

(Mis)reading Proust: Style, Rhetoric, Allegory
Zlatan Filipovic

*You and I know enough to know it's warm
Compared with cold, and cold compared with
warm.
But all the fun's in how you say a thing.*

ô ô Robert Frost, "The Mountain"

I.

The question of style in rhetoric has always been associated with clarity and intelligibility, signifying different modes of expression that can articulate the same subject matter in order to be more persuasive. "Proper" style, since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, has been determined in terms of clarity and dignity of expression where clarity is not allowed to become too prosaic nor dignity too excessive to deviate from common practice. Good style is thus the well-known Aristotelian "golden mean" or moderation between two excesses. Clarity uncommon enough to astonish and dignity common enough to reassure. "Proper words in proper places," to use Jonathan Swift, a rhetorician of another kind, would be the definition of good style or proper *lexis* for proper *topos*, which means that style should be appropriate to the subject matter. The very fact that it is not in *A Modest Proposal* is what characterizes satire whose rhetorical effect, as Swift was well aware, is dependent on the very authority of what it mocks. Good style should thus always be proportionate to its subject matter. In this paper, however, I will focus on the invasiveness of style, its ability to disable cognition, and the fact that style first emerges in the failure of reflexivity between *lexis* and *topos*, precisely in what, for Aristotle, would be "bad style," that is to say, in the disruption of continuity between rhetoric and narrative content, which will be further related to questions of reading, of temporality and politics.

The incursion of style upon our ability to read, the "*coup de style*," indeed of *stylus*, of a pointed object that "might be used in a vicious attack against what philosophy appeals to in the name of matter," as Derrida writes in *Spurs*,¹ will in this paper take the form of specific tropological concerns that will be given in terms of Paul de Man's understanding of allegory and

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978), 37.

reading. Style, inescapably tied to rhetoric and figurativity as a mode of expression, will become a syncope of cognition present in every text: a disruptive possibility of the text that outmatches its potential to be read. Style, seen in these terms, is a certain excess or lack of text that opens to a *jouissance* of reading, the pain of having read always too much or too little, of always having read *otherwise*.

What the rhetorical structure of reading in de Man points to, as we shall see in his reading of Proust, is the radical impossibility of its closure. One will never have read enough. By reactivating a certain performance or stylization of the origin that the aesthetico-referential programs push into latency, rhetoric saves reading from the terror of positivism. Style intervenes, in other words, in the reference regimes precisely by recalling the allegorical structuring of their authority. Style itself becomes a *mise en abyme* of reference, what uproots the hermeneutic structures often organized around the fetishised figures of the literal precisely in order to disappear, like a ghostly police state that obliterates the traces of its own inscription. “Styling” then could also be seen as an assault on mimetic regimes of aesthetic politics, because it points to virtual presents in a bid that saves the possibility of imagining alternatives to the world. And the exigency of reading is to keep this possibility forever open.

II.

It is in the errancy of language that all texts initiate, in the very fact that something first must be missing for the narrative to begin. But as long as there is narrative, there will have been missed contents of narration. Allegory, as we shall see, will be the figure that registers this default in the narratological economy. There is thus a permanent threat of misreading, what we call style, in every reading. One always risks missing the point. If “all the fun’s in how you say a thing,” then all the tragedy lies in the possibility of misunderstanding what the fun implies. But style is not a deficiency of meaning, an “aberration,” to use de Man’s idiom, but rather its condition of possibility. To the extent that all language is figurative, all language is aberrant. As soon as in the territory of language, in other words, one is in the territory of style. Style is the openness in which the fact of language takes place. It is what gives it its face. But insofar as it always implies multiplicity, it also signifies the possibility of an *otherwise*, which keeps traumatizing closed structures, recalling them to their own rescindability. One could say that style is the very trace of rhetoricity in the text and a memory of contingency in the system.

