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In 1981, I was fortunate to be invited to participate in a NEH Summer Seminar directed by Paul de Man at Yale University. Together with eleven other “younger scholars” in a variety of fields, I was immersed twice a week for three hours at a time (or more) in meetings with de Man where he led us into intricate, sometimes exhausting, and always exhilarating analyses of a variety of texts from philosophy, literature, and cultural studies. Thanks primarily to Paul himself, but also the others in our group and the immense resources of Yale University, the seminar was one of the most intellectually stimulating experiences of my life. It played a crucial role in my migration, by way of post-structuralism, from philosophical theology to biblical studies.

Probably anyone reading this knows already that de Man (along with Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes) was an important early proponent of the critical method known as deconstruction. He explained to our seminar that he does what any reader does, only very slowly and carefully. Deconstruction involves an extremely close reading of a text, often in intertextual juxtaposition with other texts, which takes very seriously its physical details and does not accept as given or obvious any previously accepted understandings of its language or purpose. Such accepted understandings are often passed on uncritically from one reader to another, even among scholars, and sometimes from one generation to the next. In contrast, deconstruction is not afraid to find those structural flaws in a text where it may be pried apart, where the text’s unsaid can appear, however obliquely, and sometimes with profound and surprising philosophical, theological, or political consequences. Sadly, biblical scholars do not draw upon de Man or Barthes as often as they draw upon Derrida, perhaps because the writings of those scholars are not as evidently “religious” as some of Derrida’s writings are.

In addition to a substantial introduction by McQuillan, the book’s editor, The Post-Romantic Predicament consists of a much briefer introduction by de Man, followed by two fairly lengthy essays which focus on the poetry of Mallarmé and Yeats respectively, then three shorter writings that deal with Mallarmé and Yeats in combination with Stefan George and Hölderlin, and finally a “dissertation fragment” that discusses George. Copious notes appear at the end of most of these chapters, and the book also includes a partial bibliography devoted to Mallarmé and an index. The book is clearly written, disturbed only by a few typographical irregularities which may reflect de Man’s manuscripts (see p. ix).

In the 1960 essay on Mallarmé, de Man examines the relationship between poetry and philosophy, specifically that between Mallarmé’s poems and Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. In this essay (as well as several others in this book), de Man also wrestles with the value of “sources” for the understanding of poetry, and he argues that Mallarmé does not depend on Hegel, but rather that similar “trajectories” (p. 80) appear in the respective texts. The important post-structuralist concept of repetition becomes the point of transition within the poems from finite individual existence to universal truth. The dialectical movement toward synthesis reaches a culmination but also a sort of deconstruction (although de Man does not yet use that word) of that synthesis in the “Abîme” of Mallarmé’s “Un coup de dés”, and the recognition that
Thought can only exist within an illusionary, mediate kind of freedom; it ... chooses to act against that by means of which it exists. ... The final union between matter and spirit is a return to a shapeless chaos which the mind cannot conceive of without losing its balance (p. 106, de Man’s emphases).

Similarly, in de Man’s essay on drama and history in Yeats, also from 1960, repetition appears in his discussion of the poet’s use of emblems as that usage stands in tension with the spiral movement of drama. Again de Man draws upon Hegel (as well as Nietzsche, in this case) to explore this tension between “repetition and difference” (to borrow Deleuze’s book title), which lies at the core of the post-romantic predicament (see especially p. 135), and of much post-structuralist criticism.

Yeats combines, within one coherent unit of language, a structure contradicted by its meaning, while this meaning, in turn, is destroyed by the truth it conveys. His poetry denies the essence of the dramatic, but cannot dispense with it, and this paradox becomes itself the tragic theme of a work that tries in vain to eschew tragedy (p. 148).

The remaining essays and the dissertation fragment were all written somewhat earlier than the first two, in the 1950s, and they are all considerably shorter and less subtle. No further deconstructive aporiae appear in any of these latter texts, and the criticism tends to be more what one might expect from skilled but conventional scholarship during this era. The 1959 essay on Mallarmé, George, and Yeats reads more like an expanded prospectus for a book (perhaps to include the first two essays?) than an essay in its own right, though de Man does give theoretical consideration to the task of criticism on several interesting pages (pp. 170-174), and he also hints at something like intertextuality (pp. 176-177, see also p. 199). The tension between repetition and difference may also rumble beneath the 1954 essay on George and Hölderlin, but if it had surfaced there, that essay itself would have been much different. Likewise, a similar tension between will or spirit and nature is hinted in the very rough dissertation fragment (which might better be called fragments), but it too remains undeveloped.

This book is hardly an introduction to de Man’s variety of deconstruction. That purpose would be far better served by books such as Allegories of Reading (1979) or Blindness and Insight (1983), or his important essay on Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” in The Resistance to Theory (1986), which was one of the topics of our seminar. Instead, The Post-Romantic Predicament contains some of de Man’s earliest scholarly writings, from when he was a graduate student and Harvard Junior Fellow. The analyses lack the subtlety of de Man’s later writings, but like Derrida’s “Introduction” to Husserl’s Origin of Geometry (1978, originally 1962), these essays provide fascinating evidence of a scholar’s migration toward deconstructive method. Furthermore, even at a relatively young age, Paul de Man was a highly skilled reader and critic (and not a bad writer, either), and anyone interested in very careful readings of very demanding texts will find much of value in these essays.

Scattered throughout these essays are some fine observations on poetry and theology (or more generally, faith or even truth) and one of de Man’s particular interests in this book is the relation between literature (especially poetry) and history, topics of some interest to biblical scholars. However, The Post-Romantic Predicament offers little of direct relevance to biblical studies. The book’s contribution to critical theory is undeniable, but there are other texts (including many of de Man’s) in which that theory is more fully developed and precisely exercised. This book will be of primary interest to people studying the poets who are discussed, or to those who want a complete collection of de Man’s writings.