

# 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.

Paul de Man. *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 193 pp.

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This book collects essays from the last years of de Man's life (1977-83) concerning the "critical linguistic analysis" of the possibility of an "aesthetic ideology" (Warminski 1). The essays include analyses of the work of Locke, Pascal, Kant, Hegel, Schlegel, and others related to the theory of language—in particular to the ragged border between literary theory and philosophy. Additionally, de Man talks of "the possibility of juxtaposing ideology and critical philosophy, which is the persistent burden of contemporary thought" (p. 70). He concludes that neither twain shall meet, but readers who enjoy twisting their minds in the yogic contortions of contemporary critical postures will appreciate de Man's energetic proof, and those who don't may yet be comforted by having an obviously very bright guy tell them so.

De Man's starting point is that the figurative power of language which is at the root of the aesthetic communication "renders it nebulous and obfuscating" (p. 35). "Even in the transcendental realm of revealed language in Holy Writ, the necessary choice between seduction and truth remains undecidable" (p. 69). His conclusion is that "the relationship and the distinction between literature and philosophy cannot be made in terms of a distinction between aesthetic and epistemological categories ... Contrary to common belief, literature is not the place where the unstable epistemology of metaphor is suspended by aesthetic pleasure, although this attempt is a constitutive moment of its system. It is rather the place where the possible convergence of rigor and pleasure is shown to be a delusion" (p. 50). De Man finds it "equally vain to deplore or to praise" this "disjunction between philosophy and history, ... between literature and aesthetics, ...

between literary experience and literary theory" (p. 104), although it gives philosophers plenty to scoff at in literary theorists. As near as I can make out, literary theory is a margarita, aesthetic experience being the tequila and literary theory the lime, however much we might wish it to be a martini, with gin the aesthetic component and literary theory the vermouth. The ingredients that comprise a fulfilling artistic experience simply will not stay mixed, but tend to settle out and sour faster than ice melts.

As de Man points out, "when things run the risk of becoming too difficult, it is better to postpone the far-reaching consequences of an observation for a later occasion" (p. 49). When I picked up this book, I was hoping it would set out a precise methodology that might be applied to cultural studies. What I learned was that, not only are our methodologies not precise, but that they never can be. Theoretical mathematics is more applicable to cultural studies than this sort of critical thought. Recognizing even that there are no universal truths in the context of cultural studies (except that there are no universal truths), and it is precisely the imprecision, the variegated that interests us, that what we care about is effect and affect, and causation is the black box that we leave for a later occasion, can we not construct a broadly applicable yet intellectually rigorous method of studying cultural phenomena? While de Man's essays are gems, they are not building blocks in this enterprise.

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