Texts will thus always imply an *otherwise* or *allegoria*, literally “other speaking,” that devastates reading by reactivating its virtual states. There is another text within it, certain latency or unconscious, a voice of another pushed back that reading cannot account for—which is why every reading is a misreading. A text, in other words, is thus always divided, “there always is an infra-text.” It is never singular but always plural—there is not a text but, rather, there are always texts.² Meaning then is radically unstable, subject to rescindability, its history is always *yet to be read*. Far from being nihilistic, however, this is nothing other but an affirmation of reading in a Nietzschean sense, as the joyous celebration of a world without “sure play,” as Derrida puts it, no longer turned towards presence but “without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation.”³

In de Man’s terms, this disinscription of meaning, its rescindability, “serves the disillusioning function of recalling *the substitutive character...* and *the forgotten fictivity* of the system.”⁴ This is why, for de Man, allegory will be the exemplary figure of rhetoricity that constitutes all language. It is as if in allegory language struggled to free itself from the confines of mimeticism that determines positivistic rationality, revealing its true condition. Allegory is an index of referential miscarriage constitutive of all

² What de Man will say when reading Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” against his later poem “Obsession” in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric”: “There are always at least two texts, regardless of whether they are actually written out or not... Whenever we encounter a text such as “Obsession”—that is, *whenever we read—there always is an infra-text* [emphasis added], a hypogram like “Correspondances” underneath... The power that takes one from one text to the other is not just a power of displacement... but the sheer blind violence that Nietzsche... domesticated by calling it, metaphorically, an *army of tropes*.” Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 262.

³ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 369.

⁴ In his contribution to *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, Hans-Jost Frey engages the double movement of “defacement” and de Man’s use of *prosopopeia* or “face-lending” in “Autobiography As De-Facement:” First, he writes, “the act of face-lending [*prosopon poien*, to confer a face or a mask] as such is already a defacement... But this is easily forgotten, because the constructive urge, seeking to create coherence, does not like to recall the disaccord from which it springs. A systematizing drive is at work in *prosopopeia*. The face fixes itself into a rigid order and is taken seriously. In order to reestablish itself as the hypothetical figure it is, *the face must decompose itself again*. This removal of the face is the second form of defacement, and serves the disillusioning function of recalling the substitutive character of the face and the forgotten fictivity of the system.” Hans-Jost Frey, “Undecidability,” *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, ed. Peter Brooks et al. (special issue of *Yale French Studies*, vol. 69, 1985), 90-91, emphasis added.

language. The differential structure, as we shall see, between meaning and reference, is not only *not* forgotten in allegory, but what figurative language *masks* is disclosed in the very structure of allegory. Allegory registers the memory of all figures *as* masks by tearing them off. It is a permanent interruption of the aesthetic closures and an irreducible part of every reading. “The allegorical representation of Reading,” de Man writes, is “the irreducible component of any text. All that will be represented in such an allegory *will deflect from the act of reading and BLOCK access to its understanding*. The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading. But this impossibility necessarily extends to the word ‘reading’ which is thus deprived of any referential meaning whatsoever.”⁵ It is the referential flight of meaning that the text narrates, its failure to state what it knows, that de Man calls allegory. This flight, of course, with a force of primary repression, opens all economies of tropological substitutivity, style, iterability and desire—it is what in “the work” of reading remains its unappropriable condition.

In his reading of Proust, de Man singles out an episode where young Marcel, the narrator of the novel, reflects on the nature of this allegorical “blockage.” Charles Swann, a friend of Marcel’s family, a wealthy socialite and art connoisseur, who has a keen eye for analogy, comes to visit the family at Combray and compares the kitchen maid in Marcel’s household to Giotto’s allegorical representation of Charity. But the metaphor, de Man writes, “by generalising itself in its own allegory... seems to have displaced its proper meaning” (AR, 73). Its meaning has been carried out of the limits the power of analogical relation confers: “The kitchen maid resembles Giotto’s Charity, but it appears [to Marcel] that the latter’s gesture also makes her resemble Françoise,” the uncharitable but dutiful maid in charge of the household. “If the image, as a representation, also connotes Françoise,” as de Man continues, “it widely misses its mark, for nothing could be less charitable than Françoise, especially in her attitude toward the kitchen maid (AR, 76). In other words, the figure of the metaphor designates the reference of its ground split by two incompatible meanings unable to coexist. The passage literally becomes an impasse or an *aporia* for Marcel. However, it is even before this that Proust begins to dramatize the power of allegory to destabilise the narrative continuity by placing in question its referential status, which opens young Marcel to the anxiety of reference, a

