

## ALLEGORY AND THE AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

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My concern in this essay is threefold. First, I will be arguing that the historical discussion of allegory and symbolism is a vehicle for the emergence of ideology critique. To phrase the issue in terms pertinent to this volume, if the Enlightenment defined the symbol in opposition to 'prejudice' and the Romantics described allegory as a form of 'ideology,' how did it happen that we currently view symbolism as ideological and allegory as anti-ideological? My focus here will be limited to the poststructuralist era. [On earlier notions of a distinction between 'allegory' and 'symbol,' see chapters 1 (ii), 2 (i), 12 (i, vi–viii), 13, 18, and 19. —ed.] Second, I want to suggest that different notions of rhetoric have emerged and are contrasted most significantly because of their relative interest in representing human autonomy. This issue is by necessity related to my first concern. If aesthetics opposes ideology, instead of being subsumed into it, it does so only because it represents autonomy better than other resources. This is to recall that aesthetics is a mode of subjectivization and that its major resource in this process is its concept of autonomy. Here my point will be that our view of allegory has changed because of our desire to preserve this concept. Third, I will claim that the target of ideology critique was noticeably deflected after World War II from politics to aesthetics. It was in many respects a reaction to what Walter Benjamin called fascism's aestheticization of politics, and yet not even his perceptive remarks about fascism's equation between politics and the arts explain why such a powerful transformation took place. That aesthetics and ideology collaborate with each other is now a common assumption in intellectual life. Art is ideological, it is widely declared, and, of course, ideology possesses a powerful aesthetic dimension as well. Terry Eagleton, for example, argues that the aesthetic is 'a peculiarly effective ideological medium,' while Paul de Man reminds us that 'the aesthetic still concerns us as one of the

most powerful ideological drives to act upon the reality of history.<sup>1</sup> This part of my argument will require a brief excursus into fascist aesthetics.

### *Symbolism as Ideology*

The word 'ideology' does not occur in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' (1969), the essay by Paul de Man that reversed in many ways the course of postwar thinking about Romantic symbolism.<sup>2</sup> Nor does the word appear in the earlier version of the essay included in the Gauss seminar of 1967 in which he first begins to reformulate the role played by allegory in Romantic nature poetry. We have to wait until 1972 in an essay on Roland Barthes to see de Man translate his ideas about rhetoric into ideological terms:

One can see why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating correspondence between sign and meaning, since they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness. On the other hand, theories of language that put into question the subservience, resemblance, or potential identity between sign and meaning are always subversive, even if they remain strictly confined to linguistic phenomena. (*RCC* 170)

The correspondence to which de Man refers is almost certainly a 'natural' one.<sup>3</sup> He means to define ideology as having a vested interest in the delusive process by which language sometimes represents

<sup>1</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1976), p. 20, and Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> References are to Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, 1983). The first footnote to 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' refers to Barthes's work, and in many ways an essay by de Man on Barthes is a continuation of the footnote, since it makes good on the promise to discuss at greater length the relation between structural linguistics and rhetoric. See 'Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism,' *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 164–77. The essay was commissioned by the *New York Review of Books* as a review of Roland Barthes's recent work but was never printed. It was finally published in one version in *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990) and republished in 1993 in the collection to which I refer hereafter in the text as *RCC*.

<sup>3</sup> Andrzej Warminski, one of de Man's most faithful commentators, misquotes this passage as follows: 'One can see why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating *the natural* correspondence between sign and meaning, since they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness' (23; emphasis mine). It is an inspired misreading in my opinion. See

