

Deconstruction as the Construction: Paul de Man's Ethicity of Allegory

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Abstract The article discusses Paul de Man's treatment of the ethicity of allegory in the *Allegories of Reading*, particularly a difficult passage in the chapter "Allegory" (*Julie*), where de Man describes ethics or ethicity as "a discursive mode among others" and defines it as "the structural interference of two distinct value systems." Despite the acknowledged opacity of the passage, many scholars quoted it, interpreted it and incorporated it in their own elaborations on ethics and literature. The article claims that the established interpretations of the passage are erroneous. In addition, it seeks to demonstrate that the close reading of de Man's text discloses its inconsistency. The conclusion is that de Man's famous, but enigmatic formulations cannot serve as a ground for a fruitful ethical literary criticism.

Key words Paul de Man; allegory; ethical literary criticism; Hillis Miller

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When discussing deconstructive ethical literary criticism, one cannot avoid the name of Paul de Man.¹ The discovery of his wartime journalism raised questions about the ethical grounds of deconstructive enterprise and indirectly probably even

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stimulated the ethical turn of Deconstruction. But the so-called “de Man affair” is not of my concern here. In what follows, I will rather pay attention to de Man’s understanding of the relation between literature and ethics.

De Man briefly dealt with this issue already in one of his wartime articles (“Sur les possibilites de la critique”), where he defended the autonomist position, and much later in the “Foreword to Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony*,” where he introduced what he called the “ethos of explication” (de Man, *Critical Writings* 220). His most extensive treatment of the topic, however, can be found in his tropological interpretations of Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*, particularly in the chapter “Allegory” (*Julie*). Here de Man discusses the Rousseau’s novel, in particular the *Second Preface* to it, consisting of the dialogue between R. (Rousseau himself) and his interlocutor, and regarding the referential status of the novel. Rousseau refuses to either affirm or deny his authorship, and this figure of impossibility of “reading” his own text de Man calls allegory, conceived as “a supplementary figural superposition” to the rhetorical structure of the text normally consisting “of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction” (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 205). Such understanding of allegory leads him to the conclusion that this trope *per se* is ethical. Let me quote a longer passage:

In the text of the *Second Preface*, the point at which the allegorical mode asserts itself is precisely when R. admits the impossibility of reading his own text and thus relinquishes his power over it. The statement undoes both the intelligibility and the seductiveness that the fiction owed to its negative rigor. The admission therefore occurs *against* the inherent logic which animated the development of the narrative [...] The reversal seems opposed to the best interests of the narrator. It has to be thematised as a sacrifice, a renunciation that implies a shift in valorization. Before the reversal, the narrative occurs within a system governed by polarities of truth and falsehood that move parallel with the text they generate. Far from interfering with each other, the value system and the narrative promote each other’s elaboration. [...] But in the allegory of unreadability, the imperatives of truth and falsehood oppose the narrative syntax and manifest themselves at its expense. The concatenation of the categories of truth and falsehood with the values of right and wrong is disrupted, affecting the economy of the narration in decisive ways. We can call this shift in economy *ethical*, since it indeed involves a displacement from *pathos* to *ethos*. Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to do

with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. The ethical category is imperative [...] to the extent that it is linguistic and not subjective. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as "man" or "love" or "self," and not the cause or the consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics (or, one should say, ethicity) is a discursive mode among others. (Ibid. 205-206)

