

Deconstruction and the Interpretation of Poetry
A Lecture on Paul de Man's Essay
"Hypogram and Inscription"*

Today we are dealing with a difficult subject – literary theory – at least that was what the majority of students thought when I was a student at Stuttgart University myself. Indeed, as young freshmen making sense out of methodological textbooks or theoretical essays was our most difficult reading task. And even if we somehow understood the text we were reading, we still had to guess why it should be relevant. Without teachers, we would have been at a total loss concerning the still more

บทคัดย่อ

Deconstruction เป็นแนววิจารณ์วรรณกรรมที่ก่อให้เกิดการถกเถียงกันมากมายในวงวรรณคดีศึกษาของตะวันตก ผู้ที่ต่อต้านมักจะกล่าวหาว่าวิธีการดังกล่าวเป็นกายกรรมในทางทฤษฎี (theoretical acrobatics) ที่ไร้ประโยชน์ในทางปฏิบัติ ผู้บรรยายจะชี้ให้เห็นว่า Deconstruction เป็นประโยชน์ต่อการอ่านและการตีความกวีนิพนธ์และต่อการเรียนการสอนวรรณคดีอย่างไร

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*นำเสนอ ณ ห้องประชุมคณะอักษรศาสตร์ วันที่ 9 กุมภาพันธ์ 2541, เวลา 10.30-12.00 น.

**อดีตอาจารย์ชาวต่างประเทศ ภาควิชาภาษาเยอรมัน คณะอักษรศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร ปัจจุบันทำวิจัยอยู่ ณ ประเทศเยอรมนี

puzzling question which of the various and contradicting theories of literature was to be trusted. If we liked our teachers, we would believe them. If we didn't like them, we would secretly try to prove them wrong. But of course the strategy didn't work out. Sympathetic teachers still would hold different and contradicting opinions concerning literary theory. So finally, we had to find it out all our own.

Just then, most of us took their final exams and abandoned study. But those who remained could experience a most complete change of perspective. Now literature itself turned out to be more and more difficult, whereas literary theory was easy. This is most clearly experienced when reading books in foreign languages. For me it is easier to read in French, let us say, an essay by Barthes than a novel by Balzac. Why so? Because literature is entitled to speak about everything under the sun (which is always more than you know yourself), whereas literary theory is bound to be on literature, or rather, on one or the other idea of literature (and there are not so many of them). Therefore, we can start our voyage into the realms of literary theory with the assuring conviction that theory is not so very difficult after all. This said, we won't lack the courage to tackle one of Paul de Man's major essays.

De Man, who died in 1985, has been a member of the so-called "Yale School", sometimes even called the "Yale Mafia", who made literary theory experience an astonishing yet short-lived triumph in American literature departments during the early eighties. In Europe reception has been somewhat belated, yet it might turn out to wield a more long-lasting effect, as intellectuals are cautious and therefore very slow in adopting anything new, wherever it may come

from. And indeed where does it come from? One origin is Yale, but there is another one in Paris. In Paris, the "Tel Quel" strand of poststructuralist thinking helped develop the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

I won't say much about Derrida. First of all because I haven't read him thoroughly, and secondly because after all he is a philosopher and no literary theorist. Suffice it to say that his works point out some recurrent, fundamental errors or shortcomings in western philosophy. The interesting point however is that these errors are seen to be unavoidable. Every new philosophical school trying to overcome the obstacles left by their predecessors will have to repeat the same errors sooner or later. So in Derrida's view the western tradition seems to be trapped in a dead end. And as there is no easy way out, we have to read through all the difficult stuff Derrida and his disciples are preparing - for a cure.

Although Derrida is a French philosopher, he sometimes is also being called a member of the Yale School, as he has been teaching there, too. Other members are J.Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, but none of them has argued the case for deconstruction in literary theory as powerfully as Paul de Man.

The general idea here is that language is a trickster which will always persuade us to find truths where there are none, while on the other hand it will always provide an alternative (and incompatible) reading so that we can never reasonably decide which version of the meaning of a text is the right one. From a pragmatic point of view this may seem a somewhat fanciful idea. But the history of literary theory provides strong evidence that the idea holds true - at least within the Western tradition.