arbitrary or political relations as organic. Of course, this definition returns us directly to 'The Rhetoric of Temporality.' The entire thrust of the essay is to dethrone the organicism of contemporary theory by offering an alternative reading of Romantic nature poetry. Presumably, de Man's motivation was to represent a more authentic picture of human temporality, and a certain conception of time, which he would later regret, does pervade the essay. [On attitudes toward temporality and allegory in early interpretation, see chapters 2 (iv), 6, and 14; on perspectives in recent centuries, see chapters 1, 12 (v–viii), and 17–19. —ed.] Against Wasserman, Abrams, and Wimsatt, de Man argues that natural settings in Romantic poetry do not either symbolize original emotions or strengthen the individual self by borrowing from nature a temporal stability that the self lacks. Both are characterized as errors committed by a self that wants to forget its own tragic predicament. De Man worries in particular that his generation of literary critics has absorbed uncritically the tendency among the Romantics to justify their moral and political ideas by attributing a certain naturalness to them. Both Wasserman and Abrams, for example, are said to embrace the eighteenth-century practice of treating moral issues in terms of descriptive landscapes. Abrams apparently accepts that in Romantic poetry 'sensuous phenomena are coupled with moral statements' (*BI* 195), while Wasserman cites favorably a series of lines that portray the world as a reflection of human thought and passion—as a kind of mirror—in which the human being beholds 'in lifeless things / The Inexpressive semblance of himself, / Of thought and passion' (*BI* 195).

Wimsatt, of course, takes the brunt of de Man's attack not only because he appears to believe most fervently, among the trio of critics, in the unifying, organic power of symbolism but because he translates this belief into the method called the New Criticism. For Wimsatt, de Man insists, language supposedly manifests a fundamental unity that encompasses mind and object—'the one life within us and abroad' (cited by de Man; *BI* 194). A few years later in 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,' de Man would flesh out his critique of Wimsatt and the New Criticism along precisely these lines. The New Critics' definition of the poem owes too

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Andrzej Warminski, 'Ending Up/Taking Back (with Two Postscripts on Paul de Man's Historical Materialism),' *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, ed. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), pp. 11–41.

much in his estimation to the “organic” imagination so dear to Coleridge’ (*BI* 27–28), which causes them to mistake poetic form as ‘the organic circularity of natural processes’ rather than as an effect of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (*BI* 29). For de Man, then, Wimsatt and the New Critics produce a potentially dangerous mythology in which meaning is defended as natural. And he makes it clear that the danger involved has a strictly political dimension. For he states that Northrop Frye’s mythopoetic theories take Wimsatt’s ideas about poetry a step further, preparing for the possibility of yet another, pernicious political step:

Northrop Frye falls into exactly the same error as Wimsatt and reifies the literary entity into a natural object: with the added danger, moreover, that put in less ironic hands than his own, his theory could cause much more extensive damage. A formalist such as Wimsatt hypostatizes only the particular text on which he is working, but a literal minded disciple of a mythologist like Frye could go a lot further. He is given license to order and classify the whole of literature into one single thing which, even though circular, would nevertheless be a gigantic cadaver. (*BI* 26)

In retrospect, de Man’s argument in ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’ seems to be concerned with human temporality less as a purely philosophical issue than as a predicament that sometimes calls for risky ideological solutions. These solutions rely on a dangerous mythology involving the natural forces commanded by humanity and the necessity of achieving a sense of unity even at the expense of individual human freedom and intentionality. We will have occasion shortly to attach this mythology to a particular political movement. In the meantime, it is sufficient to recognize that de Man’s essay appears to have an ideological ax to grind, especially once we recognize the connections between his views on Romantic symbolism and the definition of ideology found in the essay on Barthes. For de Man criticizes at every opportunity the tendency to represent arbitrary relations as organic. He attacks the ‘supremacy of the symbol,’ conceived both ‘as an expression of unity’ (*BI* 189) and as ‘the product of the organic growth of form’ (*BI* 191), objecting that this ‘original unity . . . does not exist in the material world’ (*BI* 192). He denigrates the ‘organic coherence’ of this synthesis as a profound illusion (*BI* 192). Finally, he complains that the nostalgia for organic unity has become a commonplace underlying literary taste, literary

criticism, and literary history. [On 'organicism' in earlier critical theory, see chapters 2 (i), 3 (conclusion), 4, 12 (vi), 18, and 19. —ed.]