⁵ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979: 77), emphasis added. Hereafter, AR.

certain chronic nervousness of words that, in fact, opens the history of reading: “What was more,” says Marcel, the kitchen maid,

poor girl, fattened by her pregnancy even in her face, even in her cheeks, which descended straight and square, rather resembled, in fact, those strong, mannish virgins, matrons really, in whom the virtues are personified in the Arena [the Arena Chapel in Padua]. And I realise now that those virtues resembled her in another way. Just as the image of this girl was increased by the added symbol she carried before her belly without appearing to understand its meaning, *without expressing in her face anything of its beauty and spirit*, as a mere heavy burden, in the same way the powerful housewife who is represented at the Arena below the name ‘Caritas’... embodies this virtue *without any thought of charity seeming ever to have been capable of being expressed by her vulgar, energetic face*.⁶

And further down: “Envy, too, might have had more of a particular expression of envy” (83). Allegory then narrates precisely the interruption of continuity between the sign and its meaning—one that is initially displeasing for Marcel, and displeasing because disjunctive, and unaesthetic.⁷ Both the kitchen maid and Charity are allegorical representations of virtue *only insofar as they are incapable of representing it*. What ties them together is the unreadability of their own narration. They both express what allegory does not narrate; they allegorize, in other words, only the impossibility of narration.

The failure of metaphor here does not create tension but tears its own connective tissue apart as soon as it is allegorised: “From the structural and rhetorical point of view,” says de Man, “all that matters is that the allegorical representation leads towards a meaning that diverges from the initial meaning to the point of foreclosing its manifestation” (AR, 75). What is foreclosed then is the possibility of reading. *Allegoria* that haunts the text as its undecidability comes here to arrogate the power of conferring meaning that it has at the same time displaced. It disassembles the trap of literalism

⁶ Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Penguin Books, 2002: 83), emphasis added.

⁷ Allegory indeed, as Benjamin says, goes “beyond beauty.” It is “disjunctive and “atomizing.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998, 208). Insofar as it refers to a meaning it does not constitute, it is the moment of lacerated beauty, of non-coincidence or disproportion. Allegory mutilates the beautiful face of art by reopening the fissure in representation. “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” writes Benjamin (178). And “ruins” are petrified, open-ended borders of meaning, splinters of the past offered to infinite misreadings that are underway to a referent they will never reach, which is why they are always overdetermined. Allegory as a “ruin” desediments meaning and opens it to a territorial loss.

set up by tropological systems and, at least, “states the truth of its aberration” (AR, 76)—this, however, as de Man cautions, does not make allegory more authentic or epistemologically reliable. Reference of Charity that can be as uncharitable as Françoise and that allows of no adjudication of meaning becomes, for de Man, the allegorical representation of reading in general. Indeed, de Man writes, “a literal reading of Giotto’s fresco would never have discovered what it meant, *since all the represented properties point in a different direction*. We know the meaning of the allegory only because Giotto... spelled it out on the upper frame of his painting: *KARITAS*. We accede to the proper meaning by a direct act of reading, not by *the oblique* reading of the allegory” (AR, 77, emphasis added). And it is this obliqueness—this impossibility of getting it right—inherent in every reading, that accounts for the irreducible plurality of styles, or, what amounts to the same thing, the impossibility of reading other than *otherwise*. Style, then, could be seen as that which desediments reading by proposing it to an always-there of its otherwise.

