

Paul de Man: Too Demanding to Dismantle

Evelin Barish's *The Double Life of Paul de Man* and its US Reception

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Abstract: What should we think of a biographer who admits inability to understand the ideas of the thinker she writes about? Why write a biography of someone not only dead but also proclaimed forgotten (unless one intends to resurrect him, which is not the case)? Why dig up someone's bones only to showcase his skeleton amidst the closet's dirty linen? Why confine oneself to the preliminary part of someone's life – the one preceding his academic biography?

Paul de Man's recent biography by Evelin Barish raises these and more questions and eyebrows. Surprisingly, however, it has elicited a largely positive response in the US. Why were intellectuals like Louis Menand, Peter Brooks, Susan Rubin Suleiman and others so cautious and humble in their lengthy reviews?

This text will suggest some possible answers.

Keywords: Deconstruction, theory, collaborationism, antisemitism, biography.

1.1.

What would you think of a judge who converts into an executioner for being incapable of understanding what the defendant did? What would you think of a literary scholar who has chosen to be the biographer of a literary thinker because she felt incompetent to understand the thinker's theory?

Paul de Man was a Belgian, a nephew of Henri de Man, a charismatic non-Marxist socialist, who with the German occupation became an acting prime-minister. The young Paul was the best student at school and a drop-out from the university. He left Belgium in 1948, passed through victories and trials in Bard and Harvard before finding prominence in Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Zurich, and Yale. He made his name in the 60s and the 70s as the most influential literary deconstructionist in the US, the mastermind behind the rise of theory, the leader of the Yale school. He died in 1983 at the age of 64 and at the peak of his glory that kept going up over the next four years; still, his fame was rather academic, within the literary departments.

In 1987 a scandal made his name even more notorious. This time he received widespread condemnation for his wartime writings, mainly in the Belgian daily *Le Soir*, known also as *Le Soir volee* for

its collaborationist stance during the IWW. At least one of these 200 reviews was anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi, although in a conformist manner. The scandal was refueled by two conferences and new allegations – these infuriated further the enemies of deconstruction, and they undertook a still ongoing *Night of the Long Knives* against its academic presence. The two books with de Man's *Wartime Writings* and the *Responses* to them did not manage to convince either the critics or the audience that de Man was not actually a fascist.

Despite the silent concord to put his name and writings in quarantine of oblivion for a quarter of a century, a recent book about de Man happened to be a biography. It was unclear what the purpose of a project like Evelin Barish's (2014) might be, as it was a blow against a dead and well forgotten man, as the biography itself proudly proclaims in its opening sentence: "A CULTURAL GIANT OF EPIC PROPORTIONS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, PAUL de Man no longer seems to exist" (capitalization Evelin Barish, 2014).

Biography is usually about someone who deserves to be revived because he has been unfairly forgotten. There is an element of *Lazarus, Rise!* in any biography. Barish's biography declares her protagonist dead without any envisaged resurrections. Very much against the grain, this biography is rather designed to hammer the last nail in de Man's coffin, if not a silver spike in his heart. Is it an exercise, evoking the once popular practice of exhuming and hanging corpses after orchestrated trials? Or is it a Sancta Simplicitas revisited? Or is there something more to this belated gesture of added twigs?

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Evelin Barish launched the project in the early 90s but because of delay and sickness lost her first contract with a publisher. It was only in 2011 that a new contract made it possible to bring the book to an end. It was the result of a truly enormous amount of work with more than 200 interviews done and numerous documents and archives researched. Still, Barish's book recalls Kusturica's movie *Underground* in which a group of people keeps hiding for years believing that the IIWW is still on. On the other hand, the context appears to be quite proper: Barish, whose repetitiveness is endemic, never tires to remind us that most of de Man's friends and supporters are not among the living already: *The great men of Paul de Man's generation have now slipped away, sinking beneath the horizon...along with ... our trustfulness concerning assertions of "greatness"* (2014:32). The narrative scheme with dead witnesses implies certain genres but might serve a biographical approach like this one as well.

A biography is written by a specialist in American Transcendentalism. It is about a theoretician, known as deconstructionist, who has hardly mentioned any transcendentalist. There is barely any common ground between these two scholars. Virtually everything Evelin Barish has to say and stands for has already been deconstructed by Paul de Man. She does not know this. She also does not seem to care. His time is gone. Hers is back.

Evelin Barish openly admits a lacking theoretical background; she would never stop calling de Man a *philosopher* whereas his main departure point from Jacques Derrida was based on his insistence that as theoretician he was engaged in reading texts. In "Criticism and Crisis", "The Resistance to Theory" (de Man 1986:3-20) and in his interview with Stefano Rosso (de Man 1986:115-122) he is quite explicit about the difference between the philosophical and theoretical approaches. She has obviously taken her role of biographer quite literally by excluding from her interest de Man's academic writing.

Evelin Barish's book stitches together two parts with little in common. The Introduction and the Epilogue are meant to provide an explanation for the belated appearance and for the purpose of the book. She talks about history and social reality, about the contexts that should shed light on de Man's misdeeds, she points out the family tragedies and the ensuing traumas and disguised suffering. What strikes one in the framework is the amount of false statements, mistakes and evidence of misunderstanding of de Man's ideas. Why

a scholar who is not familiar with another scholar's work would write his biography?

To dismantle the myth, to debunk the remains of the cult. Since the cult is long forgotten, Barish's first concern is to (re)construct it. Being aware that few would buy an unknown man's biography the author commences with pompous words of praise meant to attribute grandeur and magnitude to her subject: *Influential in both the academic world and the broader social one, de Man wielded more influence on intellectual ideas than any other voice either here or abroad* (Barish 2014:13). Such phrases rely on audience's short memory and naive gullibility. So that she ultimately undo de Man to a mouse, Barish first calls a cat a tiger in order to deride him as a paper tiger, to borrow from de Man's "The Resistance to Theory" (1986:5).

Far from building a Colossus of Rhodes, however, the author provides a range of proofs that she has never been able to understand de Man's work and ideas and that she has never tried.² Evelin Barish has not had an independent opinion on de Man beyond her admiration amidst a mass psychosis. There is not a shred of evidence in her entire book – neither a quotation, nor an allusion to de Man's canonic texts (except those borrowed by other critics, usually misquoted and misunderstood as the Archie Bunker reference³) – to suggest that Evelin Barish has written a biography about a writer whose books she has read. Otherwise a definition like this would have been unlikely: *"...theory and deconstruction, making a turn toward a stance of ironic "undecidability," in which reality is an endless hall of mirrors and writing is a necessarily "perverse" enterprise based on human lies"* (2014:31). Such an answer about the essence of deconstruction might redeem some freshmen in their first exam, but here it is Barish's boldest attempt to say something about de Man's work; and its quality

²Twice she refers to her own academic youth: *"his occasional lectures were difficult, even impossible, to understand"*, (2014:21) and nine pages later *"His occasional lectures were impenetrable..."*, to add *...but he had a magnetic pull in this already-glittering group; but (the lectures) were accepted with a certain degree of bewildered wonder* (2014:30). She continues: *"No one I had known at Cornell had been able or was willing to explain what de Man was actually teaching"* (2014:25) and, to wrap up her liaison with his teaching, she admits: *"He was the star of the humanities faculty, and like everyone else, I admired him"* (2014:18), or: *"He was the smartest person around, all the older colleagues agreed"* (2014:18).

