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A POSTSTRUCTURALIST VIEW OF “LITERARY SPECIFICITY”

Virginia Mihaela DUMITRESCU

The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies

Abstract

The present article looks at Paul de Man’s poststructuralist (deconstructionist) approach to “literary specificity”. It analyses the American critic’s all-encompassing, epistemologically unsettling concept of “the literary” within the context of his linguistic “theory” about the rhetorical nature of language on the one hand, and of his textual “theory” about the hidden contradictions inherent in any text, on the other hand. To de Man, any piece of writing (whether fictional or discursive) is “literary” to the extent to which it anticipates its own misunderstanding as a “correlative” of its “rhetorical nature” or “rhetoricity”. However, it is “pure” literature (which unlike any other type of text, overtly asserts its fictional, linguistic character, and is therefore “free from the fallacy of unmediated expression”) that most clearly exemplifies the non-coincidence between sign and meaning existing in any text.

Key-words: “the literary”, “the figural”, “nothingness”, “embodied meaning”.

A characteristic of both literary and non-literary texts is, from de Man’s rigorously deconstructionist point of view, their instability, resulting from their hidden fragmentations, contradictions, or discontinuities (such as the disjunction between grammar and meaning). Underlying the „theory” of rhetorical reading is, indeed, a notion of the “text” as an entity that should be viewed both as “a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system” and

as “a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence” (4: 270). If we were to describe the Demanian way of reading in simple terms, we would say that it is largely an account of the “fundamental incompatibility” (4: 269) inherent in the language of the text between “grammar” – that is, the “undetermined, general potential for meaning” characterizing the grammatical system of text-generating relationships and functions that are “independent” of the text’s referential meaning – and “meaning” itself, considered as a linguistic product, a mere fictional construct obtained by “applying” grammar’s general semantic potential “to a specific [linguistic] unit” (4: 268) through the referential function of language. Between grammar and referential meaning there is an irreconcilable divergence (due to the incompatibility between generality and particularity) which is identified by Paul de Man as “the figural dimension of language” (4: 270) existing in *all* texts, whether literary or non-literary.

As a true poststructuralist (or anti-structuralist), de Man does not deny the referential function, but questions the semantic value of language, as a consequence of his understanding of meaning as an exclusively linguistic, rhetorical product. By casting doubt on the authority of the referential function as “a model for natural and phenomenal cognition” (5: 11) and the possibility of an extra-linguistic meaning, de Man acknowledges Derrida’s “thesis” about the impossibility of a “transcendental signified”, or “a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, ... outside of writing in general” (1: 158).

The Demanian view of the text as an entity whose stability is continuously undermined by inner contradictions and divergences also indirectly leads to a realization of the impossibility of the text’s existence as a “presence”, or a carrier of an identifiable “truth” or “meaning”; there is no such thing as an “embodied meaning”, and what we call “meaning” in a text is actually a linguistic, fictional construct. In his Preface to the 1979 collection of essays entitled *Deconstruction & Criticism*, Geoffrey Hartman summarizes, in his turn, the deconstructionist belief that any logocentric “concept of embodied meaning” is an illusion, and the tenet that “the ‘presence of the word’ is equivalent to the presence of meaning” (2 : VIII). The above “definition” of the text is said to anticipate “the *allegorical narratives* [my italics] of its impossibility” (4: 270), in the special sense given to the syntagm within the context of de Man’s criticism: a deconstruction to the second or third degree, etc., that, by relapsing into referentiality, “narrates” the text’s failure to read itself and its own detotalizations. This is true about both literary and non-literary texts because, according to de

Man, all language is conceptual, and therefore rhetorical (since the concept itself is a mystifying metaphor that “literalizes its referent”, as “demonstrated” by the American deconstructionist in a memorable analysis of a fragment of Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* [4: 155-158]).

To de Man, any text (whether fictional or discursive) is, in a way, “literary” to the extent to which it “implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature” or “rhetoricity” (3: 136). Even everyday language turns out to be “literary” (due to the non-coincidence between sign and meaning, understood as a rhetorical construct, or between “the actual expression” and “what has to be expressed” [3: 11]) – and therefore “unreadable”, which explains why its interpretation seems to de Man “a Sisyphean task without end and without progress” (BI 11). In contrast to the traditional notion of literature, “literary specificity” is thus no longer grounded in the criterion of “greater or lesser discursiveness” but rather in “the degree of consistent rhetoricity’ of the language” (3: 137). Even in his Foreword to *Blindness and Insight*, de Man uses the word “literary” in a broad sense, with reference to any contradictory, self-subverting text. He argues that works of criticism can be read as “literary” texts, due to the discrepancy between their authors’ explicit statements and the critical insights they finally (and unwittingly) reach, or between the critics’ stated outlook on literature and the result of their interpretations – an earlier version of the “logical tension” between grammar and referential meaning, or between grammar and figure, identified by de Man in the later (fully deconstructionist) stage of his career, that we previously referred to. De Man admits, however, that various types of texts differ in their degree of lucidity: “a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign” (3: 17). Given that literature states its fictional, linguistic character, literary language proper can be considered unique (without holding a privileged position) as it is “the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression” (3: 17). It is exactly because literary works are understood to be fictions rather than factual accounts that they most clearly exemplify the non-coincidence or discrepancy between sign and meaning existing in any text. De Man deplores the fact that readers however tend to ignore the writer’s “explicit assertion” by attaching an extra-linguistic meaning to fiction and thus “confusing literature with a reality from which it has forever taken leave” (3: 17). Moreover, what we call “reality” is, from de Man’s deconstructionist point of view, equally fictional, linguistic, textual. To support his own statement about the empty, purely linguistic “meaning” of literature, and to identify the