If anything, allegory signifies the errancy of what it states. It seems to disconnect the narrative pattern, now troubled and nervous, no longer able to know what it means. There is a sort of static between the allegorical sign and its reference that questions the very possibility of connection. What is in question in allegory is the accountability of reference or anteriority. Reading a paragraph from de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller identifies allegory precisely as a figure of unreadability. Allegory, he writes,

means to say it otherwise in the marketplace, in public, as an esoteric expression of an esoteric wisdom. As in the case of parable, for example, the parables of Jesus in the Gospels, this is the 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 never will do so from anything on the surface. A paradox of unreadability is therefore built into the concept of allegory from the beginning.⁸

Allegory says it otherwise, *in style*. It signifies precisely “this Charity without charity,” as Marcel reflects in Proust, “this Envy which looked like nothing more than a plate in a medical book” or “a Justice whose greyish and meanly regular face was the very same which, in Combray,

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, “‘Reading’ Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*” in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989: 162), emphasis added. Hereafter cited as RDR.

characterised certain petty, pious and unfeeling bourgeois ladies I saw at Mass, some of whom had long since been enrolled in the reserve militia of Injustice” (*Way by Swann’s*, 84). There is thus a tropological disturbance of substitutive patterns that would stabilise the text. Mirrors are broken, the specular tropological structure fissured, pieces do not really coincide as the moment of reflexivity is ripped through by a mismatch that makes the part larger than the whole that would contain it: the face of Charity goes beyond charity it seeks to represent; it is “vulgar, energetic” (83), uncharitable, charity defaced. The loss of the specular structure as the condition of all cognitive understanding undermines also our capacity to read the text and be done with it. Allegory splinters the text or rather makes its splinters blind the reader in his attempt to read it—paradoxically however, the reader that fully sees is the one that refuses to read. In case of this particular passage from Proust, “a single icon engenders two meanings, the one representational and literal, the other allegorical and ‘proper,’ and the two meanings,” says de Man, “fight each other with the blind power of stupidity” (AR, 76). The allegorical, for Marcel, as we have seen, is unwarranted because it reads what it does not state; the representational, by reading what it states, reads “improperly.” So, fully having read, or thinking one has, is not to have read at all. For reading, as de Man writes, is “something else:”

Everything in this novel signifies something other than what it represents... it is always something else that is intended. It can be shown that the most adequate term to designate this “something else” is Reading. But one must at the same time “understand” that this word bars access, once and forever, to a meaning that yet can never cease to call out for its understanding. (AR, 77)

To read, in other words, is to have misread, to have read *in style* or otherwise, and to have already deserted what one reads. This “otherwise” keeps the call for its understanding open. It is also what destines reading to history, but one that is shorn of hope that we will ever have read properly, ever found the “right” style. Indeed, as long as there is style, the right one (we) will be missing. “Referential statements,” as Miller suggests in *The Ethics of Reading*, what would ground the text, “are aberrant not in the sense of wandering away from some ascertainable norm, but in the sense of being *a perpetual wandering from beginning to end*... we have no way to measure whether or not they are aberrant. All we can know is that they may be in error.”⁹ Although Miller does not say so explicitly, the persistent threat of

⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987:57), emphasis added. But there is no room for despair. The unensurability of meaning is the very

misreading is also what tears open a space for ethical obligation. There is an imperative, what one *must* do, only against, and indeed *in spite of*, the originary unensurability of its ground. One *must* precisely insofar as one does not have to—this is the force of the imperative that commands only against the fundamental unmasterability of what grounds it. Without this contingency the imperative would lose the force of its exigency; in its very categoricity, in other words, it is shadowed by a possible contingency. “There can be an imperative,” Werner Hamacher writes, “only because the referential function finds no correspondence in that imperative... Therefore every imperative must remain exposed to the question of whether it is not merely in the service of contingent authorities and ephemeral experiences.”¹⁰

III.