³*Even de Man's fleeting comment about the famous 1970s TV bigot Archie Bunker, she writes, was cited as the power of Paul de Man's thinking to find and reveal the truth of deconstruction in us all* (2014:18). "What difference does it make?" is not what De Man makes Archie Bunker say, he says: *"What's the difference?"* (1979:13). *At times she doesn't seem quite attuned to the way deconstructionists use language*, admits Lehman (2014), de Man's archenemy.

accounts for the scarcity of other attempts. Evelin Barish has chosen to preserve her intellectual chastity, her common sense continence in order to get a direct access to someone's essence only through his deeds. Perhaps for the first time in the history of biography a biographer skips the work of the subject of her work. An academic writes about an academic without reading what made him worth writing about in the first place.

For Barish de Man's most telling feature is his secretiveness, his ability to hide and lie, his talent to mimic and flee. The entire logic of her biography is to strip and unveil all these layers that are just façade, glossy surface, two-dimensional Potemkin villages, installed by de Man himself. Her justification for staying away from de Man's writing might only be her deep conviction that this is his ultimate façade, his mask.⁴

So the mystery – why write a biography about an unread writer – might receive a disturbing yet frank answer: "There is a profound connection between the man who secretly fled from Belgium, exiled in 1947 and never publicly to return, and the one we knew for generations later as our intellectual and cultural leader. Drawing out those links is a task I hope others will take up as they see de Man's mature intellectual development in the context of his life and formative experiences" (2014:31). She believes that there should be a connection between de Man's personal past and his public image "for generations later" but being unable to point out such a connection, she sees her book as a preliminary work to help others. The figure of believing without understanding appears thus as a trademark of this biography: "Initially I found it impossible not so much to believe what I was learning as to comprehend it" (2014:19). Initially is an understatement: the entire book is about believing without comprehension.

Barish's bitterness is provoked by the fact that de Man was a star, a myth, a guru while his life should prove that he was a hoax, a tinfoil star, a forgery, and

that all and everyone have been deluded, that through his writings de Man has ultimately tricked the entire academic community, and that her biography will prove it. She seems to truly believe that no one, not only she, was able to understand what he was actually teaching.⁵ De Man's alleged *radical skepticism* is promised to be tracked down to its roots in his personal suffering. What is to be expected from de Man's biography offered to us by Evelin Barish is a story of suffering potent enough to flourish in the radical skepticism of deconstruction. De Man's teachings thus should have psychological roots.

Being in the mode of resisting penetrability, de Man could only be penetrated where he is like anyone else or rather much worse: in his biography. The problem with De Man is that his achievements seem to be in a world parallel to his life. More than this: in de Man's case it seems quite clear – and Barish's book actually confirms this observation – that he replaced biography with bibliography.

1.II.

We have an expression in Bulgaria: *Mad is not he who eats up the cabbage pie, but he who allows him to do this*. I would have hardly been provoked to react, had US media establishment responded adequately to it.

A year ago preliminary positive reviews appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 2013), *Publishers Weekly* (November 2013) *Kirkus* (March 2014). In *The Chronicle* the summary of the book portrayed a de Man more odious than the one in Lehman's book 22 years back (1991), a ludicrous task, the more so as the new book had obviously little to add in terms of fact. Since Barish's belated opus did not actually manage to outlive all de Man's contemporaries and disciples, at least one of them, Peter Brooks, felt obliged to react in *New York Review of Books* (April 4, 2014). But even he, by far the most critical and unsusceptible to its "truths", confirmed the overall impression of acceptance. Still, he was attacked angrily

⁴"The image I began with, that of Paul de Man as an austere, self-contained, aloof intellectual, proved misleading, to say the least. Instead, there emerged a chameleon who changed colors when prodded, holding his ground when necessary, slipping and turning to escape time and time again, to reemerge triumphantly somewhere else, as something or someone else" (2014:28). "How could de Man, a person of such austere temperament, occupying a position of such respect, seeming to personify the highest professional and even ethical achievement, have had such a past? This book (is) the result of my attempt to answer those questions", she writes (2014:18), and adds: "At Cornell, an older colleague and friend once advised me to 'stay away from the theorists . . . except for Paul de Man. He, I think, is a great man.' Were we all wrong?" (2014:30) To be sure, she should not blame herself for being wrong as her admiration was a question of mass psychosis, as she confesses (2014:18).

⁵"YET WHAT DE MAN had taught or stood for seemed to be unclear." (2014:18); "He interests us now because of his capacity to invent leading roles for himself—"narratives"—and then to play them out against a constantly changing diorama that reflects the historical vicissitudes of a tortured century." (2014:31); "The success of his career reflects both the turbulence of the era and our own vulnerabilities." (2014:32) "Paul de Man's teachings have been fruitful for some in their radical skepticism. They did not, however, spring merely from the abstract philosophical ideas he developed after he passed that chronological milestone of forty. They were deeply rooted in what he had lived through, indeed suffered" (2014:32).

in a letter by D. Lehman (March 14, 2014), who himself had written already a negative review in *Wall Street Journal*, pointing to factual and interpretative mistakes and insufficient scholarship. The subsequent flood of reviews by established authors like Menand (March 24, 2014) and Suleiman (March 7, 2014) or younger reviewers like McLemee (March 19, 2014) and Romano (March 3rd, 2014), enforced the perception of restored normalcy. Reviews were published in quite respectable media: *New York Times* published two in three days, *The Chronicle* also added a new one, followed by *New Yorker*, *Harper's* (Christine Smallwood, March 2014), *Inside Higher Ed.* (Scott McLemee, March 2014), *The American Scholar* (Zaretsky, Spring 2014), *Washington Post* (Michael Dirda, March 2014), *Washington Times* (Suzanne Fields, March 2014), *Washington Examiner* (Emmet Tyrrell, March 12, 2014), *The Nation* (David Mikics, April 8, 2014). There was also an interview with Prof. Barish for *Republican Review*, she was signing free copies of her book to the alumni of her college, etc.

In fact the overwhelming majority of reviews are outright positive, praising the courage, the depth and the authenticity of Barish's approach. Obviously, what the biography happily awaited was a media environment trained to be kind, politically correct and toothless enough to meet such a book with generous forgiveness and mildly reproaching approvals. It seems that most of the reviewers are so fascinated by the juicy, shocking events in it, that only a few of them are questioning the credibility and the substantiation of the story told: Brooks, Suleiman and indirectly Schuessler through the critical responses she summarizes. All the others do not seem to care. The most eloquent and cynical in this respect is Louis Menand (March 2014)⁶ for whom the *tale* justifies the means. The more guns are smoking and the more appropriate for a miniseries a book is the better. Menand thus confirms a fantastic change in the genre expectations around biography: reviewers want to be entertained; they need no reason to believe. For most of them de Man is just another post-war European intruder-intellectual who fooled around the gullible, naive American academia, which has not yet outgrown its European complex, before being denounced as another anti-Semitic Nazi (as most

of those Europeans are). Many of them repeat the old clichés: be it that de Man subverted the canon,⁷ be it that taking de Man seriously makes us immoral accomplices, as even Romano insists.⁸

Serious media responded through authors who, to say the least, prove to be much more competent to discuss de Man's legacy than Barish herself. New York reviewers' with their aloof politeness opt to discredit on the level of facts rather than on the level of interpretations. Still, five well established public intellectuals – Peter Brooks, Rubin Suleiman, Louis Menand, and Scott McLeemy and Carline Romano – stick to the review standards: description rather than analysis. Brooks, who should have been the most appalled as a close friend and disciple of de Man's,⁹ is most persistent in hunting down the inconsistencies, contradictions and baseless or ill-founded allegations.¹⁰ He points out the farfetched association between de Man's note about a remote colony outside Europe (an anticipation of Israel?) and the concentration camps; he expresses his dissatisfaction with the description of de Man's success in Harvard, his unique ability to be recognized as someone that matters beyond diplomas and degrees. Yet at the end of the day Brooks comes to the confessing concession that de Man's *oral presence was, I think, more effective than his written*. Such a gesture seems to reveal Brooks' fear not to be associated with what is left – de Man's writing – but with what is forever lost – his oral public talks. This is an elegant yet betraying way to step back from de Man as a writer and to embrace Barish's approach towards de Man as a bewildering cult and guru figure.

