

A Calligraphy of Time: Allegory (Dis)orders in the Materialist Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man¹

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*All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible
is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have
to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.*

No, in reality: in parable you have lost.
– Franz Kafka, ‘On Parables’

*‘Itself’: it seems to survive itself, as if it had a self.
The end of analogy; or, the beginning of allegory?
This essay will show (dis)order in allegorical time.*

I. Calligraphic

This piece thematizes the material activity – accidentality – of time and its recursive flight from aesthetic categorization: how time brings order and disorder to, allegorically bifurcates, the scene of meaning-productive reading. ‘In what ways does ‘material’ inscription efface ‘artistic’ metaphors, their function and place in philosophy?’ A response to that issue, explored below, is: chrono-calligraphical.

What follows traces the reinscription of allegorical time in the perceptual experience of the hermeneutical subject. A rationale for wasting the reader’s time is to be provided in the course of pursuit. A foolish reader being rare, however, the writer must explain in advance why one would have to waste time in the first place and on what, exactly: this essay offers a framed observation on allegorical time often characterized as unpredictable or disruptive, while revisiting the critical thoughts of Paul de Man, Walter Benjamin and Immanuel Kant on the ‘suspended middle’ between the understanding and reason, between theoretical and practical knowledge, as the autonomous ‘category of aesthetics’ mediating between them; the focus is on a ‘materialist’ strand in that genealogy, ‘a materialism that Kant’s prosperity has not yet begun to face up to’.² The working hypothesis is that the aporetic constancy of the *suspended* middle between the finite understanding and infinite idea Kant seeks to bridge via aesthetic judgement, through a reflexive restitution of the subsumptive category of the aesthetic, finds further, specifically allegorical expressions in de Man’s and Benjamin’s aesthetic deliberations. The link between Benjamin and de Man

via Kant on the significance of allegory as both a historical mode of art's being and a hermeneutical act of attaching ideas to artwork,³ not to mention its political force, may be readily apparent to those familiar with literary critical scholarship on the 'post-Hegelian resistance' to the phenomenalizing or historicizing aesthetics of *Bildung*. A less trodden path to this nexus is explored in this essay that highlights, instead, the post-Kantian orientation of Benjamin's and de Man's trajectories that are attentive to the cutting – and so, enlivening – qualities of 'manifold' now-time. Such an approach, by extension, calls for a fresh reading of Kantian aesthetics, that obscure bridge between the understanding and reason constantly about to fall down. What follows is a reflection on that productive consistency – of matter: why time matters.

Material (dis)orders in allegorical time will be analyzed in the following order: inaugural, sequential and repetitive. The first phase of reading, where the key thesis is illustrated, explicates the inscriptive way in which the *gram* – as in epigram, calligram, grammatology, etc – of *allegein*, saying-otherwise, performatively inaugurates (dis)order in the Platonic-Hegelian hierarchy of form vs. matter, or idea vs. image: the material basis of literary form as 'allegory, as a graphic art' in action⁴. In the second step, the problem of the unlocatable beginning is reintroduced through this formula, 'allegory-becoming', that focuses on the parallelism, arabesque para-logicity, of narrative sequence: allegory 'as calligraphy, not a mimesis, [...] as a technical device to ensure that the emblems will be correctly identified and decoded'.⁵ This leads to a reflection, more historically inflected, on the temporality of modernity as the repetition of sublime breaks: the transformative recurrence of allegory in the aesthetics of Kant, Benjamin and de Man.

II. Inaugural (dis)order

A thing, when allegorized, starts to speak a different thing. Allegory, a sustained or extended metaphor, is a literary device that by disappearing enables an inexplicable idea to appear. Such a textual unfolding occurs on the twofold level, of an image, on the one hand, and a narrative, on the other hand, that situates the figure in the contextualized grammar of story-telling. 'In its most common usage, it refers to a narrative or an image that has at least two distinct meanings, one of which is partially concealed by the visible or literal meaning'⁶ that bears an analogical relation to the implied or 'hidden' message, the object of didactic interpretation; the origin of the hermeneutical anxiety over the true meaning of the Bible is the very invisibility of biblical truth caused by its compositional mode that is *al-legein* or *alle-goria* (*allos-agoreuein*, 'other-than-speaking-publicly').

The use-value of allegory lies therefore in its capacity for dialectical self-effacement. Allegory is expected to negate its literality, particularity or idiosyncrasy by discreetly giving a figure to the 'true' meaning or message, the assumption being that, firstly, one means one and the same thing even when saying it differently, and secondly, one delivers a publicly sharable message even when presenting it in stylized soliloquy. When, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's progress* (1678), a man named 'Christian' meets a giant called 'Despair' but plods on, regardless, across a swamp called 'the Slough of Despond', this image-passage can be read as (1) a moving thing passing from point A to point B against an obstacle in between, or (2) a man seeing an immeasurably large man at one point and then crosses an immeasurably deep pond at another or (3) a

humble, energized Christian proceeding in search of God's message; *the* meaning that allegorical interpretation traditionally aims to discover through the paralleled layers of meanings is the very last in such a series that ensures a closure of meaning, namely, the organic and harmonious synthesis of multiple meanings. On such a reading, the (1) materiality or (2) figurality of allegory is subservient to the (3) ideality of extracted symbol, one and the same voice that represses – controls, negates, overcomes, transcends – its allegorical prostheticity: immanent literality and narrative sequentiality. To wit, allegory as a literary economy of multi-tasking is supposed to catch two birds with one stone: its traditional task is to seduce and satisfy both the child and the adult; to delight and to instruct the reader or the viewer, whose 'duty'⁷ is to get 'it'. Thus, Johann Winckelmann the Prussian educator is led to suggest,