If the symbol is inherently ideological, however, other rhetorical modes used by the Romantics present the possibility of ideology critique. De Man explains that both allegory and irony are 'linked in their common demystification' of the 'organic world' postulated by symbolism (*BI* 222); neither one falls into the 'myth of an organic totality' (*BI* 223). [On 'allegory,' 'irony,' and early Romanticism, see chapter 18. —ed.] This definition requires a reconceptualization of both allegory and irony. Allegory in the early de Man is not subservient to external, cosmological, or dogmatic meanings. Rather, it is a mode of literary allusion. For example, when Rousseau appears in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to be symbolizing emotions by describing natural objects, he is in fact creating a deliberate allusion to the *Roman de la rose*. The diction of the novel, de Man claims, is hardly 'naturalistic' but controlled by this inherited typology. Texts are systems of allegorical signs in which representations of objects are subordinated not to dogma but to the relationship between signs:

The relationship between the allegorical sign and its meaning (*signifié*) is not decreed by dogma . . . . We have, instead, a relationship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance . . . . The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can . . . consist only in the *repetition* . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. (*BI* 207)

This means that allegory, unlike the symbol, does not rely on an organic identity between either subject and object or culture and nature. De Man redefines allegory in terms of the arbitrary, differential drift of sign systems in which the desire for unity or identity must simply be renounced. He reads the word 'allegory' literally, then, viewing it as a mode that always refers otherwise. Allegory plunges language users into a dizzying maze of signification in which no single sign ever coincides with another. [On de Man and signification, see chapter 12 (viii). —ed.]

Similarly, de Man reconceives of irony as a thematization of difference and nonidentity directly opposed to the Romantic ideology of the symbol. He is especially careful, it is worth noting, not to characterize the difference of irony in terms of human difference or inequality. Rather, irony presents a difference constitutive of all

acts of reflection, and this 'reflective disjunction not only occurs *by means of* language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language . . .' (*BI* 213). Significantly, then, language divides the subject into an empirical self, living in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign whenever it attempts an act of differentiation or self-definition.

From the standpoint of irony, then, any attempt to celebrate one's natural superiority over another human being immerses one in a labyrinth of signs in which such acts of differentiation are literally impossible. Allegory, too, we saw, reveals the subject to be in free fall. Any attempt at self-definition, to understand oneself as a living entity, grasps instead the self as a mere sign, which in turn leads to another sign and another, none of which bears any organic relation to the previous one. For de Man, Romantic nature poetry is caught between ideology and its other, between symbolism and allegory.

#### *National Socialism and the Myth of Organic Totality*

Only after becoming aware of de Man's wartime journalism, do we have access to the historical dimension of his theories.<sup>4</sup> This resource alone exposes the historical motivations behind his particular definition and critique of the aesthetic ideology. Similarly, it helps to explain why he chooses to champion allegory and to reject symbolism.

We imagine, for example, the young Paul de Man reading the words of his uncle Henri de Man in 1941: it is time to eliminate 'from our political organism the foreign body constituted by all the residues or embryos of the ghetto.'<sup>5</sup> As a member of the cultural elite and as a writer on the art beat at *Le Soir*, Paul de Man was extremely familiar with the hygienic and related use of the terms 'organic' and 'natural,' and he availed himself of them on any number of occasions in his own reporting for *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land*. In the now notorious essay on 'Les Juifs dans la littérature

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cynthia Chase, 'The Trappings of an Education,' *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, NE, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Geoffrey Hartman, 'Looking Back on Paul de Man,' *Reading De Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 17.

actuelle' of 4 March 1941, for example, de Man assures his readers that the nature of life in Europe, 'despite Semitic incursions,' remains fundamentally 'healthy' and that the deportation of Jews to colonies isolated from Europe will neither harm the future of literature nor impede the fulfillment of its 'great evolutionary laws' (45).<sup>6</sup> On 16 March 1942, on the occasion of the Brussels book exhibition on 'The Greatness of Germany,' he defends the pursuit of German unity by explaining that 'the entire continuity of Western civilization depends on the unity of the people who are its center' (207). And some months later, on 20 August 1942, he returns in the pages of *Het Vlaamsche Land* to the same exhibition to comment on good and bad directions in German literature. He condemns authors 'remote from all naturalness'—the direction taken 'mainly by non-Germans, and specifically Jews'—and praises those writers worthy of the German tradition who remain 'true to the proper norms of the country' (325). Like his uncle, then, Paul de Man imagined—at least in his role as an essayist—that the Nazis would unify Europe, creating 'a new ensemble of individual ideals that define a certain human type' and freeing everyone from the influence of 'small clans' closed upon themselves (159). Europe would be a new, united world under National Socialism—not merely a nation in the here and now but an 'eternal community of language and blood' (201).

