

## “TRUE” CRITICISM, AND ITS RHETORIC OF CRISIS AND FAILURE

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### **Abstract**

*The present article focuses on Paul de Man’s concept of “true criticism” or “true reading”, understood as an epistemological event that is utterly different from logocentric reading: a non-metaphysical, non-totalising, non-univocal critical approach that always occurs “in the mode of crisis” and is shaped on the model of the text under analysis, therefore repeating, through its own disjunctions, the text’s own failure to “read” itself. It aims to clarify the notion of criticism as an unavoidably “failed” activity (comparable to translation, philosophy and history) by virtue of its secondary status in relation to an elusive “original” it can never substitute for. Like translation, literary criticism, according to Paul de Man, never lives up to its promise of wholeness and coherence, and this is partly because the starting-point in both cases is an already fragmented “original”, and partly because an essay (or a translation) is also a text, and as such, it partakes of the discontinuity and disjunction characteristic of all texts. Finally, the present article examines the ambivalence of what de Man refers to as critical “failure”: an inconclusive effort marked by an “anxiety of ignorance” that nevertheless contributes to a deeper understanding of the text’s mechanism and logic.*

**Keywords:** “rhetoric of crisis”, truth, error, understanding, logos, lexis

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### **“True Criticism” and its “Rhetoric of Crisis”**

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Many critics have noticed the etymological kinship between “criticism” and “crisis” (both derived from the Greek verb *krinein*, which means “to separate”, “to sift”, “to judge”, “to make distinctions”), but few have ventured to explore the implications of this linguistic connection as rigorously as Paul de Man. According to the American deconstructionist, all authentic criticism (rhetorical reading included) “occurs in the mode of crisis” (de Man, 1997a: 8) – a crisis generated by the realisation of the impossibility of ignoring the text’s inner contradictions (such as the discrepancy between sign and meaning, *signifiant* and *signifié*, the text’s explicit statements and its rhetorical structure, etc.) and reaching a final positive truth – and, as such, it is marked to a greater or lesser extent by an “anxiety of ignorance” (de Man, 1979 b: 19). All Demanian readings of literary and non-literary texts invariably end in undecidability or aporia, generating what would seem, upon first reading, like “a darkness more redoubtable than the error they

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dispel” (de Man, 1979 b: 217). For instance, de Man’s own rhetorical reading of a fragment from *A la recherche du temps perdu* ends on an epistemologically pessimistic note: the critic admits his failure to identify the rhetorical mode of a literary text that affirms the superiority of metaphor over metonymy and is apparently dominated by metaphor, but whose metaphorical totalisations are deconstructed by “epistemologically incompatible” metonymic structures, and finally reaffirmed by a new metaphor: the “subject-metaphor”, or the narrator’s “voice”. Hence a continually renewed sense of ignorance, which explains the frequent interpretation of de Man’s epistemological scepticism as sheer nihilism. However, it is worth remembering that de Man has something essential to add, which may look like a paradox: the accompanying „rhetoric of crisis”, which is said to be characteristic of all true criticism, „states its own truth in the mode of error”, while at the same time being „radically blind to the light it emits” (de Man, 1997a: 16). What kind of „truth”, and what kind of „light” could there be beyond all this overt admission of ignorance?

De Man’s reading of the passage from Proust leads, as always, to an utterly non-metaphysical insight into the text’s inner contradictions, hence the re-affirmation of the text’s “unreadability”. It also exemplifies the deconstructionist’s frustrating relation to the text, once described by J. Hillis Miller as “a ceaseless dissatisfied movement” of interpretation (Bloom et al., 1979a: 252). Although the interpretive movement cannot culminate in a dialectical synthesis or a positive truth, it undoubtedly calls attention to a different, non-metaphysical “truth” about the hidden fragmentations, disjunctions and discontinuities of the text that make it unreadable, and ultimately to an “understanding” of the text in the Demanian sense of the word, that is an understanding of the text’s logic and mechanism. What needs to be clarified in the first place in order to correctly appreciate the Demanian concern with “understanding” is exactly the relationship between “truth” and “understanding” – a requirement that is summarised by de Man as a question: “how could a text have its understanding depend on considerations that would *not* [my italics] be epistemologically determined?” (de Man, 1998: 221). From de Man’s point of view, “understanding” is clearly (and in accordance with his deconstructionist criticism of all forms of metaphysical totalisation) “not a version of a single and universal Truth that would exist as an essence, a hypostasis” (de Man, 1998: 221), but a realisation of the truth of the text as forever unstable and “undecidable”. Deconstructionist criticism sets itself what would seem an almost impossible goal: as a paradoxical “movement in place” (Bloom et al., 1979a: 250), “a going beyond which remains in place” (Bloom et al., 1979a: 253) in an attempt to avoid any tendency of the undecidable itself to turn into “some covert form of dialectical movement” (Bloom et al., 1979a: 250), as Miller “defines” it, deconstructionist reading, unlike traditional, metaphysical interpretation, must constantly “resist its own tendencies to come to rest in some sense of mastery over the text” (Bloom et al., 1979a: 252) – which is, even from de Man’s rigorously deconstructionist perspective, a daunting task, considering the irrepressible human tendency to attach meaning to, or rather “impose meaning” upon, “the senseless