Let the artist's brush, like Aristotle's pen, be imbued with reason. He should leave our minds with more than he has shown our eyes, and he will attain this goal if he has learned to use allegory not to conceal his ideas but to clothe them. Then, whether he has a poetical object of his own choice or someone else's, his art will inspire him and kindle him in the flame which Prometheus took from the gods. The connoisseur will have food for thought and the mere admirer of art will learn to think.⁸

Thus, allegory gives an internal and visual order to, and secures a hierarchy within, the dynamics of the otherwise incomprehensible. That is the usual story; or, end of story?

In another story to be told, allegory kills both birds. Not only that, it displays, in the process of pointing to their dead inanimate fragmented bodies, the very transience of birds as their indestructible essence. A certain irreducible allegory of allegory, allegory-folding-back, turns a quest-narrative into the narrative of the rest: what remains to be seen? That is to ask what remains alive, given that all has died and will be dead; given, that is, everything lives an after-life. Narrative (dis)order and (un)certainly ensue when allegory summarily refuses to exit summarily. From the beginning, it turns back; its figural ambiguity⁹ returns to the scene of reading by disappearing from its putative disappearance. This is when the saying-differently resists cancelling out its differences from the said, from what is to be meant, on account of its mere, sheer difference; it's still there. Over time, the material otherness of difference, allegedly contingent and merely arbitrary, becomes nearly absolute, transfigured into the invisible will of the intrigue. It is as if it had a will of its own, hardly distinguishable from the attentive rigours of the dialectical epistemologist. Allegory remains 'itself', surviving itself. How, exactly?

Allegory lives on – in the melancholy of the allegorist. Benjamin understood the affective economy of allegory production, well to the point of enacting it, most notably in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel* (*The Origin of German Tragic Mourning-Play*): 'the only pleasure the melancholic *permits* himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory' (*emphasis added*).¹⁰ Originary loss is an immanent condition of the possibility of a discourse whose meaning is not only demonstratively hidden in, but *is*, the material activity of its signifiers. Allegory harbours, mobilizes and exaggerates the 'literal truth inherent in the words themselves'¹¹ as an irreducible supplement to the original meaning irreversibly lost and absent-present. In allegorical mode, such surficial images turn into

a map of reading; 'in the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune [...] The appearance (*Schein*) of totality is extinguished'.¹² Thereby, allegory unfurls like a Nietzschean 'allergen' that 'causes a certain material reaction' and thus calls for a material action,¹³ whether historical or hysterical.¹⁴ Allegory, de Man reaffirms with Benjamin, 'is material or materialistic because its dependence on the letter, on the literalism of the letter, cuts it off sharply from symbolic and aesthetic syntheses'.¹⁵ As saying or showing-otherwise, allegory presents itself as an endurance and insistence of the inscribed, the indelible images of that which remains outside the system of things, forgotten and lodged, which, about to be disabled, enables a re-reading and re-viewing. It is and thus calls for a remembrance of the neglected, defective corner of the dialectical canon and tradition of thinking. Such a non-dialectical simplicity – simplicity of a figure inseparable from the complexity of double voice within it – of allegory, like a revolving door,¹⁶ causes a 'dizziness in the reader who reaches in the emptying out of meaning a glimpse of the materiality of the letter'.¹⁷ Like photomontage, a cherished aid in Benjamin's quest for speculative philosophy, allegory forces rather than forms a vision by (dis)organizing a myriad of intersecting timelines like crossroads, like traffic lights, like Christmas lights that bewitch one who comes to sense the allegorical residence of meanings in the language of mute vision, in the 'expression of the expressionless, a kind of weeping without tears'.¹⁸

The bleak confusion of Golgatha [...] is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection.¹⁹

'The inextricability of reification and mimesis defines the aporia of artistic expression'.²⁰ The instant mortification, that is, cryptic resuscitation, of mimetologized images forces the reader-observer to face 'the *facies hypocratica* (death mask) of history as a petrified primordial landscape'.²¹ Through this aporia, of 'living expression' that immediately turns into its own tomb,²² allegory polarises time – specifically the Kantian, manifold subjective forms of intuition – into sequentialized relations and disrelational happenings. Thus the 'pressure of an unlived life'²³ transitory allegory carries through, falls, through that invisible 'gap', on the small shoulders of a smaller man the literary reader of time snowed-under;²⁴ forever belated, (un)stuck in time, man bases himself on the parabasis of meaning, subjecting himself to the accident of time, peripeteia. The infinity of the dammed leads one to sense something else in everything that resembles everything else, more surprising than a surprise, more lasting than the last, as if the condition of the possibility itself had to be further literalized, made prosthetic, more dead real: 'Literature as well as criticism – the difference between them being delusive – is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself'.²⁵ Aesthetics of allegory suffers and enjoys a dualized condition, enabling and disabling, in which it originates.