The Nazis described every relation, every possible link, within society in terms of organic or natural unity. The art and literature of a racially pure German culture was supposed to overcome differences of class and fuse Europe into an organic community. The art education of the Third Reich was supposed to recreate the 'organic link' between artists and the people (*ATR* 73).<sup>7</sup> Hitler wanted his political

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<sup>6</sup> References are to Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, NE, 1988). Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. The companion volume, *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, offers a variety of interpretations, both apologetic and incriminating, of these materials. I recommend especially John Brenkman, 'Fascist Commitments' (21–35); Ortwin de Graef, 'Aspects of the Context of Paul de Man's Earliest Publications followed by Notes on Paul de Man's Flemish Writings' (96–126); Alice Yaeger Kaplan, 'Paul de Man, *Le Soir*, and the Francophone Collaboration (1940–1942)' (266–84); and Edouard Colinet, 'Paul de Man and the Cercle du Libre Examen' (426–37).

<sup>7</sup> References to Nazi statements and expressions, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York, 1992), cited hereafter in the text as *ATR*. See also *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron (New York, 1991), especially in this context, George L. Mosse,

ceremonies and parades to unite power and form in a natural synthesis that was beautiful to see, and when they were described in newspapers and radio reports, the language obeyed his desires and intentions. ‘This ceremony was the ultimate in life-giving form,’ one report says of Hitler’s appearance at the Party meeting of 1934. ‘It was an hour of our time, an hour during which life became form’ (*ATR* 89). Nazism’s idea of nationhood was one in which the people were joined to the soil and their blood developed according to the higher laws of evolution. And, of course, their art needed to express these laws. That is why German landscape painters were asked to reject Impressionism, mere renderings of light and air, to represent ‘the unity between man and landscape’ and to interpret ‘the eternal laws of organic growth’ (*ATR* 130). This is why Hitler and Rosenberg required art to declare its faith in the ideal of beauty of the Nordic and racially pure human being (*ATR* 95).<sup>8</sup>

It is crucial to understand what happened to aesthetics under Hitler. Obviously, he made art serve ideology. But this was minor in itself, compared to the lasting effects that the Nazi use of art, literature, and music has had on the historical understanding of aesthetics itself. It is one thing to recognize that a given political movement may make greater or lesser use of art and another thing to conclude that aesthetics is identical to ideology, which was Hitler’s position. Not to accept this distinction is not to understand that Hitler possessed a theory of aesthetics and that his theory—as repulsive as this idea may be to us—has become our theory. Who among the current detractors of aesthetics possesses a definition of art substantially different from that provided by Hitler in 1935 at Nuremberg: ‘Art has at all times been the expression of an ideological and religious experience and at the same time the expression of a political will’ (*ATR* 9)?

Given my argument so far, it makes most sense to focus a few remarks on the Nazi conception of symbolism. Symbolism for the Nazis defines the process by which a political idea is made manifest

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‘Beauty without Sensuality/The Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*’ (25–32); Henry Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists* (New York, 1983); and Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> See Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1933): ‘from Aryan India came metaphysics, from classical Greece beauty, from Rome the discipline of statesmanship, and from Germania the world, the highest and most shining example of mankind’ (290, 299; also *ATR* 26).



in aesthetic form. 'Artistic change,' one ideologue explained, 'is the *symbol* of political change' (*ATR* 96; emphasis mine). Nazi art was designed to be a corrective to the supposedly impure versions of art propagated by Jews and Bolsheviks, and the beauty and truth of this art apparently consisted in its healthy intentions and hygienic character. It showed supposedly what an ideal human being was, and it made one feel good about oneself, since in most cases the audience understood that its own characteristics and virtues were being displayed in the work. It was in this respect, by providing a recipe for the good, racially pure human being, that symbolism could be said, perversely, to satisfy Kant's imperative that beauty be the symbol of morality:

The symbol is the highest and the most difficult and therefore the proudest task of art. Here, it is no longer enough for the artist to portray the deep feeling of a slice of life, to let his fantasy loose, to create a dreamlike world. Here he has to find the most economical, meaningful expression of the thoughts and feelings of his *Volk*. Not just the representation of any figure taken from reality, but the creation of a figure that is the ideal image of the people. (*ATR* 205)