This tradition has developed two major ways of looking at texts. One is Hermeneutics, the other is Formalism (although both terms nowadays are used to label old-fashioned ways of doing things, the newer schools are just up-dated versions of the old ideas). One of the major achievements in western literary studies during the twentieth century has been the methodological improvement of work on literary techniques or “devices” brought about by the so-called “formalists”. But despite all technical skill there has never been reached a point where rigid formalist analysis of a text would readily confirm hermeneutics’ insights about the meaning of that same text. Formalist analysis would start at the very bottom, by looking at the basic elements of a text and then work its way bottom up, while hermeneutics would start with a general impression and would work its way top down in an effort to validate the initial idea by showing that even the tiniest detail will eventually confirm the general meaning. Therefore, in interpretation, the two methods should meet half-way in the middle, but they do not. So the formalists said: “well, hermeneutics is methodologically unsound. We should try and start analysing meaning ourselves.” And accordingly formalism, now being called structuralism or semiotics, developed methodology for top-down analysis. Now they tried again, but still the bottom-up and the top-down interpretations would not meet.

The realm of devices and the realm of meaning seemed to be strangely separated, although it can easily be demonstrated that they are closely interrelated. In order to try solve the puzzle, Paul de Man turned his attention to tropes – like metaphor, synekdoche, metonymy etc. Tropes are rhetoric figures which can clearly be seen to be formal devices on the one side, while on the other side they are

undeniably affecting meaning by switching language from 'literal' to figural. By working in that field de Man came to believe first, that it is the power of tropes which sometimes transforms those formal devices into seemingly trustworthy kernels of meaning, and second, that figural language or the use of the power of tropes can not be restricted to literature. Therefore, the problems discussed in the case of literature do apply to language in general. But the more interesting thing may be that in de Man the idea of the power of words – which may be a spiritual force – enters formalism at the front door.

The subject of de Man's paper on "Hypogram and Inscription" is the theoretical writings of Michael Riffaterre. As Riffaterre also is an important formalist, he has experienced the same problems of interpretation de Man has been dealing with. And in his well-known "Semiotics of Poetry" he proposes another solution to the problem that haunted de Man, namely to unite formalism and hermeneutics in a way that is methodologically and theoretically sound. So what does Riffaterre propose? He claims that the whole of a poem is generated, made possible, by one single and simple idea or expression. This core of meaning is made into a text by the means of formal devices like repetition, variation, metaphor, metonymy, allegory and so on. The point is that in Riffaterre's view the core of meaning which organizes the poem, is always conventional and not interesting of its own. All the hermeneutical interesting points in the poem can be seen to stem directly from the working of formal devices hiding and redressing a conventional cliché.

In order to demonstrate that his theory holds true, Riffaterre has to interpret poems in such a way that it can be seen what is the semantic core – or matrix, as he calls it – and how all the different

images in the poem are linked to it. De Man, on the other hand, will try to show that Riffaterre's quite convincing interpretations cannot offer a solution to the problem. He will do that by pointing to some aspects of the text which Riffaterre not only has not mentioned, but, as de Man will argue, which Riffaterre is not able to deal with within his theory. So now we can see what is at stake when de Man comments upon a poem of Victor Hugo which has also been interpreted by Riffaterre.

Written on the pane of a flemish window
I love the carillon of your ancient towns
O old land, keeper of your domestic customs
O noble Flanders, where the benumbed North warms itself
In the sun of Castille and mates with the South!
The carillon is the unexpected and mad hour
That the eye thinks it sees, dressed as a Spanish dancer,
Appearing suddenly through the keen, bright hole
Made by a door of air as it opens.
She comes, shaking over the lethargic rooftops
Her silver apron, full of magical notes,
Pitilessly waking the wearisome sleepers,
Taking little jumps, like a merry bird,
Quivering like a spear trembling in its target;
By a fragile stairway of invisible crystal,
Alarmed and dancing, she descends from the heavens;
And as she goes and comes and climbs up and down again,
The mind, that watchman made of ears and eyes,

Hears her resonant foot wandering from step to step!¹

As Riffaterre explains, the poem refers to Hugo's memories of a tour through Flanders, during which he enjoyed a carillon, a little piece of music preluding the chiming of the hour. These musical impressions are now translated into a vision of the personified Hour dancing to the tune. Riffaterre calls it a descriptive poem. His main aim then is to show that poetic description does not feed on outward appearances, but on purely verbal relationships within descriptive language. The representation of the clock as a Spanish dancer as well as a bird, of the chimed tune as, an ascending and descending staircase, as well as an overflowing apron, and several other apparently incompatible details, are shown to be generated by a common matrix, the "carillon flamande". Though mutually incompatible, they are shown to be linked to the matrix by way of cliché. So the chimed tune of the clock is seen to be at the centre of the poem and the text is proceeding by exploring and putting together some of the ideas that conventionally surround it.