One needs then yet to decode the transcendental con-fusion in and of modern aesthetics, the ghost of Kant. Indeed perhaps 'the real' Kant who would be, for Benjamin and de Man, a cryptic materialist 'hijacked by the idealist [...], pressed into service for the sake of a cause that was not his',²⁶ has not materialized yet;²⁷ perhaps the scaffolding of Kantian system is better read as the skeleton of an auto-critical

judge, as the Enlightenment ‘allegory of resurrection’, that reactivates the folding over of consciousness in aesthetic self-reflection. Literature as a linguistic embodiment of allegory at work, especially in its epistemological moments, registers such a double narrative condition in which it originates auto-inscriptively – whether the reading subject likes it or not. Thus the irreducible materiality or literality of figurative works, read not as objects of humanistic (mimetic or inferential) pleasure but as self-contained allegories of corrective unreadability, secures ‘a way to put feelings, and not ideas, back at the centre of aesthetics’.²⁸ What needs to be rescued, saved and preserved, in other words, is the extreme indifference of artistic matter that *produces* aesthetic reflection, which grounds the Kantian ideal of the universality of aesthetic judgement, which, during the last two centuries of ‘(Post-)Romanticism’, has been mistranslated into ‘the art for art’s sake’ aestheticism; misappropriated into the Western European expansionist political agenda disguised as humanist projects; misread as the evident limits of bourgeois imagination. In this view, as Theodore Adorno suggests with a glimpse of hope, a truly artistic still poetic gaze would be in ‘the eyes of animals – especially apes – which seems objectively to mourn that they are not human’.²⁹ If this aesthetic tension, ‘the nonsubjective in the subject’,³⁰ is Kantian, a critical quest for it too is Kantian. Some montages will show that:

If anyone asks me whether I consider that the palace I see before me is beautiful, I may, perhaps reply that I do not care for things of that sort that are merely made to be gaped at. [...] I may even go a step further and inveigh with the vigour of a Rousseau against the vanity of the great who spend the sweat of the people on such superfluous things. [...] Only it is not the point now at issue. All one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking.

– Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §2, 1790

Literature involves voiding, rather than the affirmation, of aesthetic categories. [...] We now have to recognize the necessity of non-perceptual, linguistic moment in painting and music, and learn to *read* pictures than to *imagine* meaning.

– Paul de Man, ‘Resistance to Theory’, 1981

III. Sequential (Dis)order

Allegory *becomes* allegorical. Allegory is calligraphic – ‘the “realism” that appeals to us in the details of medieval art [...] is a calligraphy, not a mimesis’³¹ – yet in another sense, that its mode of becoming is sequentially auto-graphic. The failure of mimesis is and sees the beginning of mime.³² ‘The task of aesthetics’ is then ‘not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that’, in turn, ‘needs to be comprehended [...], recuperated by a theory that thinks its truth’.³³ Not by a meta-reflective mastery over reorganized matter but by, as suggested earlier, the melancholy enumeration of historical fragments joined by the allegorist. Again, as Benjamin observes, ‘the profound fascination of the sick man with the isolated and insignificant is *succeeded* by that disappointed abandonment of the exhausted emblem (*emphasis added*)’³⁴ that still persists. The question here is how to receive allegory, now a kind of double melancholy, if the previous query was where to locate it in the first place.

Miming as a calligraphic gesticulation, a sequential drawing in the air, is one step removed from symbolic articulation. For the thought-message it is to deliver is not open to abstracted cognition but itself remains embedded in its behavioural manifestation. Take Chinese characters whose ‘original’ meanings rely on allegorical literality and whose semantico-aesthetic identities rely, in turn, on the mnemonic order of stroking, not simply on its *Gestalt*. Similarly, due to allegory’s material introversion, to its breath-holding spells, any rational idea – of infinity, for instance – carried through allegorical medium turns into a mechanical performance of itself, akin to the unstoppable occurrence of a rhythm; thought takes place, and shapes, when time materializes, stops repeatedly. Allegories as processes of writing-excess, always-already-writing-with-something-else-or-else-writing-itself, are ‘always allegories of the impossibility of reading – a sentence in which the genitive “of” has itself to be “read” as a metaphor’.³⁵ Itself? Itself a metaphor *of* what? Impossibility; *of* reading. Reading *of* what? The impossible itself. Such a sequentially torrential, paralogical allegory cuts through, while differentiating itself from, docile, didactic allegoresis that vertically suspends and hierarchically secures ‘the hidden meaning’. It is ‘a form of extended’, horizontally extended ‘metaphor in which objects, persons and actions in a narrative [...] are equated with meanings that lie *outside* the narrative itself’,³⁶ horizontally outside; so ‘now I know how to go on!’?³⁷

Note the double-force of allegory-becoming:

Allegory consists of an infinite network of meanings and correlations in which everything can *become*₁ a representation of *everything else*, but all within the limits of language and expression. To that extent it is possible to speak of allegorical immanence. That which is expressed by an allegorical sign is in the first instance something which has its own meaningful context, but by *becoming*₂ allegorical this something loses its own meaning and *becomes*₃ a vehicle for *something else*. Indeed the allegory arises, as it were, from the gap which at this point opens between the form and its meaning. The two are no longer indissolubly welded together; the meaning is no longer restricted to that particular form, nor the form any longer to that particular meaningful content. What appears in the allegory, in short, is the infinity of meaning which attaches to *every representation*. (*emphases* and subscripts ₁₋₃ added)³⁸

Allegory becomes allegorical in twofold ways, operating simultaneously on two registers: if allegory-becoming₁, a figurative sign representing an idea or ideas, unfolds in the world of aesthetic consumerism where the teleologically self-circulatory ‘network of meanings and correlations’ is employed as a tropological device for associative cross-referencing, allegory-becoming_{2/3}, parasitic on that vein, draws out its material and formal resources from the host text – through the inscription of its viral temporality on the work pretending or intending to be a unified organic whole. Allegory, in the second phase of its ‘becoming itself’, brings out in the allegorized the multi-pored ‘infinity of meaning which attaches to *every* representation’ including its self-representation; the idea of infinitized ‘something else’, such as God or freedom, cannot simply be secured or elevated as such. Infinity here is then germinal, rather than logical or even sentimental, and autogenerative rather than teleologically guided.

Insofar as allegorized infinity escapes the perspectival projection of historical time, ‘of something becoming something else it is destined to be’, the accidentality of allegory or its immanent particularity remains infinitely powerful, explosive even. If a retroactively unified ‘historical’ timeline enables the first stage of aesthetic unification of being and knowledge, as already anticipated by Winckelmann’s retro-mimetic revival of the aesthetic formalism of Greek antiquity, which finds a more politicized and institutionalized expression in the Goethean-Schillerian ideology of aesthetic education of man, the second stage, isolatable merely logically, inserts an uncontrollable deconstructive moment into that very schema of anthropocentric time, risking thereby looking like a regression, allegory immersion into the figure of zero.

Each time in a scene of reading un-doing itself, what attracts as well as distracts the reader is the temporal obscurity and complexity of zero-point understanding. What secures as well as disturbs an act of reading is the very presence of figural language that installs itself, its ‘gram’, on a nearly nonhuman scale and at a nearly inhuman rate like cinematic cuts and flashes, too naturally and too fast. Perhaps Heideggerian postmodern masses are all suckers in a state of *Zerstreuung* (distraction, diffusion), looking in a wrong direction, when an aesthetic object produces its aura, its unapproachability, its ceremonial character that mimes its historicized fantasy.³⁹ Such figurative distraction of images invites a close-up: look at how the double-yoked attribute of hermeneutic distance, a ‘necessary yet impossible’ reading, is now transferred to the resistance of the referent, resistance now locatable as the nonphenomenal properties of the letter or the intertextual event *itself*, not as the subjective ‘aporia’ of the reader lodged within and yet set apart from the scene of reading.

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, nor its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.⁴⁰ [...] Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not.⁴¹

‘Art’s autonomy remains irrevocable’,⁴² one would conclude. Performative allegory, captured calligraphically as an act of reading ‘writing itself out sequentially’, demonstrates such an instantaneous opacity and autonomous self-referentiality of language in action. ‘For de Man, as for Benjamin,’ in other words, ‘truth is the death of intention; a text is as much a machine as a modality of understanding’.⁴³

Allegory is auto-productive, then: productive of its own matter. In this line of story, of ‘perhaps otherwise’, arising from the context of post-Kantian materialism, the Kantian imagi-nation (*Einbildungskraft*) that the Enlightenment tradition uses as the hermeneutic bridge for the aesthetic figuration of the world, runs up against its own limits – repeatedly, like a sinking ship drained of water⁴⁴ forever suspended between the bubble and the abyss. In this immediate time desiccated into a moment are arrested, in a flash, material secrets of signification, a Benjaminian ‘dialectical image brought to a standstill’. Time, when turned into a series of accidents, becomes materially singular. That given, the formal manifoldness of intuited time,

transcendentally aestheticized by Kant's repeated critiques, would be more cartographic than architectonic. The motivation behind Benjamin's self-imposed task of 'deciphering' an art object can be understood from that viewpoint, that is, mechanical – anachronistic, speculative, materialist – Kantianism, which effects another Copernican turn within Kantian 'formalism' said to privilege the epistemic authority of the hermeneutical and ultimately 'judgemental' subject who organizes things in and around himself. To analyze the materiality of art's disinterestedness as opposed to the ideality of an art object is to rescue and safeguard a vital concern of its own time refracted through the prism of the present. What needs deciphering is the unique time inscribed in an object, like manifold time caught in a mobile fragment that, *as if* in possession of an autonomous will, enacts and witnesses its own singularized tendencies and explosive potentialities, 'itself' divested of citational – allegorical – distance. Thus the power of cinematic images thrust into one's face, for instance, mentioned earlier as an allegory of movement repeating the intractable ontology of its own happening, lies in its graphic capacity not only to hamper a subject's centralized self-constitution but to posit itself as the new centre within the Kantian scheme of phenomenal representation of the noumenal. When de Man, similarly, alerts the reader to the distracting attractiveness of figure-making such as prosopopeia, his critical target is not the intention of the producer, which does not exist or is an intratextual function, but the mechanism of such text-production. Again, with such post-critical turns taking place, resistance turns into the property not of the reading subject or object but the referent itself materially ontologized and liberated: allegory-becoming shows a difference in and of and through repetition.