The significant number of reviews that a book like this provoked was a surprise. It is good when even books with defects are reviewed, be it because of the

⁶After a long list of deficiencies, he nonetheless concludes: *She's not a hundred per cent reliable on the historical background; she is a little over her head with the theoretical issues; and she sometimes characterizes as manipulative or deceptive behavior that might have a more benign explanation. Her book is a brief for the prosecution. But it is not a hatchet job, and she has an amazing tale to tell. In her account, all guns are smoking. There are enough to stock a miniseries.*

⁷*"No one ever said brilliance makes you smart, or that influential people are more ethical than farmers, seamstresses or Chevy mechanics. But de Man's theories have had the malignant affect of destroying the authority of the canon in the humanities. English departments have yet to recover."* (Fields 2014) De Man actually abstained from 20 C literature after Proust, Rilke and Yates. He wrote about one and only more contemporary pure writer – Borges, in the 50s – and confessed in the late 70s that the next one might have been Calvino (de Man 1986).

⁸Dead-ender theory types may see de Man as comparable to a scientist, unethical in his private life, who discovers an important vaccine (deconstruction) that cures a disease (logocentrism). But to honor de Man for work whose roots begin in immorality—and any realistic assessment of Barish's evidence suggests that they do—makes us complicit in the immorality.

⁹Often quoted by Barish to remember how in Harvard, in class, de Man would "sit in front of a text and just pluck magical things out of it". (2014:565)

¹⁰*"An overriding problem of Barish's book is the mélange of interesting fact with egregious misstatement and portentous innuendo."* He also points out that the accusation about de Man's plan "to create an entirely Nazi journal, one dedicated to promulgating Hitler's ideology, from his views of race to his notions about nutrition—and even his cosmology" is supported by the following footnote No 28: "I shared this information, and it has since been published in Belgian sources not now available to me."

magnitude of their topic, be it just because of the work, time, and efforts invested. Perhaps the ambition, the scope and the amount of time and labour invested in this book, not least the fact that this was the first detailed biography, dedicated to Paul de Man, inspired, or rather, instigated so many media and reviewers to respond. And there is no review in the US to miss the dedication and self-sacrifice that decorates Barish's deed.

Still, the time and the effort could not beat the perception of those who know that there is nothing particularly new to her revelations. The book tries to substantiate previous allegations made publicly as early as in 1987 by Goriély and in 1991 by Lehman and others. Barish, as it turns out, has confirmed just Goriély's accusation by finding the active sentence against Paul de Man for fraud and embezzlement of his publishing company, a crime that made him flee Belgium in 1948.

In Barish's book the wartime writings are biographically and historically contextualized, but reviewers seem more pleased by the common pattern that connects them with other failures, mistakes, sins and crimes: failed exams, adulterous love affairs, collaboration, prodigality, compulsive lying, fraud and embezzlement. Barish does her best to build a well-rounded, self-identical, stable character, doomed to always fail because of his fundamental inability to get genuinely dedicated to any cause and to be faithful to any person. But de Man's all too consistent image often seems artificial and forged. There are quite a few moments that require a more delicate psychological insight to account for the contradictions in the character and his actions, but Barish opts for a monolithic protagonist, whose chameleonic essence, profound cynicism, disrespect for the feelings of others, malignant intelligence and charm, prodigality, compulsory lying, inability to learn from previous mistakes, etc., meet in one and only diagnosis – sociopathy.¹¹ All in all, Barish's critics seem to feel obliged to respond positively to this constant,

pathologically predictable character. Even when they get critical like Suleiman, McLeeme or Brooks, they attack this approach through the flops, contradictions and omissions in its design, yet never dare to question the approach itself. At least four reviewers recognize the *Ripley* pattern but only Brooks applies it in order to criticize the obsession with which the narrator applies it everywhere. For Brooks Barish misses the complexity and the contradictory aspects in de Man's character.

The fact that a biography of a forgotten literary scholar who is already 30 years dead could provoke such interest might mean many things: that the public prefers criminal stories to theoretical writings, especially if the author of the latter is the villain in the former; that people like when an underdog takes revenge against someone from a different league; that the paradigm is changed and the only way to keep theory alive is by telling stories of its dead fathers. Or perhaps the rather excited responses towards Barish's book testifies that neither theory nor de Man are that dead intellectually. To be sure, those who knew and understood de Man are more reluctant to buy "the truth" of the book than those who have never read him before, now consoled to discover that it was not a loss.

Some of the reviewers like Brooks, Suleiman, McLeeme and even Lehman, choose to subvert the grand truth of the biography by pointing out to all too many mistakes and contradictions. Others, like Menand, wisely opt to keep the personal story and de Man's theory separate. McLeeme's alternative criticism is supported by Dirda in pointing out the tiresome repetitiveness of the same quotations, assertions and conclusions. Quite a few reviews were punning on the easy game of *Deconstructed Deconstructionist*. Such titles are totally misleading. There is nothing deconstructive to Prof. Barish's approach. Her would-be humanistic moralism remains blind for the complexities and contradictions of moral dilemmas. Barish remains entirely at odds with what she has taken the moral risk to write about. She's trying to normalize and rationalize de Man by showing him as culprit on the verge of abnormality, of social pathology, as Menand put it.

The common pattern to criticize the book is to attack it on the territory of its attacks against de Man. Barish is vicious in her insistence that de Man was not precise, punctual and correct in the way he was using literary and critical texts, that his writing was not able to meet the academic standards, that he was far from perfect in his analytical and theoretical logic, that he is a

¹¹If I am correct, Barish uses this diagnosis just once, at the beginning of Chapter 21, called "Despair, Rage and the Pursuit of Shadows": "Was the uncontrolled waste a sort of frenzy, or did it express "sociopathic" traits? Even if any of these doubtful terms were applicable, they would remain mere labels"(2014: 346). Her unwillingness to use potentially absolving psychopathological concepts obviously helped Louis Menand to miss this half-hearted diagnosis and to point to it as his own discovery, correcting her observations about narcissism. Whereas Barish does not like labels that might diminish the power of her moral claims, for Menand the diagnosis is beyond reasonable doubt. Still, his review of the book leaves a somewhat disturbing impression of intelligent indifference towards both de Man and Barish, which in itself betrays – or plays with – sociopathic symptoms.

farfetched, extreme to absurdity, repetitive and predictable in his strategies easy reader who was reading this way because he was lazy rather than because he was a seer. What scholars like Brooks and Suleiman opt to do is to challenge Barish's own book as imprecise, unclear about what is a documented fact and what is an assumption, because the author is biased and has an agenda: what she has been doing along her two decades long journey was to look for clues to support her ready-made image of De Man as the villain.

And here comes the most disturbing aspect that informs the criticism undertaken by most otherwise different reviews. They all do their best to remain on Barish's territory, to attack her in her logic, to discredit her credibility within her own value system, to point out her unfounded and often bombastic allegations, betraying wishful thinking and outright ambition to cram de Man into her pattern, thus ignoring twenty three years of teaching and writing. The most critical reviews were actually repeating the strategy to first cast doubt on Barish's credibility on the level of facts, and second, to demonstrate that her accusations were but opinionated speculations deprived of sufficient evidence. Brooks and Suleiman, for example, somewhat triumphantly expose the moments in which Barish's narrative contradicts the sheer facts – they dwell on why *Normandia* could not be actually the transatlantic liner used by de Man, what is the right translation of his provisional position in the Belgian publishing house *Toison d'Or* during WWII, what was the actual name of the literary prize inaugurated with his help in 1942 in Brussels – before expressing their more general doubts concerning the validity of her interpretation. To imply that her exaggerations and adjustments suspiciously reproduce and perform de Man's alleged misdeeds might be a persuasive argument for a diverse audience but it is an alarming concession with Barish's logic, beliefs and principles. The strategy is efficient, yet it seemed to me it made the critics descend to the book's level rather than stick to the level of its subject.