De Man says Riffaterre is totally right here, but there is more to the poem. Actually, it does not start with a description, but with an apostrophe, which is the figur of address. Someone – "I" – is speaking to the land of Flanders, today known to be part of Belgium. As Hugo has been traveling there it might appear that here the poet as traveller is speaking to the country he visits. But de Man has another, more brilliant solution in store for us. He says that by the end of the poem it will have become clear that it is not the traveller speaking to the country, but the mind, mentioned in line 17, speaking to

¹For the [rhymed] French original see appendix to this paper.

time. That is, why apostrophe, the figur of address, in this case is a prosopopeia. Prosopopeia literally means the making of a face or a mask and it is used to name the device of having something speak that normally can not.² Whereas there is nothing odd when you have a traveller speaking, the mind itself can not speak. So if the mind does speak here, it is prosopopeia. But why should "I" be the mind, and "noble Flanders" be time? That's not easy to grasp, but let's try!

Let us see how Flanders becomes Time, first. In order to get there we have to recognize that Flanders and the carillon are closely linked. Though carillons are to be found elsewhere, too, they are typical only for Flanders, just like the smile is typical for Thailand, or like the Fachwerkhäuser are typical for Germany. So if you read the first two lines of the poem about the carillon, ancient towns, and domestic customs you should already be able to guess what the third line confirms, namely that Flanders is the addressee. Therefore there is a very close connection between Flanders and the carillon, and rhetorics allows for a name for it. We may call it a synekdoche, or pars pro toto. "I love the carillon, noble Flanders" then is like saying: "I love your face, o mistress mine". So if the carillon is said to be the Hour, that's in line 5, it is only logical that Flanders should be time.

Now what about identifying "I" as "mind". I think that we can clearly distinguish two voices in the poem. One is actually speak-

²Prosopopeia therefore is closely related to personification, but is seen to be the more general term. Although prosopopeia is very often accompanied by personification, this need not always be the case. For example if in a poem an ancient town is speaking, let us say, about its past glory, while it does not cease to be a town, it should be seen as a prosopopeia, while it would not be correct to call it personification because there are too much obvious differences between persons and towns.

ing. This voice says "I" and utters the apostrophe at the beginning of the poem. The other voice is that of an observer. It pins down a description. Actually it seems more to be writing than voice because the sentence uttered – it is the first one in the poem – is so very long. It starts in line 8 and covers more than half of the poem. The situation in this poem is somehow like in a novel when the hero speaks to somebody about something and then, afterwards, the author explains it to the reader. There is a change of perspective, so that the "I" that is the subject of speech in the first sentence can indeed become an object of description in the last one.

So de Man rightfully concludes that the matrix should not be "The flemish carillon", as Riffaterre has said, but "I love the carillon". And as this expression is seen to signify "mind loves time", it is the figure of prosopopeia that brings the poem into existence. When we agree to de Man's interpretation so far, it follows that Riffaterre's theory on poetry is not successful because he is not able to deal with rhetoric figures like prosopopeia. But Riffaterre himself responded to the charges by de Man in a later essay appropriately called "Prosopopeia". In that essay he shows in a quite convincing way that he really is fit to deal with prosopopeia within his theory. For example, he tells us about the functions of prosopopeia in the novel, which are clearly different from its functions in poetry. He admits that he has given just too little importance to the figure in his first essay, but contends that, once aware, he will have no problem dealing with it. While de Man's critique has been fruitful for the interpretation of the Hugo-poem, it seems that the theoretical argument based upon it has been wrong. But that's not true. What we can see from Riffaterre's essay on prosopopeia is that the real point of disagree-

ment or misunderstanding between de Man and Riffaterre resides not in the prosopopeia, but in the title of the poem.