IV. Repetitive (Dis)order

This idea of excessive material reflexion 'itself', as an unobjectifiable allegory of 'a thing-in-itself', remains Kantian; 'which idea it is, is indeterminate'.⁴⁵ At stake here is that which distances its *self* from the cognitive self, as if autonomously or automatically, remaining and exhibiting itself as 'an indeterminate concept of reason'.⁴⁶ Its sublimity, 'partially analysable',⁴⁷ is both small and large, immeasurably; it departs from itself by becoming at once smaller and larger than itself. It, framed as such, as the cause of a reflex of the ideas of reason, is that which instantiates the sublime that 'moves' the *Gemüt* (*animus*, mind, soul, mental state).⁴⁸ Although unfixable, it is experienced as sublime. Kantian attention to the sublime and its affective mechanism sharpens the traditional gap, difference, between being and word, more concretely a being and a word that seeks to access being via 'correspondence', 'rigid designation', 'ontological inhabitation', etc. Allegory, discussed so far, points to that difference repeatedly. Allegory, one could say further, is an archaic name for the persistent sublime whose more contemporary name would be the Avant-garde.⁴⁹ In all three phases, aesthetically programmed is the temporal leadership or even tyranny of the insurmountable now-point only accessible through a surrealist 'shock', a sense of the material real disruptively inserted into any hermeneutic system of dialecticized complacency, which forces one to scrutinise the manifoldness of time, especially modernity as the repetition of differentiation itself.

Benjamin-de Man's allegory, recycled from pre-modern forms of art, revives the Kantian sublime with language, specifically the fugitivity of analogical language that is

materially transferential. Common to all three thinkers is hyperrational attention to the imagination's failure to reciprocate the generic demand of reason for totality, to encompass the unity of a given object. Mathematically agitated by and dynamically attuned to the recurrence of allegorical thought mirroring the resurgence of allegorical matter, namely, the other (of) reason watching over reason, these thinkers turn their sense of resignation into a blind insight into the expressive potency of matter's reflexion. Material reflexivity is still an aesthetic event, not a discursive axiom, for it remains an analogical conception, not logical – the relay-relation being held between the fold of the mind and that of matter. What happens in Benjamin and de Man in turn is just that: a post-Kantian textualization of the experience of the supersensible sublime that Kant resists mixing with objective knowledge; the 'latent'⁵⁰ metaphoricity of Kant's theoretical resuscitation of sublime sentiment, which centres on the strictly supplementary 'transferentiality'⁵¹ of analogical reason, finds its diachronic roots in not only allegorical expressions of High Medieval arts⁵² but by extension archaic rituals in immortalized time. Nonhuman time.

How? As Benjamin saw, something allegorical secures this image *itself*: transference. Hauntingly, it points to a certain category, a categorical truth about the cryptotautological materiality of the letter. Benjamin's materialist aesthetics, instantiated by *Trauerspiel* (mourning-play) written against the symbolist tradition that valorizes tragedy and by implication the retrospectively unified tragic time of heroic deaths, witnesses the 'allegorical schemata, symbolic mirror-image of a different game' inscribed within any given text.⁵³ It detects and enacts a play 'ennobled by the distance which everywhere separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and signified', a hyperbolic distance, of the un-dead or already dead, that (dis)orders repeatedly its own rational distance. The parallel discourse is more than sorry effects of the formalized reflex of consciousness:

The morning play is mathematically comparable to one branch of a hyperbola whose other branch lies in infinity. The law governing a higher life prevails in the restricted space of an earthly existence, and all play, until death puts an end to the game, so as to repeat the same game, albeit on a grander scale, in another world. It is this repetition on which the law of the mourning play is founded.⁵⁴

At stake is the ana-logical language of *al-legein* as an auto-deconstructive repetition itself. We, along with (the early)⁵⁵ Benjamin and (the later)⁵⁶ de Man, 'are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter'.⁵⁷ 'Here we should recall the material community of things in their communication',⁵⁸ perceptual access to which cannot be phenomenal but material. Natural language for Benjamin – not yet human or humanized – is like 'the password of a sentry box' whose meaning is 'the sentry's language itself' passed down from God and residually preserved in man.⁵⁹ It is prefigural: it acts as/like an affective or inscriptive condition of the possibility of figuration. The difference between Benjamin and de Man however, it must also be said, is in the source of allegory secretion of language: for Benjamin, it is 'the residue of the creative word of God, preserved in man', 'judgement suspended over man',⁶⁰ whereas for de Man, for whom the prefigurality of allegory has something

to do with the performatively tropological nature of degree-zero rationality and not with the absent-present God, it is nothing more and less than a ‘permanent hypothesis’,⁶¹ parabasis.