Ironically, the more involved in literary academia the critics were, the less likely it was that they would point out a mistake alluding to professional incompetence; all of them, for example, fail to note that Baudelaire's sonnet is entitled "Les Chats", not "Le Chat", and that the exemplary structuralist analysis on it was authored not only by Roman Jakobson but also by Levi-Strauss. The lack of sufficient criticism towards Barish's interpretations of de Man's actions and motives betrays

a certain level of condescending attitude towards the writer; she fails as early and as low as the level of facts, so there is no evident need to question her knowledge or competence, or her capability to apply them. Yes, Suleiman drops the remark about how "ham-handed" Barish is when it comes to theoretical or philosophical matters and Menand initially admits that "she is a little over her head with the theoretical issues". Yet Menand's somewhat morbid hyper-excitement with crime series does not change the general perception: both Barish's critics and supporters opt to uncritically reproduce her narrative in sometimes lengthy abstracts. If they buy her story, they do so in spite of her incredibility, of her over-interpretations and simplifications, of her theoretical ignorance. If they do not, this is because her incredibility on the level of facts makes dubious the interpretative aspect of her narrative; Barish's insufficient scholarship is but a vignette for the closing remarks of the reviews.

By trying to beat her on her own ground her critics in fact accept and thus endorse her rules and her game: the recurring pattern of an attractive but vicious protagonist who lies and forges documents either to get material advantages or to rescue himself; the omnipresent parochial and philistine narrow-mindedness that reduces everything to money, diplomas, decorum and legality; even the pattern exemplified in the funny reproach towards de Man's first wife Anna, who abandoned her financially and professionally stable aristocrat to the penniless 19-year drop-out with no profession and future – all these reveal a banal, obscurantist, petit bourgeois value system, unable to see anything positive in de Man beyond his alluring charm. Such value system is legitimate, albeit being more philistine than the morals of any average B-movie. To accept such simple, melodramatic, mediocre and rule-freak approach would mean to embrace as unquestionable values and principles whose *petit bourgeois* common sense is quite dubious, especially when applied to historical moments like wars or personal conditions like exile, lacking support and extreme poverty.

Authors like Barish, so excited to expose de Man's lies, should perhaps watch more often channels like Discovery and Animal Planet. In documentaries about natural life, both individual survival and taking care of one's loved ones, are priorities. Those who share Barish's view how terrible it is to moonlight in Berlitz while taking a position in Harvard also disregard the endemic poverty in which the de Mans lived up to the mid-60s. Those who are so eager to identify with Mary

McCarty, first charmed by de Man and later disappointed, or with the collector and typical academic combinator Artinian in Bard, with Levin or Poggioli in Harvard, simply confess to what extent their thinking is within the post-colonial box of taking for granted a New York bohemian and artistic milieu, or Harvard academic decorum and how hasty and eager they are in blaming an exile for his survival instinct, not least inspired by a sense of vocation and mission, as it has been soon proved. The fact that de Man did not give up his work with Berlitz, even when he was pressed by deadlines concerning exams and his Ph. D. thesis, does not necessarily show sociopathic recklessness but rather care for his family of four.

All responses that are critical of the book agree that the complexity of de Man's thought is beyond the capacity of Evelin Barish. Still, none of them dare to ask the basic question: is it moral to write about someone whose work is beyond the writer's level of competence? It seems that, overall, the reviewers accept Barish's common sense logic, whereby one believes that a life ruined by a character should reveal the implicit simplicity of de Man's theory and not vice-versa. Not a single critic dared to turn de Man's theory against Barish's interpretation of his life; only McLeeme questioned the biographer's obsession with de Man's appearance in the light of her lack of interest in his intellectual substance. Perhaps Barish just could not see beyond surfaces.

2.I.

At conferences in the Humanities we used to joke that the dullest, emptiest papers *always* provoked most vivid and productive discussions. Scholars, very much like nature, cannot stand any void and feel like instantly filling it. Less innocuously, emptiness sucks in whatever comes first and discussions usually go astray and become self-sufficient.

An anecdote, ascribed to Heidegger, tells about his first visit to a lecture of Husserl's. His professor started with a question, and in the ticking thickening silence, a girl dropped something vapid. Husserl, surprisingly, found the answer very inspiring and spent the next two hours elaborating on it. After the class he approached his assistant and cheerfully shared: "We've had a good discussion today, haven't we?"

While I was wondering why on earth such a number of reasonable people with well respected positions in academia and/or in the media bothered to review *The Double Life of Paul de Man* by Evelin Barish, those two

moments crossed my mind. The most ingenious responses were taking the book as a premiss to tell their author's version of Paul de Man's case.

Being myself both devoted and indebted to de Man, I initially got impatient with the reviewers. Like another of de Man's followers, I also keep under the belt the dicta from "Autobiography as Defacement" revealing the necessary disfiguring effect of any confession due to its inherently deferred excessive language. While reading the reviews I was waiting for the moment when the reviewer will finally turn de Man's inventions against Evelin Barish and deconstruct her: be it to dig out a trope in her ingenuous prose whose literal meaning will expose her damnable plan while vindicating de Man in return; be it to unravel an ambiguous statement, like "*YET WHAT DE MAN had taught or stood for seemed to be unclear*" (2014:22), or a dropped footnote betraying her machinations to mar de Man, to tarnish his name, and to obliterate his legacy. Alas, there was no sign of anything like that.

2.II.

Biography is a genre implying that its subject is someone who deserves a biography, that its subject is someone. It would be curious to check what percentage of people were born for the general public through their biographies. Therefore even if one is too young to remember that notorious Newsweek from the late 80s and the story about the post-WWII immigrant from Europe who talked his way to the precincts of US academia, died honored and venerated, but short after was disgraced as a Nazi collaborator in occupied Belgium, this book might resurrect the thrill. For those devoted to de Man's writings who witnessed his orchestrated oblivion and displacement from the curriculum, such a biography is not a sign of a changing tide. On the contrary, in de Man's case, one would expect that the biography is set to put together the symbolon of his life and his work so that they make a click in a perfect whole, his life being used again to discredit his theory.

From the very beginning, the reader is confused about the possible motives to write and publish such a biography today. For those who know, respect, and use de Man in their work as literary scholars or in the wider field of the humanities, this book would be irrelevant because who de Man was does not affect what is left as a system of ideas and critical readings, of books and intellectual strategies, applicable to literary and other texts and discursive practices. It is unlikely that those

who still practice a de Manian type of deconstruction would get scared for their souls after being enlightened what a villain originated it; true, professional prudence urged some to purge their syllabi and bibliographies, although no soprano or pianist would ever be condemned for singing Wagner or playing Beethoven. Facing the alternative between a “bigamist scientist with a fake diploma and nationalistic youth who discovers a cure for cancer” and a “scientist-saint inventing the ultimate biological weapon for mass destruction” most, I believe, would prefer the Nobel Prize to go to the former. Yet in the humanities, unlike in science, and the arts the situation seems to be different.