The unmasterability of reference is also what opens history and the possibility of reading, history that is nothing other than the opening to the future of reading. The text, as long as there is one, will always have cut itself loose from the truth of its reading, although it may carry its remains in the odd number of its creases that, unfolded, never really add up. And, as long as the text makes reading impossible, as long as there is unreadability that, as de Man says, “necessarily extends to the word ‘reading,’” (AR, 77), there will have been time for reading. Unreadability that is constitutive of the text is what gives us time to read. “As a writer,” says de Man, “Proust is the one who knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth’s inability to coincide with itself. *A la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight” (AR, 78). The allegory of reading becomes the accountant of time that derives from the tension between “the referential and the figural semantic fields” (AR, 157), which is to say from its rhetoricity. But also and “contrary to what one might think, [it is rhetoricity that] enforces the inevitably ‘political’ nature or, more correctly, the ‘politicality’ (since one could hardly speak of ‘nature’ in this case) of all forms of human language...” (156), writes de Man. The political, in de Man’s case, is thus made possible by the radical allegorization, that is to say, the stylization, of the “natural link” constitutive of all language that “is not conceived as a transcendental principle” but precisely, he says, as “the possibility of contingent error”

revenue of literary discourse; it is what makes it proliferate. Without it there would be neither reading nor literature to read.

¹⁰ Werner Hamacher, “LECTIO: de Man’s Imperative” in *Reading de Man Reading*, 186.

(AR, 156). And it is this possibility, hardwired in the very stuff of language, that opens the space of the contestability of the social, that I call the political. Rhetoric in de Man, considered politically disabling because of its obsessive referential attrition, is then—and for precisely the same reason—rather what opens the possibility of articulating alternatives to the world, leading to *too much* politics rather than lack of it.

The impossibility of reading and the inability of language to denominate, is not derivative but constitutive of all language. Insofar as there is something like language, referential indeterminacy remains irreducible. And this “unensurability of meaning,” as Hamacher notes, “is not an effect of the temporal succession in which the text unfolds, as phenomenological and historicist hermeneutic approaches would happily assume, nor is it a consequence of the historical distance between the text and its understanding. On the contrary, time and history are first opened up by the semantic indeterminacy of language” (RDR, 174). In other words, the ontological unfolding of presence in its hard, singular, mutilated faces—time itself—is scripted in the fabric of language as “the possibility of contingent error.”

Reading that for de Man, as we have seen, always carries the possibility of misrecognition is essentially disintegrative and allegory is the figure that makes this possibility apparent. In Proust, it is forgetting and dismemberance that powers *mémoire involontaire* as a disturbance that tears open a hole of time. Rather than revealing a consistency of integrated consciousness, *mémoire involontaire* reveals the impossibility of self-knowledge: “It is a waste of effort,” writes Proust’s narrator, “for us to try to summon it, all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it” (*Way by Swann’s*, 47). Scattered impressions and fragments, “ruins” of memory—that strictly speaking is no longer ours but that of the other, of another-speaking, of *allegoria*—are suddenly “unanchored at a great depth” (48). Far from being integrative, this means rather that self-reflexivity is permanently disjunct and uncertain, unfolded only in what interrupts self-possession, dependent on chance encounters and random occurrences without anything to plot the drama of their appearance. What makes us whole in Proust is what reveals us permanently wounded.

Mémoire involontaire disperses thus the phenomenology of self-exposition. It operates an allegorical evisceration of identity. It is not a *technē* of *anamnesis*, a recovery of subjectivity, but precisely a resistance to

it, what would be an inscription of an “elsewhere” in it, of the other that like lightening in sudden bursts interrupts all egology as the history of self-reflexivity. Such disintegrative moments are also stylistic effractions of the illusion of continuity and narrative progression, which accounts for the digressive element of Proust’s writing: in search of time that is always, and remains, infinitely out of time. *Mémoire involontaire*, in other words, remembers as much as it *dismembers*—what de Man will say of autobiography in general: “[it] deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores.”¹¹ It reveals the impossibility of integrated consciousness. In its sudden exposures, *mémoire involontaire* tells that there is a sort of half-open book to us (a *hypogram*?) whose lines we have written in a language we no longer speak but that permanently speaks and conspires against us. It is not the unconscious—that would fit the Freudian paradigm too readily—but something radically exterior, for the unconscious is still implicated in the economy of the ego as a reserve fund for the inadmissible. It is some other *other* that unravels the limits of identity, keeps it wounded permanently, prevents it from closing in upon its own in repose or atrophy, that shows what can only be the originary impossibility of *Narcissus* or self-identity.