De Man’s thesis on the originary metaphoricity of language, which locates textualized sensations such as reflex, as opposed to ideas or idealized images, at the heart of language formation, illustrates his threefold theoretical position that is atheist-materialist-formalist. Take his discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘giants’, the name a primitive man (*un homme sauvage*) attaches to other men in order to secure, in the absence of a proper name, the vertiginous impression of overwhelming largeness itself.⁶² It remains distanced from the reflexive cognitive self that thereby ‘shrinks’,⁶³ distractedly and endlessly:

The metaphor ‘giant’, used to connote man, has indeed a proper meaning (fear), but this meaning is not really proper: it refers to a condition of permanent suspense between a literal world in which appearance and nature coincide and a figural world in which this correspondence is no longer *a priori* posited. Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning. This belief is legitimate only within the limits of a given text: the metaphor that connotes Achilles’ courage by calling him a lion is correct within the textual tradition of the *Iliad* because it refers to a character in a fiction whose function it is to live up to the referential implication of the metaphor. As soon as one leaves the text it becomes aberrant – if, for example, one calls one’s son Achilles in the hope that this will make him into a hero.⁶⁴

The very idea of subjectivity, ‘the interiority of the self’ as in ‘know thyself’, is then an *intratextual* effect of the figure of the outside re-staged as such, such as ‘giant’. Fear, as a contrapuntal ‘condition of permanent suspense between a literal world and a figural world’, does not have reality independent of a codifying system which, within it, designates the causal location of fear as external, as objective. Fear (cf. phobia) as a condition remains subjective to the extent that it signifies, and matters only as, the subject’s inability to overcome its projected object. Fear activates a cognitive and pragmatic system that seeks to produce and control it; even to repress and evade it by nominal means.⁶⁵ The originary bloodiness of Christological metaphors such as ‘the sacrifice of the Lamb’, ‘bearing the Cross’ and the ‘sword of the Spirit’ – the faith in which must come ‘through hearing’, as St. Paul suggests, i.e., via a systematic, synthetic internalization of tropes dangerously indistinguishable from brainwashing – exemplifies the theo-political mobilization, re-creation and reinforcement of metaphors as linguistic forces that not only affect but effect ‘the real’. When language behaves distractedly, that is called meta-phor, and language is originally distracting: in a word one says is a world built and unbuilt. For de Man, therefore, as with Benjamin, metaphors are performative and secretly indexical rather than referential or ornamentally evocative. Thus in this view, ideas of freedom and perfectibility, the Kantian ‘metaphors’ of dynamically sublime infinity, are ‘relay-stations’⁶⁶ or ‘temporary way station’⁶⁷ enabling the Rousseauesque fusion between the aesthetical and the political. Further back, that is also, as de Man notes, a Cartesian-Pascalian

self-inscription of modern time: the epistemic zero-point acting disruptively, in the auto-deconstructive sequence, as the trope of self-foundation.⁶⁸

In short, de Man's point is: the figural *turns* literal. Quite literally then, the fear of the literal, whether Biblical or animal, is (inscribed in and aroused by) the beginning of the word. It is as if the meaning of a word wishes to be literal, for it knows it cannot be but does not give up becoming so. The encased giant, a catachrestically captured infinity, harbours such traits – that is, temporality – of language, as material 'connotation' or 'referential implication' carried in and through the life and death of metaphors. This point on the sublime origin of language, noted a long time ago by Longinus and rearticulated in contemporary post-Kantian aesthetics such as Jean-François Lyotard on the logic of the Avant Garde as 'the presentation of the unrepresentable' and Jacques Derrida on the surplus 'paregonality' of artwork, is an index to this broader (a)historical thesis: in the beginning is a cut. This causes in the human hermeneutical subject a petrified absorption of attention into the excessive or deficient. The first case in point, to stay with the Christian allegory, would be Adam's distraction to his own body, its sudden smallness, in the face of the question that summarily demands objective visibility, 'where are you'? Indeed, in the beginning must be the word: an experience of the originary distance from, and relation to, the origin that seems apart from the phenomenal world which, nevertheless, produces the awesome 'noumenal' world from within.

Awe is a bubble of sensation transmuted into sentiment, a matter of Kantian aesthetics. To what extent is nature a wonder? To the extent it becomes denaturalized, a distant thing. Henceforth, art naturalizes nature. Renaturalized through the (mis)use of metaphorical language at a reflexed, defamiliarized time is a sense of wonder, of divine forces in nature, a dynamically codified sentiment carried in and through the Babelic history of mortal transience. No wonder that, a long time ago, art was supposed merely to imitate nature; no wonder, *aesthesis* theorized by the Enlightenment project thematizing that sense of distance⁶⁹ 'came to view art and nature in strict analogy';⁷⁰ no wonder then, after Kant, one would even claim '*beauty plus pity* – that is the closest we can get to a definition of art'.⁷¹ A *strict* analogy, a stricter modern Kantian reflection, poignantly demonstrates that there *is* a distance, an affective experience of fundamental inequality, between nature and art, nature and 'natural language', being and the word. Held together in parallel by analogical (dis)relation, those polarized terms communicate their mutual resistances in the language of consistent muteness, *reine Sprache* (pure language). In this regard, referential language – turning out, in this strange twist of tropological logic, less clear, honest and straightforward than rhetorical language – is irreversibly wedded to the postlapsarian illusion of and hope for correspondence. One step removed from the origin, referential language attempts to find the seamless equation between language and being, but what it ends up discovering is the figural equivalence of that very difference easily confused with and thus reduced to the original, priceless value of 'proper' meaning; hence, the second-order recuperation of meaning through mimetic projection that, as de Man defines, is an intratextually produced and manipulated ideological delusion. Further back then, what has already occurred in the world of 'natural' human language, as Benjamin infers, is a melancholic 'over naming': 'the translation of