The story actually matters only for those who have a preliminary knowledge and a negative opinion about de Man and his place in deconstruction and postmodern thought in general. For them the book reaffirms their conviction that de Man was one of the most embarrassing alien charlatans who seduced US academia. Besides the usual suspects cheered by any scandalous spectacle of a disgraced celebrity, the readers who hailed the book were those adversaries of deconstruction who would bet on psychological causality for want of critical argumentation. Conservatives in the media were in the haste to repeat their mantras about deconstruction as a leftist liberal conundrum spreading agnosticism and guilty for the challenging of the canon, as if Rilke and Yeats were not the latest writers on de Man's list.

Then why bother to respond to such a book? The author of the biography has taken her task rather literally by removing from her focus everything irreducible to the sheer life of her protagonist. Hers is the revenge of the admitted but uninvited to the cult; she has decided to prove that de Man is entirely of flesh and blood, an easy prey for another exposure of the next false prophet, the next Simon Magus.

To arouse the curiosity of those who do not know who de Man was and what he did for the study of language, literature, and philosophy, by telling a story of adultery, bigamy, swindling, embezzlement, lying, forging, and deceiving, is highly unlikely – not because the story is dull but because Barish's narrative is cluttered with an aunty type of tedious pondering, parochial horizon and musty moralism. The annoyance from Barish's monotonous biting remarks is surpassed only by her would-be judicious attempts to provide de Man's misdeeds with psychological or, worse, philosophical explanations.

2.III.

Still, the actual reading of the book invites approaches alternative to those undertaken in the media, whether positive or negative.

The critics of this book seem to be taking for granted the genre nomination “biography.” They also opt to neglect the contrast between the corpus of the book and its framework. The book actually begs for a fairer approach that would dismiss the straitjacket of the Introduction and the Epilogue and will focus on the body of the book, the genuine story. The Introduction and the Epilogue are but prostheses meant to provide justification for writing a biography about someone forgotten. Yet the radical invalidity, incompetence and even absurdity of the framework proves that it was rather set as a launching rocket designed to put the satellite of the novel into the right orbit before burning out without a trace. The framework is a deceptively solemn justification for what the book happens to be: a documentary novel. The genuine function is to make a substantial claim: it is not a biography of a thinker, but a novel about a con artist. This is what Louis Menand has found and liked in this book – the smoking guns, the mini-series.

Barish started this project more than twenty years ago when the scandal around de Man and deconstruction was still alive. Gradually, the scandal subsided and de Man was largely forgotten. Barish's biography missed the right moment to appear by a decade or two. Now Barish would rather hope that biography will be taken by her readers as a pretext or as the shell of a novel; a documentary novel, yet a novel that should not actually care about what the protagonist did in his intellectual, academic life. The semi-fictional approach testifies that she had lost track of whom she was writing about long ago. Through documents and interviews she entered a life, that was very much self-sufficient and self-significant, a life full of drama and suspense. Barish gave up the idea of juxtaposing de Man's life and writing, first, because she found herself unable to do so, and second, because she discovered for herself that de Man's life was a much more exciting story than his theory.

Yet Barish is an academic, a professor of English. The decorum of an academic study was still dear to her. She was hoping to gain by mixing genres yet the fact is her book never managed to make up its mind what it actually is or wants to be. Being halted at the gate of de Man's Law by the fearful guard of his imaginary impenetrability, Barish was happy to

discover that there was a back entrance – through his life; or rather through its early period.

Another Paul – Jean-Paul Sartre – tells in *Les Mots* his story of a 9-year old author of adventurous novels; challenged by his mother's friend's question what he will do when he gets older, if he is writing novels now, he responds, "I'll live them out!" From Barish's perspective, De Man seemed to be more predictable: first he lived, and then he came up with a theory. For some it was but a systematic although treacherous attempt to exonerate his early life; for others it should not have to do with his life at all; for yet others his writing was his act of repentance and redemption. For Barish, at the end of the day, the only thing that mattered was an insidious life that deserved to be told. What she really tried to do is to write an adventurous novel under the disguise of biography. Yet her textbook moralism clipped her wings: no matter how interesting and rich de Man's life appears to have been, in her book it is systematically reduced to the trivial life of a petty con artist. The author feels responsible to furnish the narrative with numerous accounts of her protagonist's likely motives and impulses, with interpretations of his character, with reconstructions of his psychological condition, his possible attitudes and moods. That is where the triviality of the narrative comes from – it comes from her. Some recurring patterns appear to be richer and call for extra work. Instead, what Barish offers is the same parochial petit bourgeois scheme, obsessed with money, statuses, appearances and decorum. At some point, the reader feels free to start cheating by intentionally omitting the author's interventions. Read in such a manner, the story ceases to be trivial and invites a conundrum of competing interpretations, which already make the reader feel home, in de Man's home of reading.¹²

In 2003 The Beatles' album of 1970 reappeared under the name "Let it be...Naked". The idea was to remove the reassembling intervention of Phil Spector, his "Wall of Sounds Aesthetic", and to restore "the band's original vision." It would be interesting to see what one could do with the actual story of de Man's documentary novel stripped from the interpretative interventions of the author's omnipresence. By earning such freedom, the reader might discover that the plot

goes beyond the protagonist's lot and possesses a more general agenda message-wise.

2.IV.

If we approach this new novel paradigmatically, as Levi-Strauss suggested for the structural study of myths, a recurring narrative pattern would be easily detectable: the main character is returning again and again to the place of the crime; in his case, this is his initial failure to become an editor-in-chief.¹³ First, in 1942, according to Barish, he co-authored with his editor-in-chief De Becker the concept of *Cahiers Européens*, an overtly pro-Nazi cultural journal. Barish's allegations about de Man's contribution seem unfounded and farfetched: it is unlikely that De Becker would take the whole responsibility for a project that eventually cost him a death sentence, nor would the prosecutor neglect the fact that a different handwriting had been used in the second part of the outline. Much better documented are de Man's ambitions first to reach a position of power in *Agence Dechenne*, a distributing company with a publishing branch, which allowed him to look for an executive appointment in *Toison d'Or*, a publishing house sponsored by the Nazis.¹⁴ Barish's interpretation of the position of *literary adviser as editor-in-chief* has already been criticized by Suleiman. Yet Barish seems to be right about de Man's most intimate ambition: to run a publishing house or at least a journal. De Man's overreaching was exposed and he was reported to his boss in *Le Soir* by his boss in *Toison d'Or* for systematic negligence. Almost instantly, the same type of report discredited him in *Agence Dechenne*. Both reports concerned mismanagement, both of them detected losses for the companies, both accused de Man of greedy negligence, having to do with loss of original, unrecoverable manuscripts. The pattern is the same: the character overestimates himself in aspiring to an executive position in a publishing house, while he is fired from his three jobs for underperformance on his actual level. According to Barish, her protagonist's self-overestimation was systematically sanctioned as underperformance.

¹²One of the indicators that the interpretative layer of the book drags behind its narrative potentiality is the recurring impulse to focus on the endnotes rather than on the body text. It would be an amusing endeavor to calculate the ratio between the endnotes supporting the textual corpus and those actually contradicting it.

¹³"Paul, the mastermind of the project, would then be able to make a quick upward leap and be named to a high position in the company, perhaps becoming chief editor of a new publication or taking over an existing one" (2014:251)

¹⁴"Thus when Paul de Man was still only twenty-two, he was close to becoming the editor in chief of one of Belgium's most active publishing houses" (2014:263).

Three years later the protagonist launches a publishing house, *Hermes*, which fails dramatically in less than two years: the trial in absentia, which took place in 1951, four years after de Man's fleeing to the US, is well documented. It seems the character returned to the same place, this time by initiating a business venture and appointing himself manager. It is the same type of business – a publishing house, designed to translate and to commission works on the fine arts and drama. This time the protagonist fails abysmally as it seems he has spent or wasted the entire capital of his company, most of which came from investors, secured by his father and his friends.