This is admittedly a very difficult passage (henceforth I'll refer to it as the *Passage*). Joel Black calls it "extravagant" (Black 193), Marc Redfield "dense, seductively iconoclastic" (Redfield 49); Eva Antal admits to have problems "with the real meaning of de Man's ethicity" (Antal 15). Alex Segal comes to the conclusion that due to its difficulty de Man's formulations in the *Passage* "seem to avoid ethics altogether" (Segal 274). Also Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading* confirms its unreadability. He describes it as "intricate" (Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* 61), as "an exceedingly odd definition of the term ethical" (ibid. 49), and on another occasion he stresses that "certain aspects of what de Man says do not quite make sense, not at least from the point of view of ordinary logic and reason" (Miller, "'Reading' Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*" 164). This seems an accurate description of the *Passage*, but also of de Man's *Allegories of Reading* as a whole. It can be supported with other observations, such as Jonathan Culler's when he states: "de Man's writing is special — and often especially annoying — in its strategy of omitting crucial demonstrations in order to put readers in a position where they cannot profit from his analyses without according belief to what seems implausible or at least unproven" (Culler 229). Let me round up this series of quotes with a confession of de Man's close friend Derrida: "even for his admirers and his friends, especially for them, if I may be allowed to testify to this, the work and the person of Paul de Man were enigmatic" (Derrida 592-593).

It is thus a common knowledge that de Man's writing is not very generous to the readers who want to get a clear picture of what they read, and in particular this holds true of the *Passage*. Yet surprisingly, despite its opacity, the *Passage* proved to be extremely popular. It has been — or at least the crucial parts of it have been — quoted by many scholars such as Joel Black, Christopher Norris, Eva Antal, Simon Critchley, Robert Eaglestone, Paweł Marcinkiewicz, Patricia Ward, Namwali Serpell, Jonathan Culler, Smaro Kambourelli, William Handley, David Parker, Rüdiger Heinze, Martin McQuillan, Geoffrey Harpham, Marc Redfield, Alex Segal, Barbara

Johnson, Werner Hamacher, Joseph Hillis Miller and probably several others (here I list only those who I studied).¹ With a single exception of Norris, all scholars quoted it affirmatively without being able to grasp it fully. Some of them tried to decipher and interpret de Man's formulations; others simply took them for granted, while some others even applied them to their own readings. All this deserves attention since, as I will argue in what follows, in my view, 1) all these interpretations of the *Passage* are erroneous, and 2) de Man's enigmatic formulations cannot serve as a ground for a fruitful ethical literary criticism. Unfortunately, the time limit will not allow me to pay due respect to this very complicated issues. I will have to summarize my argumentation instead.

Let me turn to the first point of my discussion. I want to make it clear that my aim is not to criticise all the misreadings (de Man would probably claim that they are necessarily such). They are mostly not the result of the interpreters' incompetence, but of the obscurity and inconsistencies in de Man's text. Since the majority of interpretations seem to follow (explicitly or implicitly) the lines of Hillis Miller's understanding in *The Ethics of Reading*, I'll exemplify the most common failure with his misreading.

But let me first complete de Man's treatment of the "ethicity" of *Julie* as started in the *Passage*. The *Passage* is immediately followed by this important statement: "But the Preface and the main text of *Julie* are ethical not only in this wider sense. They are also moralistic in a very practical way" (de Man 206), and this practical ethical — or moralistic — dimension is exemplified by "R.'s lengthy considerations on all the good his book will be able to do for its readers" (ibid.). The following pages of the chapter are devoted to this dimension, to the necessity of its appearance. It is obvious that de Man makes a break here. While his definition of ethics in the notorious *Passage* is opaque, extravagant, even impossible to understand, the practical ethical dimension brings us to more familiar ground in this respect. Rousseau himself as well as Julie are inclined to give moral lessons. Now, the

1 Apart from works quoted in the bibliography see also: Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*; Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism. Reading After Levinas*; Paweł Marcinkiewicz, *The Rhetoric of the City: Robinson Jeffers and A. R. Ammons*; Patricia A. Ward, "Ethics and recent literary theory: the reader as moral agent"; Smaro Kamboureli, "The Limits of the Ethical Turn: Troping towards the Other, Yann Martel, and Self"; William R. Handley, "The House a Ghost Built: 'Nommo,' Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"; David Parker, "Introduction: the turn to ethics in the 1990s"; Rüdiger Heinze, *Ethics of Literary Forms in Contemporary American Literature*; Werner Hamacher, "LECTIO: de Man's Imperative."