language of things into that of man', thing-language transcribed into the irreducible 'image of the sign', of which human language is a prosaic mimesis.⁷²

Benjamin and de Man are linked by their inability or rather refusal to sublimate Kant: let there be such a conclusion. The moral here is, the oceanic feeling of the sublime, 'a trembling between nature and freedom',⁷³ the origin of and access to which could only be 'literally' meta-phorical, is untranslatable: only transferable, transcodable or transmutable. Specifically, what the two critics share and mobilize is the Kantian time of revolutionary modernity. A riveting force of their critique of the formative ruse of aesthetic ideology lies in their critical intimation of the cutting-edge-ness of time which remains strangely fluid for being also formally manifold – put allegorically, precisely in light of their attempts at re-Kantianizing Kant who could not be a Kantian in the first place, unless literally dead.⁷⁴ Demonstrated above is the deconstructive mode of that re-inscription or re-staging of a certain figure of Kant that is invisible yet operative, the noumenal Kant, as it were. True, 'overcoming or transcending' of that suspension and suspicion has been and still is the overriding task of modernity. In that sense, perhaps modernity has not begun, yet, in another sense, it seems already over. The beginnings of allegory this piece has been tracing and recording, intimate the staccato of the modern as its productive material basis. True again, the analogical attribution of the autonomous self, namely, the figure of freedom, to 'the noumenal', 'things in themselves', reflects and could actually even reinforce the historical or mechanical alienation (*Entäusserung*) of the modern mind from perceptual objects. The Hegelian solution to the problem of being's reflexive withdrawal would be the dialectical unification of the 'movement' of thinking and that of being, and the Heideggerian response, the homogenizing localization of the 'unconcealed truth' (*aletheia*) of a thinking being and the being of thinking. That said, the critical (dis)relation between the finite and the infinite, which Kantian threefold critiques institute, reflexively and repeatedly, still remains an antidote to the ideological conflation of the two; Benjamin and de Man, too, stand lingeringly somewhere between the two, unfreely free.

Notes

¹ Dedicated to the driven lovers of St. Agnes.

² Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.89.

³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.382.

⁵ De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.53.

⁶ Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literature and Cultural Criticism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp.8–9.

⁷ Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), more famously, equates the following three: the aesthetic, pleasure and duty. In the 'aesthetic state' he projected, where pleasure is assigned a political function, 'the beautiful soul' is not constrained by

any Kantian 'ought' (p.176), for his duty is his delight. Following yet misreading Kantian (critique of the power of) judgment, Schiller uses the 'freedom and disinterestedness' of taste ideologically or reconditions it sociologically, as a means to further the aesthetic ideal of harmonious humanity, the lost historical model of which is for him Greek antiquity.

⁸ Johann Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Limitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (Menston: Scolar Press), p.69; pp.61–9.

⁹ '[...] for example, the parables of Jesus in the Gospels, this is a way of revealing it and not revealing it. If you have the key to the allegory, then the esoteric wisdom has been expressed (otherwise), but then you would not have needed to have it said otherwise. If you do not have the key, then the allegory remains opaque. You are likely to take it

literally, to think it means just what it says. If you understand it you do not need it. If you do not understand it you will never do so from anything on the surface. A paradox of unreadability is therefore built into the concept of allegory from the beginning': J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.348.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1977), pp.183–185: 'If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. [...] In this age drunk with acts of cruelty both lived and imagined [...], the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.'

¹¹ Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (Cornell University: Ithaca, 1979), p.33.

¹² Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.176.

¹³ J. Hillis Miller 'Paul de Man as Allergen', in Tom Cohen et al. [eds.], *Material Events: Paul de Man and The Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.184.

¹⁴ 'The scandalous, counterintuitive things de Man says come into language through the encounter, at the limits of the most exigent theoretical rigour and obedient close reading, of the unintelligible. De Man takes the rational to the edge of irrationality, or identifies the unintelligible as that which has always already infected the pursuit of rational knowledge. [...] Wherever de Man starts, whatever texts he reads, whatever vocabulary he tends to use leads ultimately beyond itself to its limits at the border of a dark unintelligibility'. J. Hillis Miller, 'Paul de Man as Allergen' in *Material Events*, p.200.

¹⁵ Paul de Man 'Introduction' in Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p.xxxiii; p.xxv.

¹⁶ 'the turning motion of tropes: [...] the specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure. The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self'. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp.70–71.

¹⁷ Miller, 'Paul de Man as Allergen', p.196.