This new definition, provided by Wilhelm Westecker in 1938 in a party organ, contains everything that postwar critics despised about symbolism. More important, it exposes the extent to which the Nazis sought to transform aesthetic theory. They mimicked the history of poetic and artistic defense, twisted its arguments, essential vocabulary, and concerns, and identified the ambitions and desires of artists as their own—but all with a small and pernicious difference. Consequently, it has been hard to trace how the Nazis changed aesthetics and easy to argue that they did not twist or taint anything that was not corrupt and dangerous before they touched it. Art and ideology are one, the argument goes, for National Socialism flows 'naturally' from the logic of Western aesthetics. In effect, then, Goebbels's declaration in 1937 about Hitler continues to echo among us, although Goebbels did not understand, apparently, his own sense of irony: 'The Führer loves artists, because he is himself one' (*ATR* 45).

All of these ideas and others like them must have wheedled their way into Paul de Man's ears. One could not live in Europe and not hear them all the time. This helps to explain why, after the war and after his failures in Europe, the idea of organicism was so emotionally charged for him. It helps to explain why he bristles when he arrives in the United States and finds his contemporaries—Wasserman,

Abrams, and Wimsatt—describing Romantic nature poetry in organic terms and repeating Coleridge's dictum, 'Such as the life is, such is the form' or 'the one life within us and abroad.' It also helps to explain why he would come to define ideology as 'precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality' (*RT* 11).<sup>9</sup> De Man's view of aesthetic history moves from Schiller's apparent misreading of Kantian beauty as the beauty of the state to Goebbels's 'grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state' as the state aesthetic of the Third Reich.<sup>10</sup> For de Man, then, the natural culmination of the aesthetics of beauty is National Socialism. He knows because he saw it happen. He loved beauty too much, and it happened to him. People loved their country, and they became Nazis.

### *Allegory as Anti-Aesthetic*

The aesthetic has been found guilty of collaborating with fascism, and this collaboration supposedly exposes its essential and deceptive nature for all to see. The historical fact of this perception requires that we take a more enlightened attitude toward aesthetics, which entails that we acknowledge its predisposition to fraternize with ideology and that we make some basic changes. If art leads to Auschwitz, it is necessary to denounce it and to take up the cause of anti-aestheticism. If beauty is ideological, we must find an alternative to it. Today we consider the highest expressions of art to be exemplars of anti-art. Art fails if it does not oppose the pernicious illusions perpetuated by aesthetics in some fundamental way. In contrast to Kant,

<sup>9</sup> References to Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Paul de Man, 'Kant and Schiller,' *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, 1996). I thank Professor Warminski for providing me with a manuscript copy prior to publication. De Man's reading points out that Goebbels's statement, 'politics are the plastic arts of the state,' is 'a grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state,' concluding that 'the principle of this misreading does not essentially differ from the misreading which Schiller inflicted on his own predecessor—namely Kant' (154–55). As a corrective to de Man's reading of Schiller, I recommend Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley, 1989), who identifies Herder, not Schiller, as a source for undemocratic conceptions of the aesthetic state: 'By the time of his death Herder . . . had bequeathed his arguments on behalf of the organic state to theorists who overturned his own pacific version of cooperative activity and minimal governmental intervention for romanticist visions of hierarchical autonomy. Herder ought not to be blamed for such travesties of his view, but his thought, "the albatross before the coming storm," was more in keeping than that of Schiller and Goethe with nineteenth-century notions of the modern state and their problematic career' (54).

who believed that aesthetic beauty is a mysterious and ineffable apparition of otherness that takes hold of us without our consent, and for which no explanation can be offered, we prefer to think of art in terms of the political virtues of clarity, forthrightness, politeness, honesty, and purity of motive. Apparitions are deceiving, to turn a phrase, so the ghostlier demarcations of the aesthetic must be suppressed. Purity of motive is paramount. Bad art is mere art. Good art cannot be art.