Actually, this trial is Barish's only contribution to de Man's story – the discovery of the 5-year jail sentence. According to Barish, de Man simply stole and spent all the money of the company. However, this time her narrative does not have any clue where the money has gone. Such blankness is in striking contrast to her voluptuous description of de Man's way of life as a collaborationist with three jobs. Barish incessantly repeats that the money has been stolen, authors and translators have been deceived, and almost no books have been published. In a footnote, she quotes de Man's uncle, "Bob De Braey reported being in Paul's office and said, "I never saw anyone there. He worked hard on translation. He couldn't live from the [publishing of] works of art"; interview, November 18, 1992" (2014:800). It seems the protagonist was working hard, only perhaps in the wrong direction. He was trying to be a one-man orchestra, and what he was actually doing had to do with his vocation while being counter-productive for the company.

Barish never seriously asks where a million and a half franks have disappeared. She admits there was a robbery from the company's safe, yet the question remains unanswered. It seems the character fails by a catastrophic recurrence of his previous incapability and underperformance in running a business, a publishing house. Barish is adamant that he was simply stealing and swindling, that it was a case of mass embezzlement. From the image of the publisher translating hard in his office one could get a different impression: there were good intentions behind the actions along the road and all of them led to hell. Once again the character called de Man overestimates himself, underperforms, fails and runs away, this time abroad. Logically, at the trial the entire blame was laid on him. Ironically, Georges Goriély, the historian who first raised the issue as early as 1987, learned about it from a fine arts specialist who was paid 15, 000 franks

by de Man without providing anything in return; still, he complained about not being paid the next 15, 000. It seems de Man was taking and giving money without keeping records. He was overestimating the spiritual, intellectual aspect of his project. The mismanagement of an optimist hoping to cover the initial expenses by the profit to come does not seem to be led by bad intentions, by bad faith; otherwise it would be implausible to make him take the savings of his nurse or of his aunt. It was a misjudgment of proportions that made this blunder worse than a crime.¹⁵ It was the self-inflicted wound of a person who recognized the pattern of his initial failures that cost him his three positions almost at once. It seems there was passion, desire and jouissance to this doomed failure, a suicidal impulse, but also the thrill of inevitable disgrace.

What kind of *Todestrieb*, of self-destructive impulse should one have to put oneself in a position in which one has failed so badly before? It seems like an attempt to heal the wound of the past, but it also looks like an impulse to open a deeper and deadlier one.

After this failure, which sends the character to the US, he once again tries to convince his new friends and editors of his capacity to launch a publishing project, this time in New York. Luckily, they did not buy his story and the project was not started, which brought "de Man" to his teaching career. But the pattern is the same.

What are the implications of this pattern? Barish discovers it, points it out, but her interpretation remains short of the mark, referring to de Man's spendthrift character, to his anti-bourgeois resentment, to Bataille's influence. She finally concludes that he might have been willing to fail in order to run away from his bourgeois milieu and from his wife. All this is possible but hardly plausible, and since Aristotle we have known that a plot had better follow the laws of probability.

Perhaps, to make better sense of the story, we would need some help from de Man himself, from his writings. De Man sought success in a sphere in which he believed he was competent: the one of books, literature, and art. He (mis)read the intellectual and aesthetic value of the books as their sheer market value. He was notorious for purchasing twice as many copies as he might hope to sell. He read his spiritual

¹⁵ "...for the situation was, in the words of the duc d'Enghien, "worse than a crime, it was a blunder." (Barish 2014:291)

talents as a guarantee for practical skills, just as he read books as widely desired goods. De Man was hoping to distribute his love for books on literature and art and to make a suitable profit out of it. He was a bad reader of himself because his reading of books was wrong; he misjudged their purpose, value and the likely demand for them. He was on the stage at which he was not yet able *to tell the dancer from the dance*, the writer and translator from the publisher and distributor. He was a naive reader whose reading failed. By translating his skills as editor and translator into a capacity to run a publishing house, de Man was misinterpreting by relying on the translatability between an authentic attitude towards words and the arts, and a practical activity in the world. Words, he learned, were not meant to be translated into actions, at least not into successful actions in the world. Words, taken seriously, slowly, critically, are doomed to be translated into failures in the practical world.

The futility of human hopes and endeavors is a commonplace in de Man's writing. From the standpoint of the documentary novel, based on the motives of de Man's life, one can see this repetitive motif of futility as something more than a post-existentialist cliché. De Man founded his theory on a particular predicament in language. Faithfulness to and within language betrays. Human decisions and actions, when they are based on such fidelity, are always doomed to fail, as he did when he took his devotion to books as a sign that he would make a good editor-in-chief.

So what we have here is the recurring scene of de Man's failure that might have brought him to a theory of triumphantly doomed reading. An interested, motivated reader will seek to recognize a metaphor or a symbol instead of, respectively, a metonymy or an allegory. It will often strive to provide continuation between language and the world, complementarity between alternative readings, between books as works and books as goods. It is exactly because language never remains in its realm and always mingles with other activities and practices that we should be aware of its ideological character of mixing reference with phenomenality (de Man, 1982:9).

Seen from the perspective of de Man's recurring failure to translate his critical-linguistic talents into publishing skills, de Man's theory might receive a new accentuation. It was not about the slippery ground of language; it was about inevitably taking practical decisions and doing practical things by favoring a reading that imposes a correspondence between

language and the world on the basis of their linguistic, grammatical and logical correctness. Figural language, the tropological aspect within every discourse, is the alarming point where the joint between language and reality is *out of joint*. De Man's theory does not actually insist on the self-referentiality of language; it rather implies an awareness that reading is not an innocent practice, as it always mingles with our decisions and actions. The point is that the reading that will turn out to be wrongly chosen, is not such because of particular mistakes in reasoning or grammar, but because of the neglected figural aspect, taken as literal because of its cultural, political, social, and aesthetic sanctions. It is not so much because the figural aspect is a machine for equally possible readings. It is because one of these readings is always taken as the right one because its figural moment is culturally sanctioned, i.e. transferred into a cultural literal meaning. It is exactly because de Man's theory reflects on our way to operate in the world that it remains important as a permanent warning.

Suspensions towards aesthetics, and semiotics for that matter, both under the auspices of the symbol, come from the insight that both projects seek to mend language, i.e. to restore the reliable correspondence between signifier and signified, or to imply some iconic motivation of the sign taken as the etymologically atomic and individual, and therefore totalitarian trope of the romantic symbol. De Man's theory is to be taken as a permanent warning supplementing every theory of language, literature and discursive practice. Theory is always critical – and political – with regard to the three elephants of modernity – the worlds of action, of beauty and of truth.

We are used to believing that in de Man it was all about the figural aspect of language that brings to the point the impossibility of reading because of the existence of two or more equally valid, grammatically correct and logically coherent readings, which do not allow us to make a choice. Such existence of alternative readings does usually ensue from the figural aspect of language with its inevitably proliferating meanings, or from the impossibility to choose between the figural and non-figural, literal meaning, usually accepted as more artificial than the figural reading already rooted culturally or aesthetically. Yet de Man would always return to the motifs of the futility of human endeavors and hopes, and to the question of the authenticity of some readings or insights. When again and again he made the same wrong reading of the statement "I know about books" as "I could make a

good publisher,” he was wrong exactly because the statement was correct and it took the evidentiality of the reading for granted. Moreover, this meant trying to motivate such a statement, to take it as a motivated sign, as an icon, a symbol, a mimetic aesthetic image. When we say that something “makes sense”, exactly the same process harnesses together the sensual, the cognitive and the practical. Language in its communicative and nominative function repeats the same lazy utopianism of adjustment between words and things, languages and worlds. De Man’s concern was this repetitive semiotic/aesthetic/ideological gesture that restores the unity between language and the world by fixing conceptually, or through image and imagination, the fissures between worlds. Literature is of such importance for de Man because it is the only field of language that systematically boycotts such adjustment or fixing.

