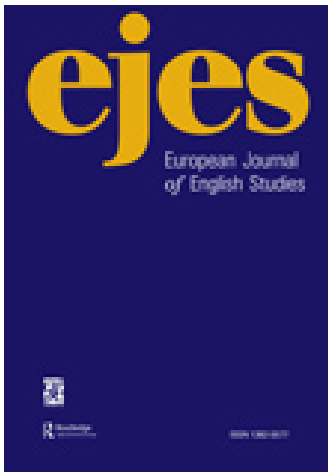


This article was downloaded by: [Stockholm University Library]

On: 02 September 2014, At: 11:18

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



European Journal of English Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/neje20>

Posthuman Affect

Pieter Vermeulen

Published online: 31 Aug 2014.

To cite this article: Pieter Vermeulen (2014) Posthuman Affect, European Journal of English Studies, 18:2, 121-134, DOI: [10.1080/13825577.2014.917001](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2014.917001)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2014.917001>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article has a double aim: it contributes to a new theorisation of posthumanism and it revisits standard accounts of the relations between posthumanism and deconstruction. Departing from the observation that the distinction between (semantic, subjective) emotions and (asignifying, nonsubjective) affects is critical for posthumanism, the article shows how posthumanism can be described as a minimal emotive scenario. In this scenario, the cancellation of humanism and its strictly codified emotions generates intractable and nonsubjective second-order affects. Both pleasurable and terrifying, these 'posthuman affects' resemble traditional notions of the sublime, without the latter's recuperative and reterritorialising connotations. The article mobilises this broad emotive understanding of posthumanism to question the traditional account of the rise of posthumanism as a reaction to the excessively textualist and literary interests of deconstruction. Focusing on Paul de Man's readings of Kant, Schiller and Hegel, it shows how de Man's use of the notion of 'materiality' – another key term in the discourse of posthumanism – is already part of an emotive scenario that, like later posthumanist practices, revises the traditional structure of the sublime in order to map a shift from human emotion to posthuman affect.

Keywords: aesthetics; affect; de Man, Paul; emotion; materiality; posthumanism; second-order feeling; sublime

Posthumanism and affect

'Abhuman', 'ahuman', 'inhuman', 'nonhuman', 'posthuman': the proliferation of these terms, with their intersecting and overlapping tonalities and meanings, testifies to the ambition of contemporary critical thought to grasp phenomena that resist the labels of the human or humanism. This essay capitalises on the trivial observation that of all these terms, only 'posthuman' clearly denotes a change, a transition and thus a minimal narrative movement: indeed, the prefix 'post' encrypts a micro-narrative passage from humanism to that which is left or emerges in its wake. This transition is often coded as an institutional story of the development, during the last three decades, from the excessively textualist and literary focus of deconstruction to a more affirmative engagement with the world outside the text – with bodies, animals, affects, technologies and materialities of different

kinds. Characterising these engagements as ‘posthuman’ – rather than, say, ‘inhuman’ or ‘nonhuman’ – is a reminder that they are underwritten by a complex and contradictory mixture of anxieties, desires and exhilarations. Such an assemblage of affects always besets the abandonment of old certainties and pieties – in this case, those of humanism and the category of the human that it used to define and sustain.

The movement away from a buttressing of the human to a dynamic radically subverting it does more than shape the institutional account of contemporary critical thought; it is also encoded in the theoretical foundations of one of the emerging forms of posthumanist thought: the field of affect theory. Theories of affect share ‘the belief that affect is independent of signification and meaning’ (Leys, 2011: 443). They routinely oppose ‘affects’ to ‘emotions’; whereas the former are non-subjective and asignifying forces that are ‘disconnected from meaningful sequencing’ and are ‘narratively de-localized’ (Massumi, 2002: 25), emotions function as defensive moves that reterritorialise these unregimented forces onto a human subject. Emotion is a ‘subjective content’ rather than a nonsubjective intensity; it is ‘intensity owned and recognized’ (28); affect, in contrast, is an impersonal dynamic principle that cuts across personal feelings and experiences.

Theories of affect, in other words, name a dynamic that *precedes* human subjectivity, while signalling the recuperative move in which these intractable forces are *recoded* as subjective possessions. Like many other posthumanist practices, theories of affect are marked by a double temporality: *institutionally*, they are what comes *after* humanism and the human; on the level of *content*, however, they recall what *precedes* human life, and what the category of the ‘human’ recuperates as an individual possession (Cecchetto, 2011: 21–2). Brian Massumi (2002: 128), whose work has been exceptionally influential in the theorisation of affect, writes that ‘[t]he extension into the posthuman is thus a bringing to full expression a prehumanity of the human. It is the limit-expression of *what the human shares with everything it is not*: a bringing out of its *inclusion* in matter’ (italics in the original).