¹⁸ Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p.117.

¹⁹ recited from Jan Rosiek, 'Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory in Benjamin and de Man' in *Orbis Litterarum* 48 (1993), p.150.

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.117.

²¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.166.

²² Worth noting is its thematic link to early Derrida's materialist deconstruction of Hegelian-Husserlian phenomenology in *Margins of Philosophy* and *Speech and Phenomena*.

²³ Attributed to Theodore Adorno on Benjamin: Rebecca Combay, Benjamin in Simon Critchley and William Schroeder (eds.), *A Companion to Continental Philosophy* (London: Blackwell, 1998), p.350.

²⁴ 'To him (the child), the hero's adventures can still be read in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes. His breath is part of the air of the events narrated, and all the participants breathe it. [...] He is unspeakably touched by the deeds, the words that are exchanged; and, when he gets up, he is covered over and over by the snow of his reading'. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.463.

²⁵ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p.19.

²⁶ Lindsay Waters, 'On Paul de Man's Effort to Re-Anchor a True Aesthetics in Our Feelings', *Boundary 2*, 26.2 (1999), pp.148.

²⁷ De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.89.

²⁸ Waters, 'On Paul de Man's Effort to Re-Anchor a True Aesthetics in Our Feelings', p.149.

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.113

³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.113

³¹ 'Attempts to define allegory keep reencountering a set of predictable problems, of which the summary can serve as a preliminary characterization of the mode. Allegory is sequential and narrative, yet the topic of its narration is not necessarily temporal at all, thus raising the question of the referential status of a text whose semantic function, though strong in evidence, is not primarily determined by mimetic moments; more than ordinary modes of fiction, allegory is at the furthest possible remove from historiography'. De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.53.

³² 'We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing [...]. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does allude, but alludes to nothing [...]. Mallarmé thus preserves the differential structure of mimicry or *mimesis*, but without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation, which implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated'. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (London: Athlone, 1981), p.206.

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.118.

³⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.185.

³⁵ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p.205.

- ³⁶ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Athlone, 1980), p.296.
- ³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1968), p.84.
- ³⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), p.26.
- ³⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.4, pp.313–355.
- ⁴⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.1.
- ⁴¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.3.
- ⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.1.
- ⁴³ Geoffrey Hartman ‘Looking back on Paul de Man’, Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich [eds.], *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.9.
- ⁴⁴ Cinema, for instance, the new inhuman apparatus, Benjamin observes, ‘sucks the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship’: ‘A Short History of Photography’, *Screen* (1972), p.20.
- ⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.256.
- ⁴⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.244.
- ⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant ‘Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality’ in David Walford (ed.), *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.252; 280.
- ⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (LA: University of California Press, 1973), pp.47; p.209.
- ⁴⁹ Kenneth Holmqvist and Jaroslaw Pluciennik, ‘A short guide to the theory of the sublime’, *Style* 36: 4 (2002).
- ⁵⁰ Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding* (Cambridge, Mass: the MIT Press, 2000), p.68; pp.94–97.
- ⁵¹ Kant describes the workings of symbol as ‘a transfer of our reflection on an object of intuition to an entirely different concept’. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp.352–353 cited in Pillow, *Sublime Understanding*, pp.94–5).
- ⁵² N.A. Halmi, ‘From Hierarchy to Opposition: Allegory and the Sublime’, *Comparative Literature*. 44: 4 (1992), pp.337–360.
- ⁵³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, pp.55–8.
- ⁵⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.57.
- ⁵⁵ ‘On Language as Such and On the Language of Man’, ‘The Task of Translator’ and *Trauerspiel*.
- ⁵⁶ *Allegories of Reading, Resistance to Theory and Aesthetic Ideology*.
- ⁵⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.73.
- ⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.71.
- ⁵⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.74.
- ⁶⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.74.
- ⁶¹ De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, vol.31, p.32 fn29; p.179.
- ⁶² De Man *Allegories of Reading*, pp.149–151; p.177.
- ⁶³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford Worlds Classics, 1990), p.63.
- ⁶⁴ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p.151.
- ⁶⁵ The positional, if not dispositional, fearlessness of Socrates’ philosophical attitude towards objectless ‘death’ exemplified the philosophical repression or avoidance of the metaphoricized other.
- ⁶⁶ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p.151.
- ⁶⁷ Waters, ‘On Paul de Man’s Effort to Re-Anchor a True Aesthetics in Our Feelings’, p.150.
- ⁶⁸ De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, pp.51–69.
- ⁶⁹ ‘A sense of aesthetic distance is self-produced in the subject, i.e., through the subjective presentation or processing of it: ‘When in aesthetic judgment, we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime. If we are to judge nature as sublime dynamically, we must present it as arousing fear.’ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.119.
- ⁷⁰ Alexander Gelley, ‘Context of the Aesthetic in Walter Benjamin’, *MLN* 114 (1999), p.933.
- ⁷¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p.251.
- ⁷² Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, pp.69–71.
- ⁷³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.113; p.118; p.331.
- ⁷⁴ Jesus was not a Christian, Mohammed not a Muslim, Socrates not a philosopher (before Plato wrote him down as one), etc.

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