power of positional language” (de Man, 1984: 117). In the radical „allegories of reading” following the pre-deconstructionist „blindness and insight” stage of Demanian criticism, the peculiar, negative „truth” stated by the rhetoric of crisis „in the mode of error” therefore has to do with the above-mentioned non-metaphysical understanding of the text’s logic and the text’s „truth”, which translates as a realisation of its unreadability or undecidability (which, in its turn, should not be generalised into a final, univocal truth).

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### *“True Reading” as Conformity to the Textual Model*

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De Man demonstrates through his own interpretive effort that the impossibility of reaching a conclusion about the rhetorical mode of a text or of choosing between two mutually exclusive readings permitted by a text (such as the metaphorical one and the metonymic one, in the case of the Proustian fragment) corresponds, in effect, to the text’s own failure to read itself in the process of self-deconstruction. Here is, in brief, de Man’s description of the deconstructive process taking place within a text (which should be echoed by the deconstructive impulse of any true [critical] reading of that text): the textual paradigm consists of “a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction”, a process that engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition” which, by repeating the act of totalisation that was initially invalidated, “narrates the unreadability of the prior narration”; all “primary deconstructive narratives” are centred on metaphor (the prototype of metaphysical totalisation), and they narrate “the failure to denominate”, whereas the story told by “narratives to the second (or the third) degree” is about “the failure to read” (de Man, 1979 b: 205), which is best illustrated by the rhetorical figure of allegory.

The ultimate proof of rigorous (or “true”) reading appears to be precisely in the critical text’s conformity to the textual model, as suggested by the following edifying passage of de Man’s Foreword to Carol Jacob’s book, *The Dissimulating Harmony*, which we will quote at length:

*What makes a reading more or less true is simply the predictability, the necessity of its occurrence, regardless of the reader or of the author’s wishes. ‘Es ereignet sich aber das Wahre’ (not die Wahrheit), says Hölderlin, which can be freely translated, ‘What is true is what is bound to take place.’ And in the case of the reading of a text, what takes place is a necessary understanding. What marks the truth of such an understanding is not some abstract universal but the fact that it has to occur regardless of other considerations. It depends, in other words, on the rigor of the reading as argument. Reading is an argument [...] because it has to go against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen; this is the same as saying that understanding is an epistemological event prior to being an ethical or aesthetic value. This does not mean that there can be a true reading, but that no reading is*

*conceivable in which the question of its truth or falsehood is not primarily involved. [...] it is not a matter of choice to omit or to accentuate by paraphrase certain elements in a text at the expense of others. We do not have this choice, since the text imposes its own understanding and shapes the reader's evasions. The more one censors, the more one reveals what is being effaced. A paraphrase is always what we called an analytical reading: that is, it is always susceptible of being made to point out consistently what it was trying to conceal. [...] True reading, as opposed to paraphrase, is an argument: that is, it has the sequential coherence we associate with a demonstration or with a particularly compelling narrative. But what is here being argued (or compellingly told) is precisely the loss of an illusory coherence... (de Man, 1998: 221-222)*

The fragment sheds light on a few basic “principles” of de Man’s criticism: firstly, “true” reading is a necessary and predictable epistemological event in the sense that it will always take place independently, or even in spite of “the reader or of the author’s wishes” – which is not equivalent to saying that there can ever be a true or correct reading. Secondly, “true reading” (in de Man’s sense of the word “true”) will always bring about a certain understanding of the text which is in no way synonymous with reaching a final totalising, metaphysical truth (although it cannot avoid its own forms of totalisation) but is actually a realisation – imposed by the text and not incompatible with the linguistic law of the impossibility of reading – of the text’s logic. Finally, true reading is not a mere paraphrase of the text, but a *rigorous* “argument”, i.e. a coherent “demonstration”, a “compelling narrative” like the one described by de Man with reference to the textual paradigm mentioned above. “Rigour” is a key-word in de Man’s criticism, and it is often associated with the basic requirement of deconstructionist reading: conformity to the text’s mechanism of self-reading (or self-deconstruction), which points on the one hand to the impossibility of reading and on the other hand to the unavoidability of relapsing into truth, referentiality, totalisation.