To what extent, however, is the anti-aesthetic only another means of representing the experience of autonomy? The purpose of the anti-aesthetic is apparently to free us from the pernicious influence of the aesthetic ideology, but how does it represent this newfound autonomy? If we bear in mind the hazards of defining autonomy, this is hardly a facile question. The reason that Kant chose to represent human autonomy aesthetically was because he saw so clearly the paradox involved in trying to define it on the basis of predetermined concepts. To define freedom is in effect to define it out of existence. To analyze it is to murder to dissect. Kant came to the conclusion that freedom may be defined only on its own terms, and since 'its own terms' are not even comprehensible, although we comprehend their incomprehensibility, he proposed an analogy. The analogy is, of course, found in the experience of beauty. The beautiful object is, like freedom, its own definition. Thus, the experience of aesthetic autonomy, Kant concluded, is the closest that we ever come to understanding the nature of human freedom.

The very existence of the anti-aesthetic attests to the fact that we have not yet abandoned the hope of defining freedom apart from *a priori* determinations. For the stated purpose of the anti-aesthetic is to oppose ideology. But we no longer have recourse, after Auschwitz, to either the analogy of beauty or to the symbolic mode as a means of imagining human freedom. Allegory, however, remains a viable choice. The Romantics denigrated allegory as nonart, preparing it as the perfect vehicle for an anti-aesthetics once it emerged, and the allegorical escaped association with fascist ideology by virtue of its marginality in recent aesthetic and political history. Consequently, allegory has become today one of the most obvious tropes by which an anti-aesthetic vision of autonomy is being pursued. Whether called aesthetic or anti-aesthetic, however, the analogy according to which autonomy is conceived may very well remain the same. For if Kant was right about the nature of autonomy, the resources available for representing it are extremely limited. It remains to be seen, then,

whether allegory presents additional resources or merely rehabilitates the aesthetic as traditionally conceived. It also remains to be seen whether an anti-aesthetic representation of autonomy, if it can even be said to exist, is preferable to an aesthetic one.

To this end, I would like to make my way toward a conclusion by glancing briefly at de Man's late theory of the allegory of reading and at another, related use of allegory proposed by Fredric Jameson. My intention is to use the work of de Man and Jameson to illustrate the two responses to the aesthetic ideology that have tended to characterize the postmodern era. Both attempt to control the power of the aesthetic by subordinating it to a master narrative, but the difference between these master narratives is palpable. Briefly, the first approach opposes the aesthetic to a pseudo-aesthetics usually called the anti-aesthetic. It tries to remove the art object from the center of the aesthetic experience, but it usually replaces it with another object. This other object supposedly symbolizes a more 'authentic' experience of autonomy because its aesthetic idea is that aesthetic representation is corrupt, but it ultimately fails because this idea is so totalizing that it destroys the possibility of freedom as such. The second approach is more straightforward. It preserves the traditional view of the aesthetic object but restricts its idea to a particular political philosophy through which it believes autonomy will be achieved. In other words, it responds to the aestheticization of politics with a specific politicization of art.

De Man, we saw, redefined allegory with the intention of cutting it off sharply from 'symbolic and aesthetic syntheses' (*RT* 68). Allegory supposedly deconstructs by its very nature the malignant ideology of the aesthetic. And yet if we read de Man closely, it becomes clear that allegory performs this task in the name of a purer aesthetics, one characterized, nevertheless, by autonomy and the old-fashioned refusal to make any 'pronouncement on the nature of the world' (*RT* 10):

Whenever this autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available. The ensuing foregrounding of material, phenomenal aspects of the signifier creates a strong illusion of aesthetic seduction at the very moment when the actual aesthetic function has been, at the very least, suspended . . . . Literature involves the voiding, rather than the affirmation of aesthetic categories. (*RT* 10)

Aesthetics deludes us, de Man claims, by creating the perception of an organic or phenomenal relation between subjects and objects or between language and the world. The allegory of reading, however, debunks the illusion of aesthetic seduction in two crucial ways. First, it exposes the fact that language does not take part in the world. Meaning has no natural origin, despite the ideological claims made on behalf of symbolism. Second, allegorical reading renders visible the pure materiality of the signifier. It puts on display the objective characteristics of the sign by detaching it from its semantic function, thereby stripping language of its ideological and potentially offensive meanings.

It might appear that nothing remains of aesthetics after de Man has finished reading. Literature, for example, appears as pure void. But this is not the case. For the feast of reading leaves a few leftovers on his plate. What remains is the materiality of language as such. De Man peels away layer after layer of symbolic meaning to expose the kernel of the signifier, and this kernel, which is said to be 'material,' comes to represent the actual aesthetic function of language. In short, rhetorical reading strips away the so-called aesthetic illusions produced by symbolic objects labeled natural or organic only to disclose the existence of a deeper materiality, and this new object then comes to symbolize the aesthetic autonomy of language.