even more epistemologically disturbing human emptiness that literature helps us realize by merely “naming” it, he quotes two passages from Rousseau, one of his favourite authors. The first one is a note written by Julie, the protagonist of the epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, who has experienced human happiness but is ready to face death with equanimity: the protagonist states her preference for the insubstantial world of imagination or pure fiction (“le pays de mes chimères”), which seems to her is the only one worth living in (“le seul digne d’être habité”), and indirectly affirms the impossibility of satisfying the human desire for presence, truth or meaning by referring to the sheer “nothingness of human matters” (“le néant des choses humaines” [7: 693 – apud 3: 17]). De Man insists that her realization of such “nothingness” and her exaltation of the fictional world cannot be read as “a deficient sense of reality” (3: 17), as further clarified by another fragment from Rousseau. The second quote, taken from a “Letter to Malesherbes”, is about the same insatiable desire (or yearning) for presence and meaning: “If all my dreams had turned into reality, I would still remain unsatisfied: I would have kept on dreaming, imagining, desiring. In myself, I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have filled: a longing of the heart towards another kind of fulfillment of which I could not conceive but of which I nevertheless felt the attraction” (7: 1140 – apud 3: 19). According to de Man’s reading of the passage, the frustration expressed here is not caused by an absence, as we might be tempted to believe, but rather by the unbearable “presence of a nothingness”, of a void very similar to the one so clearly identified by Julie; a void that can be affirmed, but “cannot be known” (6: 131), as the philosopher Richard Rorty pertinently remarks. It is, as the critic explains, the role of literature to name this “nothingness”, which leads to a new “definition” of literature that only reiterates de Man’s statement about the radical separation of the work of fiction, as a linguistic construct, from empirical reality that we have already referred to: “Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding, and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature.... The work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others” (3: 18).

But even though people tend to take for granted literature’s explicit statement about the break between a sign and its meaning (which would be equivalent to admitting, like Paul de Man, that literature “means” nothing, or does not have an extra-linguistic meaning), criticism still refuses – in a defensive way that is humanly understandable – to acknowledge such a disturbing insight which lays bare the intolerable truth about our existential void: “The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing ‘the nothingness of human matters.’ In order not to see that the failure lies in the nature of things, one chooses to

locate it in the individual, 'romantic' subject, and thus retreats behind a historical scheme which, apocalyptic as it may sound, is basically reassuring and bland" (3: 18).

As de Man would later observe from a "ruthlessly theoretical" point of view, the resistance to acknowledging literature's lack of "meaning" has turned English departments into organizations that, instead of focusing on "their own subject matter", are mainly dedicated to applying information derived from various extra-literary fields (such as ethics, psychology, politics, intellectual history, etc.) to the literary text, in an attempt to make the text "meaningful" in the traditional sense of the word (5: 21-26).

De Man's appreciation of literature as the most lucid type of language and as a paradigm of the linguistic fracture inherent in any text has sometimes been misinterpreted as a form of essentialism quite at odds with his avowed deconstructionist "principles". Richard Rorty, the American pragmatist, for instance, criticizes de Man for privileging "literary language" and „setting up an altar to Literature" (6: 132) to replace the once-revered Logos of metaphysics, even though the new linguistic "Truth" communicated by this „Dark God" is a "negative" one: the impossibility of a language of truth. Rorty's accusation is quite understandable: philosophers have always dreamed of a totally transparent language, since philosophical truth is supposed to be totally free of figuration and visible in a direct, unmediated form. By contrast, de Man thinks that all texts are similar in the sense that meaning or truth is always mediated by language (and therefore fictional, illusory, given its exclusively linguistic, rhetorical nature). All language is "necessarily misleading" since it can create the illusion of truth, of unmediated meaning, thanks to its referential function; but at the same time language promises an altogether different truth: "its own truth" (4: 277) about the "presence of nothingness". The irreconcilable contradiction between the two "truths" conveyed by language results in epistemological uncertainty – or, in Paul de Man's radical deconstructionist terms, "unreadability".

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Virginia Mihaela Dumitrescu is a Lecturer in English for Business Communication with The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, translator, co-author of two textbooks, author of articles on literature, criticism, translation theory and intercultural business communication. She holds a Ph.D. in Literary Theory from Bucharest University.