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### ***“True Criticism” as Failed Translation***

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If the critic’s text is contradictory and self-deconstructing, as can be inferred from the above-mentioned imperative of conformity to the textual mechanism, it is therefore because the analysed text (whose self-subverting mechanism it approximately replicates) is a highly unstable, fragmented, homogeneous, dynamic – in a word, „unreadable” – entity. The relationship between criticism and the text is very similar to the one between translation and the original, as explained by de Man in a conference delivered at Cornell University in 1983, in which he “reads” Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” (“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”), a canonical text in the area of translation theory, “rhetorically”, as an illustration of his own “theory” of the impossibility of reading. The parallel between translation and literary criticism brings out some of the characteristics of true criticism we have already referred to, such as its unavoidable “failure”, its own

contradictions that undermine its claim to coherence, the fact that it is not a mere paraphrase of the “original” text, but rather an “event” or an “occurrence” that can lead to a particular, non-metaphysical way of understanding the “original”, or can shed new light on the original, etc.

De Man insists on the double effect that the translation process may have on the original text: the original owes its survival to translation (in the sense of being “kept in circulation” by it), but at the same time it is “decanonised”, since translation lays bare the original’s hidden imperfections, “disjunctions”, “disruptions”, “weaknesses”, “cheatings”, “conventions” that are always in contradiction with its explicit “claims”; indeed, everything that in the original seems to be “poetic” is “disarticulated” and thus rendered “prosaic” by the translation process; and all the “disruptions” of the original text, which are usually concealed by rhetoric, make translation impossible. Moreover, because of the secondary status of translation in relation to the original, the translator himself seems to be doomed to failure; by virtue of his subordinate position, he “can never do what the original text did” (de Man, 1997 b: 80). Even the title of Benjamin’s essay seems to suggest the idea of renunciation and, by extension, failure: “die Aufgabe” can be read both as “the task”, and (by association with the verb “aufgeben”) as an act of “giving up” which is conducive to defeat: because of the linguistic difficulties that are involved in any translation process, “the translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original” (de Man, 1997 b: 80), as de Man concludes. At its best, translation can only be an “occurrence” that makes us aware of our own incapacity to keep the force of language under control.

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### *The Ambivalence of Critical “Failure”*

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But what are those linguistic difficulties, or those internal disjunctions of the original text that account for the failure of any translation? According to de Man, they consist in the incompatibility between grammar and referential meaning, grammar and figure, or sign and meaning. De Man turns to Benjamin’s example of the German word “Brod” and its French correspondent, “pain” to illustrate the eternal conflict between “das Gemeinte” (what is meant) and “die Art des Meinens” (the way in which meaning is produced), and its corollary, the unreliability of translation (as manifested in the way the connotations of foreign words may divert us from the meaning intended by the original). The French word *pain* brings to mind new connotations (associated with the many French bread varieties: *pain français*, *baguette*, *ficelle*, *bâtard*, etc.) that can “upset the stability” of the word “Brod” and thus alienate native speakers of German from their own language. A similar disjunction exists between the “word” and the “sentence”, “Wort” (the agent of the statement, both as a lexical unit and as grammar/syntax) and “Satz” (both “sentence” and “statement”, and, by extension, “meaning”), which explains the failure of a strictly literal, “wörtlich”, translation, or a translation that reproduces the exact syntax of the original. In the light of the

Wort/Satz disjunction, Benjamin views the translator’s task as “distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet” (Benjamin, 1969: 76). Unlike the poet, who, in his „naïveté”, aims „to convey a meaning that is independent of language (which, to a deconstructionist, is pure illusion), the translator focuses on language: as Benjamin remarks, it is „words” rather than „sentences” that constitute the basic elements of a translation. Or, to quote Paul de Man’s radical reformulation of Benjamin’s idea, the translator’s relationship with the original is one between languages, “wherein the problem of meaning (...) is entirely absent” (de Man, 1997 b: 81-82).

According to both Benjamin and de Man, literary criticism is comparable to translation and other secondary (and equally “inconclusive”, “failed”, “aborted”) activities, such as philosophy and history in that they are all somehow derived from an “original” (literary works, perception, past actions), without being imitations or paraphrases of that original. Both translation and literary criticism “read” the original “from the perspective of pure language” (“reine Sprache”, an entirely non-referential language, or “pure signifier” ([de Man, 1997 b: 96]), and in so doing, they reveal an already fractured, dismembered, disarticulated original. Considered from a deconstructionist perspective, they both have the effect of further “undoing” an original that is “already disarticulated”, as they allow us to realise.

As the translation of the German word “Brod” into French demonstrates, the “failure” associated with translation (and criticism) is therefore one that originates in an insoluble linguistic “error” inherent in any text (i.e. the disjunction between referential meaning and grammar, between “das Gemeinte” and “die Art des Meinens”, between “logos” and “lexis”, or between “vouloir-dire” and “dire”) – which should therefore caution us against the epistemological value of any text, be it a literary text, a translation or a critical essay. Even though criticism, like translation, cannot find a solution to the “error” that exists at the very heart of language, it has the merit of correctly identifying it underneath and beyond the seductive, mystifying figures of rhetoric. But on the other hand, as “pure language”, criticism, like translation, is in danger of being drawn into the same abyss of language and unreadability as the “original”, as illustrated by de Man’s own critical discourse, which has sometimes been criticised for its abstruseness or incomprehensibility.

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