problem for the interpreters seems to be the following: although de Man explicitly distinguishes the two modes of ethical in *Julie*, namely the rhetorical/tropological and thematic mode or, in his own words, the ethical in “the wider sense” and the moralistic, the theoretical and practical ethical dimensions, he never explains clearly the relationship between both. And this seems to be the source of confusion for Hillis Miller and many others. Although the rhetorical and the thematical “ethicity” happen on different levels, the interpreters tend to explain the opaque rhetorical or theoretical ethicity by means of more accessible practical morality, since this obviously remains the only possibility for them to make the enigmatic formulae of the *Passage* to have some sense. To this purpose, Hillis Miller equates de Man's *moral-ity* or *ethicity*, contained in the last four sentences of the *Passage* — ethicity understood by de Man as a “renunciation” and “sacrifice” (ibid. 206) (thus as a *negation*) — with the “making of ethical judgments” (Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* 48) (thus with a *positive*, affirmative activity). Consequently, he concludes: “Ethicity is a region of human life in which lying is necessarily made into a universal principle, in the sense that ethical judgments are necessary but never verifiably true. The failure to read or the impossibility of reading is a universal necessity, one moment of which is that potentially aberrant form of language called ethical judgment or prescription” (ibid. 51). Such a conclusion certainly serves well Hillis Miller's own purposes, the development of his own ethics of reading. It can also be said to be consistent with de Man's understanding of language. However, it wrongly interprets the *Passage*, ignoring the fact that the *Passage* tries to define “the figural mode with the ethical tonality” (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 188), the immanent ethicity of *rhetorical* devices, of allegory as a *trope*, and has nothing to do with the making of ethical judgments, pertaining to the *practical* ethical (moralistic), *thematic* dimensions. Certainly, Hillis Miller wants to cope with de Man's dictum that “Ethics (or, one should say, ethicity) is a discursive mode among others,” but fails to do so. To my knowledge, the majority of attempts to understand the *Passage* — although some of them are quite thorough, eloquent and sophisticated — fail in a similar way.

Now I turn to my second point. The close inspection of the *Passage* reveals how idiosyncratic, eccentric and enigmatic de Man's understanding of ethics is. While in the chapter “Metaphor” of the same book ethics is defined as “depending on relationship among men” (ibid. 156), which is, I believe, a common perception, in the *Passage* de Man introduces a very different, actually the opposite notion of ethics that has explicitly “nothing to do [...] with a relationship between subjects” (ibid. 206). Here ethicity is understood as intrinsic tropological mode, in the last consequence linguistic, being therefore only “a discursive mode among others”

(ibid.). Such an understanding is possible, of course, but it makes sense only if tropological operation in question — the allegorical mode — displays features that we normally ascribe to the area of ethics (otherwise the denomination “ethical” would be completely arbitrary and therefore of no use). But this is exactly what we are missing in the *Passage*.

To be sure, de Man seems to offer a clear definition of what he understands as ethical, when he asserts: “Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems” (ibid.). But this definition is problematic in more than one sense. Hillis Miller rightly observed that contrary to Derrida, de Man “has a tendency, in spite of the fact that each of his essays is the ‘reading’ of a particular text, to move to levels of absolute generality” (Hillis Miller, “‘Reading’ Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*” 164), which necessarily leads to confusions. The above definition of ethical as “the structural interference of two distinct value systems,” referring to *all* allegories, is a very good example of this. It is much too general¹ to be useful or valid. First, it is too presumptuous when claiming that allegories are *always* ethical in this sense. And second, I see no reason why the structural interference between two distinctive value systems such as, for instance, cognitive or epistemological and aesthetic would be ethical. — But the definition remains problematic even if we give up its generality and read de Man’s formula as applied specifically to Rousseau’s *Julie*. The two value systems involved in the structural interference here are obviously the ones comprising of the categories “of truth and falsehood” and of “the values of right and wrong” (ibid.), yet it is not quite clear that either of them are ethical values. While for Barbara Johnson the interfering value systems are the referential and the moral (Johnson 68), for Martin McQuillan, for instance, they are “the referential and the linguistic” (McQuillan 126).