It is thus allegory rather than metaphor that is at the heart of Proust’s writing. Indeed, Proust’s entire search for lost time could be seen as an allegory of the impossibility of integration, of permanent losses and mourning.

Allegory is always an allegory of a tropological stabilisation in the text, a “*contre*” in every text, what in reading as a cognitive process turns against it, so to speak. Allegory is both the cause of reading failure and of its possibility. It narrates the story of unaccountability of reference or, in de Man’s words, “of its own denominational aberration” (AR, 162). It is a process of deconstruction that exposes the unwarranted conceptual systems that substitute reference for signification in a bid to finally close off the textual field. Inability to read keeps this field open; it is the very source of reading and its takings. For what is reading if not an allegory of its own repetitive failures to read that keeps the text rescindable, open to continual retests: the very revenue of reading. For de Man, Avital Ronell writes, “[r]eading involves the undoing of interpretative figures to the extent that it questions whether any synthesis, any single meaning, can close off a text and adequately account for its constitution... [it] ‘states the logic of figures

¹¹ Paul de Man, “Autobiography As De-Facement,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984:81).

and the logic of narratives to be constantly divergent,”¹² what one could call the very definition of style. But allegory itself is a figure that can “only repeat this aberration on various levels of rhetorical complexity” (AR, 162, emphasis added). In other words, for de Man, allegory does not escape the reappropriative metaphors of reading.

Ronell, however, distinguishes between interpretation and reading: “In contrast to interpretation,” she writes, “which involves a development over the course of a narrative toward a single figure reconciling all its diverse moments, ‘reading’ ‘states the logic of figures and the logic of narratives to be constantly divergent.’” (*Stupidity*, 104). This distinction, however, is problematic not only because the shades of its edges are impossible to delimit—where does reading begin and interpretation end?—but also because it annuls, in a stroke, the very premise of de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology* and the politico-epistemic stakes in reading. It surreptitiously postulates the possibility of authentic or correct reading—the end of style, in our terms—that somehow precedes interpretative process and regulates the field of its displacements, what would be the *ad-venture* of truth. De Man, however, makes no such claim for his reading but, on the contrary, repeatedly states the impossibility of any reading, including his own, *not* to forget its rhetorical status.¹³ Reading cannot *not* be referential: “All readings are in error because they assume their own readability” (AR, 202), but this is precisely what opens reading to further deconstruction. Once again, allegory *does not* escape the reappropriative or cognitive metaphors of reading, but this is also why we never will have finished reading. Reading *both* (con)states and performs the undoing its own statement. It “never ceases to partake of the very violence against which it is directed,” as de Man writes in “Shelley Disfigured.”¹⁴

The allegorical disruption that recalls closed conceptual systems to their substitutivity, their originary stylization, the originary *prosthesis* or performance of anteriority, will thus necessarily lead to another reappropriation that takes its own undoing as the referential closure. Catastrophe of cognition then is only a syncope, a fainting or a loss that gets repossessed—but that now leaves *visible its originary virtuality*. In other words, allegory as a trope reiterates the mimetic model that calls for yet another reading: “Texts engender texts,” de Man says, “as a result of their necessarily aberrant semantic structure; hence the fact that they consist of a

¹² Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: Illinois UP, 2002:104).

¹³ Cf. *Allegories of Reading*, 162, 205, 240, 242, 275.

¹⁴ Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 119.

series of repetitive reversals...” (AR, 162). Whenever reading stops, it does so prematurely. The possibility of referential reading, however, is the horizon and the pathogen of every reading, which is why it solicits a call for the infinite vigilance of deconstruction that will never have come to rest and that, in the end, is committed to what Derrida would call an *absolute arrivant*, for which or “for whom one must leave an empty place.”¹⁵ This is why de Man can write that “deconstructive discourses are suspiciously text-productive” (AR, 200). For what deconstruction cannot reach is closure. It cannot complete itself because *it is owed to the other*, which is why it is not a system but rather a reading of inevitable misreading inherent to all systems. Deconstruction is the rear-guard work of style, what recalls the substitutivity of all systems.

IV.