So here is the alternative character before us: a journalist, a critic, an editor and a translator, devoted to the arts, literature and culture and committed to the idea of improving the natural bad taste of the masses,¹⁶ reads his dedication as a mission, destined to succeed. But in at least three consecutive efforts his reading proves wrong, a failure, a fall. It was exactly because his reading was based on reasonable, logical and grammatically correct propositions undertaking a rhetorical (albeit disguised as semiotic or aesthetic) mending of the figural rupture between language and reality that he was finally sentenced to failure and to jail. What he discovered later as a literary scholar was that he would have repeated the same wrong reading unless he had found literature to be at work everywhere, in all discursive and non-discursive practices. He also found that it is useful to make a decision or undertake an action in an always already (perceived as) literary situation, in which the reading is never one, and the alternative readings keep our eyes open for the difficulty, if not the impossibility, to match language and the world.

Of course, it is easy to say that it was simply silly to repeat the same mistake again and again, i.e. to remain blind, to neglect the practical aspect, the pragmatic context, concrete conditions – the simple fact that the young intellectual was practically incapable of running a publishing house. What his theory

discovered, however, was that language is a machine that we could use in order to transform our desires and denials, our interests and illusions into seemingly reasonable, correct statements. It is only the figural aspect that opens up along the barrier line between our desires and their rigorous linguistic articulations. It is only through the absurdity of the rhetorical aspect of language that we could face, and to some extent, control the absurdity of our desires and anxieties hidden behind seemingly perfect propositions. It is the madness within language that might help us face and fight the madness in ourselves and in the world we inhabit.

So it seems that the recurring pattern of de Man’s overestimating himself while he was underperforming should be slightly corrected. De Man was simultaneously over-performing and underperforming on two different levels. What he was trying to do was to dovetail these two levels in order to negate the underperformance on the practical level. The irony was that he actually managed to stitch together these two; however, the effect was that underperformance thus became total. The futility of human hopes and endeavors proves to be an effect of our seemingly successful readings.

2.V.

The literary experience of reality, therefore, might help supply the “matching” reading with alternative, challenging readings, thus depriving it of its “unique totality”, of its “absoluteness” and “truthfulness”; or, to put it bluntly, to prevent it from becoming a “salvation”, a “solution.” Yet the literary experience of reality could also help find the hidden motives, the unfathomable impulses that urge one to repeat the same mistake over and over again.

If we go back to the recurring narrative pattern of de Man’s failures, it is easy to see that the repeatedly failing reading might have to do with a number of additional repetitions.

One of the puzzling moments for Barish, and others, is why Paul de Man has pointed out his uncle Henri de Man as his father on a number of occasions. She is helpless to find a meaningful explanation why de Man lied when he had to justify his Belgian past: to confess a filial indebtedness to the top collaborationist in the country would hardly imply innocence. She was even more shocked to discover that it was not a cunning pre-deconstructive strategy and de Man was lying about

¹⁶“regret that wholesalers like us do not profit from the chance . . . to exploit the literary appetite of the public [and] to raise the natural bad taste of the mass.” (2014:259)

Henri in perfectly innocent circumstances. Barish reports that rumor had it that Paul was actually Henri's son, but chooses to close the case by concluding that most probably Henri was not around when Paul was conceived.

It is possible, however, to go beyond the facts in the beliefs. It is not of great importance here what actually the case was. It is much more important that there were two readings concerning the question who was his father. Paul was put in a permanent situation of undecidability.

A trivial psychoanalytic reading would simply guess that he made a choice; he singled out Henri as his father and rebelled against his father's aspirations to be his father. Such a reading would take his multiple responses that Henri was his father literally, as a statement articulating a belief. Paul openly despised Jan de Man with his barren onanistic violin playing and adulterous behavior. Paul's brother was a retarded rapist, perhaps serial. Sex was his obsession. In that sense, Rick was his perfect father's son. Not Paul: Paul was indifferent towards sex and women. Or he pretended to be, so as to detach himself from his "brother" and "father."

Yet Paul did not embrace such a simple psychoanalytical reading that would allow him a perfect list of excuses for all his failures. Before finally choosing Henri as a father, already in the US, in Belgium Paul lived an exemplary life of frustrating, exhausting undecidability, preventing the process of identification, of becoming a subject.

He wished Henri to be his father, as they had so much in common, but it would imply that his mother was unfaithful, which would leave him an illegitimate son without a father. He did not see anything in common between Rick and himself, but his mother preferred his disgrace of a brother to him. Was it because he was illegitimate, a regrettable adulterous mistake, despite his qualities and talents? When his mother's serial attempts to kill herself finally succeeded, did he have the right to blame Jan for this or did he have to blame himself for being insufficient, for being unable to replace either Henri, or Rick, or even Jan in the heart of his mother?

Therefore, there were obvious advantages to remaining Jan's son. Jan was everything he was not, but he was not everything he would not like to be. In Paul's eyes, his father was a petty entrepreneur

lacking élan and panache; still, he was a successful businessman. Paul, who was committed to books, writing and thinking very much like his spiritual father Henri, was also obsessed with earning, making money, being successful in business, as his practical/virtual father Jan almost was. At the end of the day, Paul had two readings of himself epitomized by his two possible fathers. Those readings seemed to be equally likely and mutually excluding each other while each of them was perfectly contextualized by the other: Paul could literally be Henri's son only to the extent that Jan was his figural father; and vice versa – if Jan was his literal father, this did not prevent Henri from being his figural father on a different level of figurativeness. Paul was not happy with Jan's success as a businessman, but by 1941, when Paul was 22, Henri was already a catastrophic failure, an exile somewhere in France, and later a refugee in Switzerland. He actually died by repeating Rick's death – he was run over by a train.

Suspended between his two fathers and between his two identities of a man of letters and a man of money, Paul chose to overcome his fathers' double failure by reconciling them in a common project. Henri was an intellectual but he was an engaged intellectual, and politics brought about his failure. Jan was a practical man, but he was also an art consumer and amateur musician. Paul decided to find a way to reconcile these two incommensurable readings. To become a cultural journalist was but the starting point. To become an editor-in-chief of a cultural publishing house or a journal was the perfect solution, the ultimate reconciliation. It was putting together the practical, material success with a cultural commitment benefiting the others; it was about making literature and art useful in a double sense: for himself and for others. I have already suggested why this project of reconciling the practical and spiritual self-readings failed.

Now, how about women in de Man's life? One of the possible reasons for de Man's radical indifference towards psychoanalysis is his essential a-sexuality. His prose leaves us with this unmistakable sense of a total lack of interest in sex and sexuality. As often happens with a-sexual young men, they fall prey to the most persistent woman who got interested in them. Anne, de Man's first wife, was married when she started chasing him. Once again he misread the situation. He was looking for an innocent sexual initiation, secure because of the woman's marriage. He was wrong: she got pregnant, and eventually her husband dropped out of their *ménage à trois*, replaced by three children. Anne, with their three sons, paradigmatically

corresponds to de Man's triple attempt to become a publisher: she was his father in skirt, only strong, resolute and enslaving. Already under Anne's spell, Paul felt like saving himself by going back to his first Platonic date Frida. It did not work, as she got married. Next time he attempted to run away, he found Patricia Kelly, his second and last wife. De Man was notorious for his austerity and sexual immunity along his entire academic career. The women he chose in his life were friends and mothers: Frida was six years older; Patricia got immediately pregnant and from the very beginning was marked by motherhood. Paul, who never managed to really reach his mother (he has referred to his sense of insufficiency) and who finally lost her, seemed to be doomed to remain a-sexual. When Paul launched his publishing house, he paid tribute to his father and his female version, his wife. The practical, social and egoistic side of his split subject was given a chance, or rather was given the chance to fail in order to be dismissed. By entering the literary departments of US academia without diplomas and credentials, and through his impossible because bigamous marriage, Paul de Man chose his spiritual, figural, illegitimate father Henri. That was, in fact, his way to choose himself as fatherless, non-patriarchal, a-sexual, dis-gendered, self-generating, self-sustaining, chthonic monster.¹⁷