It should be noticed, however, that the experience of linguistic autonomy does not refer to the individual work of art, as Kant always insisted. De Man's aesthetic vision is not about either individuality or personal freedom. Rather, the work symbolizes a greater whole—the unity of language—which like nature in Coleridge appears as the aesthetic itself. Language now plays the role of total artwork, so local apparitions of the aesthetic do not possess any particular identity or distinctiveness. They merely stand for the larger whole, which is why de Man's readings always come to the same conclusions, always expose the same law of reading, regardless of the work being interpreted. It is no misuse of the term to say that de Man represents language as a 'state,' if we consider that he defines it as a sphere of existence, characterized by its own form, in which subjects exist under the rule of the external law of this form. De Man was right, then, to worry that technically correct rhetorical readings are 'totalizing (and potentially totalitarian)'—since he of all people understood the meaning of these expressions—for they demonstrate irrefutably, predictably, and repeatedly that language, even though

'defective,' is an enigmatic and sublime totality that organizes human existence (*RT* 19).

De Man's personal experience with the aesthetic ideology of National Socialism, it appears, leads him to repress the aesthetic object, but a new object returns in the form of the materiality of language itself. That this materiality may itself be a fiction and not a true object—for what precisely does it mean to refer to language as material?—only proves that he has doubly repressed the object. Instead of the aesthetic object, he embraces the idea of language as system. There is no object in de Man, then, only an idea that stands in for it, and because he both presupposes the existence of this idea and repeatedly produces it as the result of individual readings, his theory may be called with justice ideological. For ideology treats all events, objects, and subjects as if they were the logical exposition of its idea. That de Man identifies this idea, moreover, as the only authentic experience of autonomy means in the final analysis that his theory fails as an ideology critique.

Fredric Jameson has on several occasions championed a view of allegory similar to de Man's, although he has the virtue of being clear-sighted about what he is reacting against and about what his political motivations are. He is, after all, a Marxist. In *The Political Unconscious*, he explains that allegory, as opposed to symbolism, opens up aesthetic objects to 'multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated as so many levels and as so many supplementary interpretations' (29–30).<sup>11</sup> However, these multiple meanings do not oppose ideology at the immediate level, as de Man seems to claim, but prepare the object for 'further ideological investment' because they permit the subject 'to imagine a lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History' (30). A plethora of allegories exist, then, but they contribute to the aesthetic ideology insofar as they inflate the self-esteem of the subject by representing it as more powerful and stable than it really is. Nevertheless, the very existence of these allegories holds the possibility of making us aware of the multiplicity of interpretations available, and if we then make the connection between these interpretations and a sequence of modes of production, we will begin to see a larger picture that may act as the basis

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<sup>11</sup> References are to Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY, 1981).

of ideology critique. This picture is called the Marxian philosophy of history (33).

In later work, however, Jameson narrows his conception of allegory, and it acquires a more motivated relation to aesthetic experience. Rather than merely making us aware of the play of the signifier, allegory becomes a medium for politicizing aesthetic pleasure.<sup>12</sup> Allegory triggers 'a kind of dual or stereoscopic experience,' related to the aesthetics of the sublime, in which a subject experiences an object as both the object itself and as a pretext for the representation of a 'sheer unfigurable force' (*P* 72). Jameson calls this representation of pleasure allegorical for a precise reason: it supplements the enjoyment of a particular object with the pleasure of the political issue symbolized by it. The object thematizes the political issue, then, being both itself and other: 'the thematizing of a particular pleasure as a political issue . . . must always involve a dual focus, in which the local issue is meaningful and desirable in and of itself, but is also *at one and the same time* taken as the *figure* for Utopia in general, and for the systemic revolutionary transformation of society as a whole . . . . So also . . . a given piece of textual analysis must make a punctual or occasional statement about its object, but must also, at one and the same time, be graspable as a more general contribution to the Marxian problematic' (*P* 73–74). Allegory reveals that aesthetic pleasure is always political, for it opens up the Marxian problematic, that is, the transformability of social relations as a whole (*P* 73–74).