Of course, de Man’s statements make more sense if we understand them as Barbara Johnson does. If *pathos* denotes seductive power of fiction that doesn’t challenge the referential authority, Rousseau’s renunciation, his sacrifice of this authority, can be understood as a shift to *ethos*. In de Man’s interpretation he doesn’t seduce his readers any more, pretending that what he recounts is *true*; instead he does what is *right*, he resigns his authority against his own interests, and this is an ethical move. Hence, one wonders where does the confusion about the value sys-

1 Generality is a recurrent problem of ethical literary criticism, and de Man is a good example in this respect. I would like to use this opportunity to repeat my claim that “when discussing *literature and ethics*, one should avoid as much as possible generalizations and strong statements” (Virk, “Complexities” 6-7; see also Virk, “Etična” 19).

tems come from then. How can such a competent and well informed reader of de Man as McQuillan, the author of a Routledge Critical Thinkers series monograph on de Man, make such a *faux pas*? My guess is that not only possibility, but even the necessity of misreading is inscribed in de Man's own text on the ethics of allegory.

To be sure, the tropological treatment of ethicity as such is not an impossible task. De Man conceived allegory as ethical already in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" where he explicitly discussed the *ethics of renunciation* and stated that allegory *renounces* "the nostalgia and the desire to coincide" (de Man, *Blindness and Insight* 207). Yet such a treatment raises some questions that become evident in the *Allegories of Reading*. The first problem shows up when we discover that de Man, when discussing Rousseau's inability in the *Second Preface* to confirm the referential authority of the text and speaking in this respect of renunciation and even sacrifice, actually falsifies. If we cloread in a deconstructive manner, it becomes obvious that at least in this particular case the term "ethics of renunciation," when referring to the rhetorical level of the text, to the allegory as a trope — and not to the thematic level, for instance, to Julie's renouncing her love to Saint-Preux —, is misleading. To renounce or to sacrifice something that belongs to you may be an ethical deed; but in the *Second Preface* this is not the case. Rousseau doesn't really know if he is entitled to the authority of the author of *Julie* or not. He would be able to renounce, sacrifice this authority if it belonged to him. But since it doesn't, or at least it is not clear whether it does or not, he simply cannot do it. If there is something he "renounces," than this is the desire of the other, his interlocutor, who would like him to have such authority. But this desire belongs to someone else, and we cannot really renounce someone else's desire. The sacrifice in the ethical sense can only be the sacrifice of something which is ours. Such a sharp thinker as de Man ought to be aware of this; however, he seems to be motivated to use the inappropriate metaphor in order to support his claim (that allegories are always ethical).

The second problem with the *ethics of renunciation* on the rhetorical level is that it is a metaphor, a personification and as such, according to de Man's own principles, aberrant. One should never forget that metaphors are not to be taken literally. We cannot transfer metaphorical objects, their properties and relations directly to the reality. If someone says that he has a frog in his throat, we won't wonder how the slimy little beast got through his mouth into his throat. In this respect it is clear that de Man, when speaking of the ethicity of allegory, doesn't really discuss "the will of a subject," the subjectivity of Rousseau, but the rhetorical properties of the text, its tropological structure. De Man is quite explicit about this: "Taken literally, Rousseau's assertion that he does not know whether he or his fictional characters wrote

the letters that make up *Julie* makes little sense. The situation changes when we realize that R. is merely the metaphor for a textual property (readability)” (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 203). Yet despite the fact that de Man has a clear mind about the personification he uses, he nevertheless makes wrong conclusions. It seems that he himself became the victim of the aberrant metaphorical substitution he chased so fervently. Unreadability as a key feature of allegory is *per se* a matter of referentiality, of epistemology. It only becomes a matter of ethics for de Man by virtue of an aberrant substitution inscribed in the metaphors of renouncement and sacrifice.