If posthumanism succeeds humanism in intellectual history, it makes its mark by reminding the human of its embeddedness in nonhuman matter. In the work of Cary Wolfe, for instance, posthumanism is *not* a form of ‘transhumanism’ that holds that ‘the “human” is achieved by ... transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether’ (2010: xv). Through this drive to abandon the messiness of the body for the purities of the digital or the spiritual, transhumanism is merely ‘an *intensification* of humanism’ (xv), and this is an option that Wolfe resists. N. Katherine Hayles shares this resistance when she notes that ‘embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman’. She remarks that this ‘erasure of embodiment’ merely continues the operations of the traditional liberal humanist subject that the project of cybernetics aimed to displace (1999: 4).

More critical versions of posthumanism instead oppose fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy. Hayles proposes a *different* posthumanism, or what the introduction to this volume calls a ‘critical posthumanism’ (Callus, Herbrechter and Rossini, 2014). Such a critical posthumanism would ‘put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects’ (Hayles, 1999: 5). For Wolfe and Hayles, posthumanism does not denote

the successful transcendence of nonhuman constraints, but instead sends a double message: it declares the end of humanism by insisting that the discrete, disembodied entity of the human never existed. Further, posthumanism displaces humanist sensibilities by suggesting that they have never been more than an illusion. Critical posthumanism makes humanism unavailable as a former possession; in other words, humanism cannot even be properly mourned for. As it emerges in critical posthumanism, the posthuman represents a site in which neither relief nor grief is felt. Near the end of her book *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles (1999) hints at the more ambivalent emotive experience of the posthuman, noting that ‘the prospect of becoming posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure’ (283): terror is linked to the prospect of the disappearance of the human, and pleasure is tied to ‘the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means’ (285).¹

In this essay, I want to bring the resources of the ‘turn to affect’ (Leys, 2011), which is one face of critical posthumanism, to bear on the passage of the human to the posthuman. I argue that this passage can be fruitfully described as a minimal emotive scenario. On this reading, the posthuman can be plotted as a necessarily affective experience of the demise of the strictly codified, subjective feelings that are associated with traditional notions of human subjectivity; significantly, the *demise* of feeling that posthumanist thought seeks to enact generates second-order feelings that are less easily captured, defined, understood or reterritorialised onto the subject. To state this in the nomenclature of affect theory, posthumanism encodes a scenario in which the demise of (subjective, semantic) ‘emotions’ is followed by (intractable, asignifying) ‘affects’ that can be called second-order feelings to the extent that they emerge in the wake of first-order emotions. If it refuses to indulge in the fantasies of the transformation of the human into ‘a disembodied posthuman’ (Hayles, 1999: 22), posthumanism can be understood as an emotive scenario in which a ‘suspension’ of the procedures and pieties of humanism takes place. The elision of humanism’s ‘clearly identifiable emotions’ (Smith, 2011: 162) produces a complex, difficult and often contradictory affective dynamic, which Hayles’s mixture of terror and pleasure tries to name.

From the sublime to second-order feeling

Although Hayles does not remark on it, the combination of ‘terror’ and ‘pleasure’ as a way to circumscribe a bewildering emotional state is hardly unprecedented. It recalls but does not repeat the emotive and aesthetic scenario that we know as ‘the sublime’. While this category is traditionally associated with eighteenth-century aesthetics, it has also been connected to postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984; Tabbi, 1995). Traditionally, the sublime describes a feeling of terror incited by the spectacle of something that appears to overwhelm human capacities; in a compensatory move, this negative sensation is supplemented by the pleasurable realisation that the apparent threat to human sovereignty has not managed to overwhelm it and has therefore strengthened the subject’s sense of dignity. While seeming to touch on the limits of the human, the sublime is in fact a tremendous ego booster. Read less generously, it appears as a strategy that only cultivates liminal

experiences in order to triumphantly reaffirm the human. This is the very strategy that Hayles (1999: 2) diagnoses in transhumanist celebrations of ‘the union of the human with the intelligent machine’ that intensify rather than erase humanism. Her attention to the contradictory feelings of ‘terror’ and ‘pleasure’ points to a more contradictory affective dynamic, one that is not pre-emptively streamlined into a progressive narrative of human affirmation but rather preserves a sense of disorientation and bewilderment.

Hayles’s example makes clear that a posthumanism that insists on embodiment cannot simply be reduced to one particular emotive disposition; instead, it generates a field of affective possibilities that different posthumanist practices can inhabit in various ways. For Hayles (1999: 251), the posthuman is ‘a heterogeneous force field through which certain vectors run’. This expansion of the field of possibilities often implies a renewed attention to the corporal dimensions of subjectivity (Braidotti, 2006), and appears in Hayles’s work as the paradox of ‘embodied virtuality’ (1999: 1). It entails the idea that human embeddedness in and interpenetration with that which is not human indexes increased possibilities for change and newness (Hayles, 1999: 290; Wolfe, 2010: 18). By making available affective experiences that do not correspond to readily available emotional scenarios, the posthuman inaugurates a novel affective dynamic that escapes sensory and emotional codification. Crucially, the inability to place these affects in an emotional vocabulary produces its own feelings: ‘feelings of dissonance, of uneasiness, of being unsettled and not knowing precisely why’ (Smith, 2011: 163). This uneasiness has been described as ‘a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about what one is feeling... the dysphoric affect of affective disorientation – of being lost on one’s own “cognitive map” of available affects’ (Ngai, quoted in Smith, 2011: 163, ellipsis in Smith). Importantly, this sense of emotive disorientation, this second-order feeling that is generated by the absence of emotion, need not only be a negative experience; it is an affect that can also be valorised as ‘something transformative’ and as a change ‘in physical sensation, in corporeal orientation’ that marks the site for the emergence of the new (163).

