

THE CRITIC AND THE “BLIND FORCE” OF LANGUAGE: A “THEORETICAL” READING OF ROUSSEAU

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Abstract

The present article looks at a type of reading which Paul de Man calls “theretical” to distinguish it from the traditional, “aesthetic” approach. The “theoretical” close reading, characterised by increased analytical rigour and focused on a clear-cut distinction between the linguistic and the phenomenal, aims to identify the “literariness” of literary language (a term used by the American critic with reference to “the autonomous potential of language”, to all the non-intuitive linguistic “factors” and “functions” that are not accessible to perceptive knowledge and constitute the incontrollable, “inhuman”, mechanism of language). The “linguistics of literariness” underlying it is used as an instrument for denouncing “ideological aberrations”, or the confusion between the materiality of the signifier and the materiality of the object designated by it. Unlike the traditional, totalising, “aesthetic reading” which starts from the premise of the possibility of knowledge, and the intelligibility of the text, the non-cognitive “theoretical” reading is an extreme example of linguistic and epistemological scepticism. Ironically, the critic himself cannot escape the error he criticises, as shown in the initial stage of his reading of a fragment of Rousseau’s Confessions: he tends to resort to the totalising, defensive strategy he later denounces as pure mystification, in an effort to elude the “blind force” of the linguistic mechanism by attributing meaning to structures created mechanically through the “positing power” of language.

Keywords: “theoria”, “aesthesia”, meaning, the positing power of language

Against “Aesthetic Ideology”

In some of the essays included in the volumes *The Resistance to Theory*, *Aesthetic Ideology*, and *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, de Man denounces “aesthetic ideology” and advocates a type of text analysis which shows a radicalization of his previously expounded “theory” of rhetorical reading. The “theretical”, non-phenomenal close reading, characterised by increased analytical rigour, focuses on a clear-cut distinction between the linguistic and the phenomenal; its primary goal is to identify the „literariness” of literary language, a term used by de Man with reference to “the autonomous potential of language”, or the non-intuitive linguistic “factors or functions” that are not accessible to perceptive knowledge, and therefore non-phenomenal (de Man, 1997 b: 10, 13) - in other words, everything that precedes the figural and the logical, but can create „a strong illusion of

aesthetic seduction" (de Man, 1997 b: 10). "Literariness", as conceived by de Man, does not consist in the capacity of literary language to unify sounds, names and objects, but rather in the "material aspects" of language – which explains Derrida's statement about de Man's "original materialism", and the existence of a "materiality" theme in Paul de Man's work – although the "matter" referred to by the French critic cannot be equated with the traditional metaphysical concept, since it is "a matter without presence and without substance", which "resists" such metaphysical oppositions as the one between the sensible and the intelligible (Derrida, 1989: 52), and, in a way, precedes them (Derrida, 1989: 53).

Paul de Man's non-aesthetic, "theoretical" approach is one essentially focused on internal contradiction, discontinuity, instability and fragmentariness. A text is understood not as a harmonious unity of form and content but as a highly conflicting entity which is permanently torn between its irreconcilable dimensions (the grammatical ["persuasive"] and the figural ["tropological"]) or linguistic functions (the "performative" and the "constative"). The word "theoretical" obviously acquires a new meaning in de Man's criticism: one that is in no way related to the classic pair of opposites "theoria"/"praxis", but has more to do with a new polarity, "theoria"/"aesthesis", standing for the divergence between the specifically Demanian perspective on texts (which is a linguistic, theoretical one), and the traditional (metaphysical, logocentric, aesthetic, hermeneutic, phenomenological) approach to literature. The new "linguistics of literariness" (de Man, 1997 b: 11) underlying Demanian reading does not deny the referential function of language; instead, it questions its cognitive authority beyond the linguistic area, and challenges the idea of grounding one's knowledge of the phenomenal world in the referential function. The "linguistics of literariness" is used as an instrument for denouncing "ideological aberrations", if "ideology" is interpreted in the Demanian way, as a confusion between the materiality of the signifier and the materiality of the object designated by it, between "linguistic reality" and natural [phenomenal] reality", or between "reference" and "phenomenalism" (de Man, 1997 b: 11). Those "aberrations" consist in our tendency to attribute real, phenomenal existence to mere products of the referential function as a defensive reaction against the mechanical, "inhuman", arbitrary, incomprehensible aspects of language, or against all the "linguistic events" that "occur" independently of man's will or intention (de Man, 1997 b: 96) and alienate man from his own language. The "linguistics of literariness" thus seeks to demonstrate that any text shows a "potential confusion between the figural and the referential statement" (de Man, 1979: 116).

