A Note on the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man," in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Polity Press, 1990), pp. 13-22.

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Citation: Eugene O'Brien. Review of De Man, Paul; Warminski, Andrzej, *Aesthetic Ideology (Theory and History of Literature)*. H-NEXA, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=784

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