De Man was strongly criticized for his heartlessness and indifference towards his children (something that some of them emphatically deny). If there was something de Man was afraid of, it should have been the undecidability of fatherhood. His first son was born while his lover was still under the constraints of her first marriage; therefore his son was ascribed to Anne's husband. Although he fixed this later the one thing he would not like to impose on his children should have been the undecidability of fatherhood.¹⁸

Paul de Man, who had an obsession with mirrors and difficulties with fatherhoods in all their forms, at the end of the day found the legitimate form of dealing with books that was both intellectual and practical, and yet

critical in both directions. De Man's theoretical project preserved his attraction to and fear of the reproduction of the same. Literature was his way to both reiterate reproduction and to avoid it through the myriad of alternative readings.

This newly embraced monstrosity of the self-generated, literally self-made man sheds light on his shocking combination of brilliance and inability to take exams and to stick to rules and laws. The best student in school failed at the university for three years in a row. Later on, in Harvard, the story repeated itself: the most brilliant Ph. D. student was systematically avoiding or failing tests and exams. His difficulty to come up with a book at the later stage of his career is also well documented.

Barish's documentary novel has tried to avoid the blatant psychoanalytic reading of de Man's failures, and finally of his success, but to no avail. The family romance is so rapacious and seductive – it generously accounts for every failure in de Man's life – that one might wonder why his theory has remained so indifferent, if not suspiciously hostile, towards psychoanalysis in all its modifications. One possible explanation is de Man's deep aversion towards those universalist readings which would adjust and integrate all elements in a non-controversial unity – the unity of the perfect excuse. And here comes de Man's ethics at its utmost: instead of embracing a psychoanalytic approach that potentially would be able to provide a consistent justification, de Man has developed a theory of failing reading that promises no excuses at all. His repetitive failures are a systematic effect of erroneous self-readings, but those mistakes at times emerge as worse than crimes. Contrary to psychoanalytic reading, there is no mercy in his explanation why we fail and why our endeavors are futile.

2.VI.

All in all, de Man's failures are the ones that Paul Johnson associates with intellectuals in his self-subverting book (1988). Evelin Barish tried to measure de Man with the same parochial yardstick, to squeeze him into the same philistine framework. At the end of the day, however, Barish's narrative luckily gives a sufficient number of facts that transcend or simply do not fit her general scheme or radical denouncement. Throughout her intended story a different de Man appears, a de Man of whose existence and essence she gives evidence while being herself unaware of this

¹⁷Paul was indifferent towards politics as a field in which people choose and support positions. His notorious collaborationism, which did not prevent him from communicating with, hiding and supporting Jews and leftists, and also from writing positively about left-oriented journals like *Messages*, testifies that politics for him was to sought anywhere else but in politics itself. As in the case with Anne, his indifference towards politics in politics itself made him an easy prey for opportunistic collaborationism, unable to always subdue the pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic overtones.

¹⁸When years later de Man wrote a short essay on Borges, he was particularly fascinated by the figure of a house-painter who became an Islamic post-Platonic heretic by preaching that mirrors and fathers are sinful because they multiply the lie of the world out there. (1964)

hidden de Man that traverses her writing. De Man found himself a foreigner in many worlds before gradually discovering his authentic homeland – literature, Humanities, academia. Evelin Barish does her best to squeeze him into the scheme of proper manners and respectable conduct but he's too big for the scheme, despite being himself as handsome, tall, well dressed and charming, as she likes him. The most inspiring aspect of Barish's biography is the manner in which her protagonist does not fit the straightjacket of the biography imposed on him.

The biographer, and unfortunately her critics, have no idea that her narrative cunningly portrays him beyond her intention. The US Humanities of the day appear to be a rather controversial institution often run by great minds but also controlled by ties and connections, an institution indifferent towards banalities like survival, an institution that would tolerate the unexciting Artinian to the students' choice de Man. Under the philistine fable of the failing fellow, an alternative plot makes its way to the surface, only to prove de Man's insight that the moments of deepest, dumbest blindness are impregnated with the most ultimate intimate insights. Being a biography, Barish's book is both invalidated by de Man's suspicions towards the genre, but as literature it also testifies that language and narrative resist control and defy the intention by telling a story going astray and beyond what was set and plotted.

Evelin Barish, who for mysterious reasons, has undertaken such an enormous and untimely project, is luckily rewarded by the genius of her victim, Paul de Man, who opened our eyes to the hidden, unintended narratives, to insights behind blindnesses. There is a tragedy in Barish's sinister self-sacrifice, but there is also a repentance that has to do with her, perhaps, only true discovery – that the American life of Paul de Man was a true repentance for his Belgian wrongdoings and that this repentance has been rewarded with one of the most exciting, typically American, self-made success stories in which a foreigner with no money and diploma, biography and bibliography managed to reach the highest precincts of US academia. Therefore, an otherwise problematic attempt like Barish's, at the end of the day, deserves tenderness and mercy not only because of the *sancta simplicitas* effect, but also because of the unintended effect of her narrative – to tell a different story in which de Man is not just a Rastignac-Ripley among the glass

menagerie of the US intellectual circles but rather a Hamlet-Faust with a guilt, debt and a mission.¹⁹

What I have tried to show is that Barish's autobiography could actually be better read as a documentary novel offering two readings, alternative to her parochial interpretation of the most traumatic events in de Man's life. De Man, my reading of the novel suggests, was a perpetual success, failure, and survivor. His theoretical school that has so much to do with failing readings, and with the strange interplay between blindness and insight, symbol and allegory, metaphor and metonymy, prosopopoeia and irony, theory and aesthetics, reference and phenomenality, form and meaning, internal and external, criticism and psychology, etc. – his theory theorized on the impossibility of having one's cake and eating it, too. De Man's life, in a naked reading of Barish's biography, actually substantiates her hope that there should be a connection between de Man's life and his thought. Yet in order to get to this point, one needs to apply de Man's theory to Barish's book; one can thus read it through the alternative approaches that it invites.

Similarly to those poorly written conference papers, her book might nonetheless provoke interesting readings having little to do with her own prescription.

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¹⁹There is an ancient paradox in Aristotle's poetics that has tormented scholars and students for centuries. In the beginning he says that the comic character is worse than the beholder whereas the tragic one is better. There are suspicions that a better translation would be a more objective one, putting emphasis on the social status, i.e. that the comic one is lower in class and position whereas the tragic one is positioned on a higher social stage. The latter translation better corresponds to the fact that principally tragedy's plot is set in the king's court among the members of the royal family. On the other hand, catharsis requires a level of identification: compassion towards the suffering character on stage is a prerequisite for the fear of oneself by a new, uplifted, subliminal cluster of fear and compassion that are meant for the fundamental problems of being incorporated by the suffering character on the stage. The latter interpretation sublates the contradiction as the character remains higher exactly because he is capable of hamartia and the identification is with someone or something that transcends ourselves. In a sense, this is the very principle of tragedy: the protagonist is both better and worse as he dares more, as he or she is extraordinary, exceptional, outstanding, peerless, nonpareil, and all these qualities of superiority are excluding. Excluding in Agamben's sense of exclusiveness that is exemplary, and as such, is included within the general scheme as its exclusion.

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