To de Man, literature is pure fiction not because it ignores "reality" but because "it is ...not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language" (de Man, 1997 b: 11). Instead of making definitive statements about referentiality, de Man prefers, in a truly deconstructionist manner, to refer to the "potentially aberrant" (de Man, 1979: 235) character of referential systems.

“Theory” and Critical “Praxis”

Unlike the traditional, totalising, „aesthetic reading” which starts from the premise of the possibility of knowledge, and the intelligibility of the text, de Man’s radical („theoretical”) reading questions any possibility of totalisation and understanding.

De Man examines the “defensive” character of all “aberrant” forms of unfounded totalisation in an early essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, noting that even the unity of spirit and nature, achieved by means of symbol in Romantic poetry, is a “strategy” (de Man, 1997 a: 208) of hiding the “negative” existential truth about the temporality of human destiny, through an illusory identification of the finite with the infinite, of the transient with the eternal. In the later, radical, “theoretical” stage of fully fledged deconstruction, de Man is more interested in the means of dissimulating inconvenient linguistic “truths”, such as the the one about the the “inhuman” dimension of language (viewed as an implacable, uncontrollable mechanism). The defensive strategy that he is most concerned with consists in simply annulling the divergence between “sign” and “meaning”, between language and empirical reality – a divergence that literature/the work of fiction affirms in an explicit manner, “by its very existence” (de Man, 1997 a: 17). De Man warns us that such a divergence exists in any type of language (both literary and non-literary) – hence the epistemological consequences of his “theory”.

In spite of his own “theory” about the impossibility of understanding, the critic himself cannot repress his own metaphysical, logocentric impulses, and tends to resort to the defensive strategy he has denounced as pure mystification, in an effort to elude the “blind force” (de Man, 1984: 118) of language by turning language into an “aesthetic object”, by attributing meaning to structures created mechanically by language through its performative power, which de Man calls its “positing” – or “positional” – power (de Man, 1984: 116, 118; de Man, 1997 b: 19).

The Positing Power of Language and the Imposition of Meaning

The “positing power” of language, which only becomes apparent when we look at language as a grammatical mechanism, as a sequence of “performative” speech acts or acts of linguistic positing, is, according to de Man, “entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it” (de Man, 1984: 116). The reader’s defensive strategy is determined by man’s natural need to attach meaning, through figuration, to every linguistic “event” that would otherwise appear as incomprehensible: “...we impose... on the senseless power of positional language the authority of sense and meaning” (de Man, 1984: 117). This is how de Man explains the process: the speech act is turned into a trope in a defensive yet authoritarian effort through

which we force the linguistic event to acquire meaning (a meaning that language itself - considered as a grammatical mechanism - cannot posit, since the performative speech act only has a general semantic potential). Let us recall that, within the context of de Man's critical idiolect, such words as "grammar", "meaning" and "figure" ("figuration") acquire new definitions: "grammar" is understood as the system of text-generating relationships and functions endowed with an "undetermined, general potential for meaning" and "independent" of the text's referential meaning; "meaning" is viewed as an exclusively linguistic product or a fictional construct, an effect of "applying" grammar's general semantic potential to "a specific unit" (de Man, 1979: 268) through the referential function of language; the referential function responsible for the "generation" of a text also leads to the appearance of a referent that, by "destroying" the "generality" or "indetermination" of grammar's "potential for meaning", undermines "the grammatical principle to which it owed its constitution" (de Man, 1979: 269) – hence the insurmountable "divergence", which is present in every text, between referential meaning and grammar, which de Man calls "the figural dimension of language" (de Man, 1979: 270). It is only against the backdrop of his "theory" of language that we can understand de Man's statement about the incapacity of language to posit meaning: "language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning..." (de Man, 1984: 117).