While Jameson reproduces the typical postmodern affiliation between allegory and the sublime, he does not seem to notice that his focus on the object places his theories squarely within the province of the beautiful. For the dual perspective in his definition of allegory is incompatible in the final analysis with either the Burkean or Kantian sublime. The sublime defines in both cases the subjective experience of self-limitation based not on the perception of an entity locatable in time and space but on the rupturing of these categories by an experience that cannot be called objective. This is why in both Burke and Kant the sublime is best referred to the experience of God. If

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<sup>12</sup> References are to Fredric Jameson, 'Pleasure: A Political Issue,' *The Ideologies of Theory, Volume 2* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 61–74, hereafter cited in the text as *P*; cf. 'Representations of Subjectivity,' *Discours social/Social Discourse* 6, 1–2 (1994): 47–60.

the sublime is to serve Marxist analysis, then, it is better used to represent the experience of confinement felt by subjects imprisoned within the alienating machinery of capitalism. However, Jameson wants art to play a revolutionary role, and this purpose requires that he accept the possibility of moving outside the confines of sublime totalities such as capitalism. It requires, in short, a vision of autonomy. And this requirement explains in turn why he must focus on the aesthetic object, for only the vision of an object that exists in the here and now as its own idea presents a viable analogy for human autonomy. Only this experience effectively represents the conflict between self and other (including other selves) constitutive of the fact of political existence, while simultaneously engaging the desire to resolve this conflict by imagining politics in its ideal form, that is, as a community in which many individuals with different interests and ends agree to agree about a common object: the community itself.

Jameson provides an extremely powerful description of aesthetic experience. In fact, it is so forceful that it subverts his own political agenda. For the beauty of his interpretations begins to collapse the moment that he tries to read the allegorical duality of the aesthetic object in terms of his particular political philosophy. Few people will accept that the defining truth of the political unconscious is the philosophy of Marx. If the idea of a political unconscious is persuasive, then, it remains so only at a general level, the level, that is, at which it reproduces the ideal of community experienced by everyone in the individual perception of the work of art. This is certainly an experience of the *polis*, but it is not a particular one. If this experience is to be called allegorical, as Jameson insists, it appears that allegory summons the aesthetics of beauty only under another name.

Today more art is being made and enjoyed in the West than at any other time in history. In the United States, annual attendance at museums has grown from 200 million in 1965 to 865 million in 1997, and there are currently more than 9000 museums, containing some 700 million artifacts and specimens, with their doors open to the public. In a ten-year period, Germany built 300 museums, and France already has 1000.<sup>13</sup> A new museum seems to open every day

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<sup>13</sup> Statistics for Europe cited by Régis Debray, 'Universal Art: The Desperate Religion,' *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Spring 1992): 35-41, esp. 36; other statistics provided by the American Association of Museums and the Institute of Museum Services.



in Europe. All of this may be the effect of the increasing segmentation and individualization of Western society, since the aesthetic is a mode of subjectivization. But it may also be a response to the increasing desire on the part of individual members of society to feel at one with society again, to imagine beautiful solutions to the conflicts that they feel between their own inclinations and the desires and needs of the many. If it is true that the political world is now threatened by a growing failure of the imagination and an attendant decline in individual judgment and responsibility, it may be the case precisely because the experiences of the mid-twentieth century have made it impossible for us to think about politics as a craft in which imagination, creativity, beauty, and good taste are crucial.

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In 1992 the revenue for museums and botanical and zoological parks was 3.4 billion dollars in the United States. Both *Art Participation in America: 1982-92*, Research Division Report #27, and *1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, Research Division Report #39, of the National Endowment for the Arts, prepared by Jack Faucett Associates (n.p., October 1993 and December 1998, respectively), contain many useful statistics about participation in and attitudes toward art. For example, in 1997 50 percent of adults in the United States attended an arts performance or exhibition during the previous year in contrast to 41 percent in 1992 and 39 percent in 1982 and 1985. Audiences for opera, classical music, and jazz performances were 4.7, 15.6, and 11.9 percent, respectively. Audiences for opera, classical music, and jazz programming on the radio were 10.8, 41, and 39.3 percent. Reading literature was at 63.1 percent.