Style emerges thus in the fissure between sign and meaning, that is to say, in unreadability. It is the radical allegorisation of “the natural link,” the interruption of continuity between sign and meaning that I propose to call style—what shows that sign and meaning can never coincide, e.g., Charity *represented* by “uncharitable” Françoise in Proust or Justice whose face becomes “unfeeling” and “unjust.” Style itself is an indication of a lost reference of reading. Furthermore, like reading, there is never just only one

¹⁵ The *arrivant* in Derrida is affirmed as an absolute alterity or wholly other in Levinasian terms and his notion of the other as pure transcendence that remains outside phenomenology—to greet the other *as other*, as unassimilable, is to do him justice. Absolute *arrivant* comes also as the unpredictability of the future, as alterity that remains radically unforeseeable, without anticipation, as Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*: “Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise of the arrivant from whom or from which one will not ask anything in return and who or which will not be asked to commit to the domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, state, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, even humanity), just opening which renounces any right to property, any right in general, messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited as such, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope...” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994:81-82). This is what reading is pledged to; it commits all its resources, owes itself to the other, to the unwritten accounts of its history—which means that history is never past *but always yet to be done*. For *absolute arrivant*, cf. also Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1993:33-35).

but a plurality of styles. It is only ever in plural. As we have seen, style points to an interruption and failure of our ability to read, to a temporary swoon or syncope of cognition that shows “the logic of figures and the logic of narratives to be constantly divergent.” This would be the idea of *stylus* as a “pointed object” that intervenes, literally punctures the attempt to totalize or close off a text. The fissure to which style points is rhetorical and manifested in the structure of allegory that preserves the alterity of the text, its ultimate unreadability that, however, makes reading itself possible. It is here also, in this impotence to read, that the political finds its conditions of possibility, because it allows for the contestability of the social, the social that is never fully read, that remains incomplete. Style intervenes in the reference regimes to show the inscription and the contingent nature of their authority. It is tied to politics in that it presupposes the possibility of synchronic alternative meanings. And this is what reading is, always *otherwise*, in style.

As the trace of rhetoricity in the text, style keeps visible the contingency of the historical archives and epistemic regimes making possible alternate economies of meaning. As a memory of contingency in the system, it frees up its repressed energies. This general freeing of latency in the text disrupts all possibilities of its totalisation. Unlike other rhetorical figures, allegory, as we have seen, is the very expression of style, of its performative possibilities. As a figure that registers the inscriptive traces of the system, allegory points to a certain originary prosthetics or performance of anteriority, the originary styling of the origin.

Style opens thus to an absence of any unifying principle that would arrest the drift of text in peripheral readings, its very *ek-stasis*. It is affirmative and remains complicit, without conscience, with Nietzschean destruction of epistemic orders. It is the affirmation of reading as a certain continual intoxication of disinscription of meaning, the inability of language to synchronize with its object, without thereby being governed by a negative, guilty desire for the proper. The proper is style-*less*. It is the stupor and atrophy of style. Style is rather the trauma of this drowsiness. It is astonishment itself, and reading shows itself in this traumatism of the same by placing it in question, by mortifying it without end. In style, the body and matter of the text are lost, dismembered in a dance of active interpretation, but they are lost without grandeur: there is nothing to commemorate. Indeed, if “all the fun’s in *how* you say a thing,” as Frost suggests, then we will never stop laughing.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso.
- De Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- De Man, Paul. 1984. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Trans. Barbara Harlow. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge.
- Frey, Hans-Jost. 1985. "Undecidability." *The Lesson of Paul de Man*. Ed. Peter Brooks et al. *Yale French Studies*, vol. 69, Yale UP, 124-34.
- Hamacher, Werner. 1989. "LECTIO: de Man's Imperative." *Reading de Man Reading*. Ed. Lindsay Waters & Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 171-202.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 1987. *The Ethics of Reading*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 1989. "'Reading' Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*." *Reading de Man Reading*, 155-71.
- Proust, Marcel. 2002. *The Way by Swann's*. Trans. Lydia Davis. London: Penguin Books.
- Ronell, Avital. 2002. *Stupidity*. Chicago: Illinois UP.