De Man would of course object to my comments. He would probably point to the final sentences of the *Passage* where he stresses the linguistic level of his treatment of allegory as ethical that has nothing to do neither with the everyday-practical ethical level nor with the traditional (Kantian) moral philosophy. It is simply a designation of a rhetorical mode or operation built on the analogy with the “real” ethics. However, while this analogy seems to make more sense in the case of “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” it is not that watertight in the case of the *Allegories of Reading*. Here the “unreadability” (uncertain referentiality) that belongs to the order of *cognition*, to the domain of *hermeneutics*, is arbitrarily described in terms of renunciation and sacrifice and in this manner translated into the domain of *ethical*. The allegories as de Man conceives them are thus not ethical due to their intrinsic nature, but due to the misleading translation.

Consequently, it is no surprise that although the *Passage* from the *Allegories of Reading*, defining the ethicicity of the allegory, has been widely quoted and discussed, de Man’s conception of ethicicity as “a discursive mode among others” hasn’t got many followers. In principle, de Man’s tropological analyses ought to be a perfect starting-point for the *rhetorical ethical criticism*, but what we know today under this title (the work of James Phelan, for instance) doesn’t show any sign of de Man’s influence. There have been, as mentioned before, quite a lot of references to the *Passage*, yet mostly in a very general way, invoking the name and idioms of de Man as authority in order to support the credibility of their own enterprises, but without really productively and expediently applying his method and conception of ethicicity. The most famous exceptions in this respect are Barbara Johnson and Hillis Miller, but their use of de Man’s formulations from the *Passage* cannot be treated without certain reservations. I already briefly discussed Hillis Miller, therefore I’ll only mention Johnson here. In *The Wake of Deconstruction*, she *translates* de Man’s tropological treatment of the ethical dimension of allegory to the real-life political practice, which is a disputable translation. Not only does the Man in the *Passage* explicitly delimit his purely linguistic conception of the ethics from the domains of the

real-life practice and subjectivity, but even when he (not on the level of allegory as a trope but on a practical-ethical level of moralistic discourse) discusses praxis, he adds the following warning: "The resulting discourse of praxis is however not only devoid of authority (since it is the consequence of an epistemological abdication), but it occurs again in the form of a text. The *Second Preface*, however practical it may be in its concerns, is not more of an action than the rest of the novel" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 209).

To conclude. It is of course not to deny de Man's merits regarding many areas of literary criticism; however, the ethical literary criticism, at least in my view, is not among them. De Man's treatment of ethics in the *Allegories of Reading* is too remindful of the attempts of German romanticists such as Schelling or Friedrich Schlegel to build a system of transcendental idealism by means of theoretical *construction*, undisturbed by the "banalities" of the real life experience and practice. Such a discourse — in my view self-referential and in the last consequence even tautological — may be pertinent to some domains, but it doesn't seem to offer a suitable approach to the domain of ethics. In this respect Christopher Norris is right when he concludes that de Man's treatment of the ethics of allegory results in the "emptying-out of ethical categories to the point where they seem entirely disconnected from issues of practical choice and commitment" (Norris 183). Such a concept that conceives ethics as an intralinguistic phenomenon does not only deviate from established Western conceptions of ethics, but is also not compatible with the ethical literary criticism as practiced by Nie Zhenzhao, who understands ethics as "the ethical relationship or ethical order between man and man, man and society, or man and nature" (Nie 88).

In order to avoid misunderstandings, I must add that my verdict doesn't concern the ethics of Deconstruction in general. The importance of Derrida's treatment of ethics — for instance of his deliberations on the relation to the Other, on friendship, gift, responsibility, hospitality etc. — for the ethical literary criticism remains invaluable. This is why his ideas have been so widely applied in the ethical literary criticism. Despite the numerous references to the *Passage*, the same does not hold true of de Man's treatment of ethics in the *Allegories of Reading*. Due to the linguistic absolutism, such an "ethics" remains trapped into a self-referential loop, being only "a discursive mode among others" — and nothing more.

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