The title – “Written on the pane of a Flemish window” – is somewhat picturesque. As windows are not so common a material to write on, the title is one of the details that remind us of curiosities bound to become attractions for tourists. But our learned scholars can tell us that writing on a window pane is just another literary cliché. De Man points to Swift’s poem to Stella as a model. Riffaterre informs us about a now broken window at the famous French castle of Chambord. Among the many French writers that have written about it, the most famous perhaps is Chateaubriand. Riffaterre even found out that Hugo took away a splinter from that very window when he was visiting the castle. As for German literature, we can add some writing on a window pane from Jean Paul’s novel “Hesperus”. (it seems that in former times, everybody had a diamond ring for writing on window panes!)

Riffaterre explains the title as an allusion to the inscribed window at Chambord. The inscription, actually by a French king, has been about instability and change. That the window is broken now just lends more persuasive power to those ideas. Therefore Riffaterre concludes that the poem is about the passage of time.

In de Man’s view, the title is linked to the “invisible crystal” in line 14. Just like clocks make the passage of time accessible to the senses, so the writing on the window pane lends visibility to the window. For de Man, the poem is not on vanity but on sense certainty. The highly philosophical, epistemological problem of sense certainty (which is recurrent in de Man) has a more down-to-earth corollary in the problem of formalist and hermeneutic searches for truth in

poetry. While hermeneutic approaches will find themselves trapped within a “non-determinable system of figuration” (de Man, 41), rigorous formalism leads to a conclusion similar to the one de Man finds already in the title: “Every detail”, he says, “as well as every general proposition in the text is fantastic, except for the assertion, in the title, that it is ‘écrit’, written” (de Man, 51). That is what de Man calls inscription. As the idea of inscription is not easy to grasp, it is only defined in terms of what it is not: “Inscription is neither a figure, nor a sign, nor a cognition, nor a desire; nor a hypogram, nor a matrix” (de Man, 51). It is this concept of inscription that Riffaterre has nothing to say about. For him, inscription is always the inscription of a subject – who, in this case, is Victor Hugo. That the poem actually has been written by someone, who well might have been Hugo, would not be denied by de Man, but it is missing the point. In contrast to the inscription, the author of the poem is a piece of knowledge which is far from self-evident. Structuralists of the Prague School have convincingly demonstrated how any author, trying to express himself through his writings, immediately becomes the image of an author as soon as his work reaches public attention. The poem we are talking about, by the way, is playfully inconclusive about its author. If we think of Hugo the poet as traveller in Flanders, ‘Written on the pane of a Flemish window’ could as well refer to the poet as a rude tourist who leaves some traces everywhere he goes, as it could refer to the traveller just having found the poem on some maybe forever unknown window in Flanders.

So it seems, after all, that Riffaterre’s “Semiotics of Poetry”, though a very learned and valuable book, can not offer a solution to the problem of relating form and content in interpretation, or, on a

wider scale, to reconcile formalism and hermeneutics. Neither does de Man, but his answer has been from the start that such a reconciliation, though necessary for any theory of poetry, can never be achieved.

References

- Paul de Man. "Hypogram and Inscription" in *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis 1986.
Michael Riffaterre. *Semiotics of Poetry*. Bloomington 1978.
Michael Riffaterre. *La production du texte*. Paris 1979 (English translation: Text Production. New York 1983).
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Appendix

Victor Hugo

Écrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande

J'aime le carillon dans tes cités antiques,
O vieux pays gardien de tes mœurs domestiques,
Noble Flandre, où le Nord se réchauffe engourdi
Au soleil de Castille et s'accouple au Midi!
Le carillon, c'est l'heure inattendue et folle,
Que l'œil croit voir, vêtue en danseuse espagnole,
Apparaître soudain par le trou vif et clair
Que ferait en s'ouvrant une porte de l'air.
Elle vient, secouant sur les toits léthargiques
Son tablier d'argent plein de notes magiques,
Réveillant sans pitié les dormeurs ennuyeux,
Sautant à petit pas comme un oiseau joyeux,
Vibrant, ainsi qu'un dard qui tremble dans ta cible;
Par un frêle escalier de crystal invisible,
Effarée et dansante, elle descend des cieux;
Et l'esprit, ce veilleur fait d'oreilles et d'yeux,
Tandis qu'elle va, vient, monte et descend encore,
Entends de marche en marche errer son pied sonore!