The Inhuman Face of Language

The uncontrollable aspects of language constitute a major "theme" of de Man's criticism. Like any other text, reading/criticism itself is an "event" whose function is to reveal the above-mentioned mechanism of disjunction. Moreover, reading itself can fall into the "abyss" of language, and illustrate the same disjunction and contradictions (between grammar and referential meaning) within the text of its own discourse.

Such a textual "event" is de Man's essay "Excuses", included in the volume *Allegories of Reading*, focusing on a fragment of Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which Jean-Jacques narrates the following autobiographical episode: while working as a servant in an aristocratic household, he steals a ribbon; when the theft is discovered, he cannot overcome his guilt and shame; instead of taking responsibility for his action, he accuses a young maidservant of having stolen the ribbon and having given it to him as a present, in an attempt to seduce him. Finally, both he and the girl are dismissed. As a narrator addressing the reader, Jean-Jacques cannot confine himself to a mere "confession" of what happened, but feels it necessary to add an excuse by referring to the "sentiment intérieur" that accompanied his shameful act – his love (or desire) for the girl (metaphorically suggested by the ribbon): "But I would not fulfill the purpose of this book if I did not reveal my inner sentiments as well, and if I did not fear to excuse myself by means of what conforms to the truth" (Rousseau, 1959: 86, apud de Man, 1979: 280). And the narrator continues to justify his initial lie and

the false accusation he made against the innocent girl: „Je m’excusai sur le premier objet qui s’offrit”, or, in de Man’s literal translation: “I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself” – a statement that should be read as part of a coherent causal chain: “...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...”. The causal explanation is particularly appealing to a reader who is trying to make sense of Rousseau’s behaviour. It is therefore because of Jean-Jacques’ desire for and obsession with the girl that he pronounces her name unconsciously. However, de Man cannot cease to explore other possibilities suggested by the self-deconstructing text; the causal argumentation, for instance, turns out to disrupt the narrator’s reference to the „sentiment intérieur”: a closer reading shows that the girl’s name, Marion, actually appears in his apologetic discourse purely by coincidence, as a “free signifier” which is only “metonymically related to the part she is made to play...” (de Man, 1979: 288, 289). At this point, such terms as “desire”, “shame”, “guilt”, which were previously invoked by the narrator, become meaningless and irrelevant. What gains relevance is the “performative power of the lie as excuse” (de Man, 1979: 291), “the machine-like quality of the text of the lie” (de Man, 1979: 294), or its fictional character. The utterance of the girl’s name now appears to be an arbitrary, mechanical action, a “fictional statement”, and at the same time “the most efficaciously performative excuse” (de Man, 1979: 289). If Marion’s name is devoid of significance (since it is just „le premier objet qui s’offrit”), and therefore Jean-Jacques does not say anything, and least of all a person’s name, when he utters it, then it is easy to understand that he is as innocent as the girl: as pure fiction, his statement is “innocuous” and his error is “harmless” (de Man, 1979: 293). De Man’s conclusion points to the incontrollable, “inhuman” character of language: “language is entirely free with regard to referential meaning and can posit whatever its grammar allows it to say” (de Man, 1979: 293), regardless of the speaker’s or writer’s intention. The problem with Jean-Jacques’ excuse (and any other text) is its double dimension (that of being a fictional discourse and an empirical event), hence the impossibility of choosing between the two – and the predicament of even the most “theoretical” reader.

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