Reading the posthuman as an emotive scenario that opens up unformed potentialities, as I propose to do, makes it possible to recognise posthuman affects in practices that have traditionally not been considered in this light. While Braidotti (2006) distinguishes posthumanism’s ‘pure affirmative affectivity’ from the ‘irreparable loss, unpayable debt and perpetual mourning’ she finds in deconstruction, I read deconstruction and the ‘affirmative’ posthumanism that Braidotti advocates as two instantiations of the minimal emotive sequence that I have identified. By analysing posthumanism in texts and practices that are not explicitly concerned with technological transformations of the human, this approach moves beyond what the introduction to this volume identifies as posthumanism’s often excessive focus on ‘technologisation’; instead, it participates in a broad and open-minded effort to explore the rich possibilities for thinking ‘beyond humanism, anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism’ (Callus, Herbrechter and Rossini, 2014).

In the rest of this essay, I will draw on the extended sense of posthuman affect in order to revisit one of the institutional narratives through which posthumanist thought has affirmed itself. Typically, posthumanism is traced back to either the postwar emergence of cybernetics or the somewhat later ‘erasure’ of man that was

described at the end of Foucault's (2002) *The Order of Things* (Wolfe, 2010: xii). Thus posthumanism often understands itself as a return to bodies, *technes*, machines and other materialities that were obscured by the literary and textualist proclivities of the humanist tradition, including its late twentieth-century afterlife in deconstruction. I discover a disorienting affective encounter with the demise of humanism in the late work of Paul de Man. De Man's late work notoriously advances a conception of language as an essentially *nonhuman* force, even if he himself at times preferred to call it 'inhuman'. In a debate about these terms, de Man explains his conception of language in terms of the double temporality of the posthuman. Declaring the end of the human by stating that it never existed, de Man notes that (1986: 96) 'the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur ... If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such' De Man's almost exclusive focus on language has arguably prevented a more fruitful engagement with his work in posthumanist thought. Nonetheless, what is clearly played out in this passage, and across de Man's late work more generally, is an emotive scenario that I identify as posthuman; if anything, the slippage from 'the inhuman' to 'the non-human' testifies to this affective dimension.

De Man's late work carefully and repeatedly stages the breakdown of linguistic, ideological and philosophical structures in order to set free the complex second-order feelings that inevitably emerge in their wake. His project is not a work of demystification or ideological critique that tears down illusory superstructures to reveal the naked reality that they were meant to hide; instead, what de Manian deconstruction reveals is an affective force to which a clear meaning or a recognisable shape cannot be assigned. As we will see, it is precisely because of its intractability that this force invariably invites capture and reduction. In de Man's late work the name for this affective force is 'materiality'. According to Marc Redfield's (2005: n.p.) gloss, materiality is 'a concept or semi-concept' that does *not* mean 'physical presence'. Rather, it names a force that is *neither* a substance *nor* a phenomenal reality; it is the paradoxical remainder that Derrida (2002: 151) called 'a materiality without matter' – a force that can be neither denied nor controlled.

Reading de Man's late work in affective terms seems obvious if we recall that several of his late texts deal with Kant's and Hegel's accounts of the sublime. As we have seen, this is precisely the emotive scenario from which the posthumanist attention to embodiment measures its distance. De Man's archive reminds us then of the European lineage of the posthuman affect that I am outlining in this essay. For de Man (1996: 90), Kant's and Hegel's aesthetics undo the architectonics of their philosophies and reduce them to what he calls the 'prosaic materiality of the letter'. Importantly, de Man underlines the association between the (Kantian) sublime and a sense of *Affektlosigkeit*, the absence of affect that, according to the emotional logic outlined above, generates second-order feeling. Redfield (1990: 64) calls this 'the pathos of a-pathy'; Terada (2003: 86) notes that in de Man's reading of Kant, 'feeling *nothing* is *feeling* nothing'. This circulation of affect is not and nor could it ever be confined to textual analysis; instead, it infects the affective impact of de Man's texts on readers. The carefully cultivated impersonality of many of de Man's textual analyses produces a sense of impatience and irritation that arguably

played a role in the backlash against his work in the 1980s, and therefore also in the institutional move away from the literary and the textual to less bloodless matters.

If we read them for affect, we can recognise the posture of renunciation that emerges out of de Man's texts as one moment in a broader and less containable affective dynamic. As Terada writes (2003: 84), under 'the generally economic law of emotive thermodynamics', the very fact that 'emotion drains away from a noble mind', far from arresting the flow of affect, in fact 'excites emotion in others'. This is true of the Kantian sublime as well as of de Man's work, as 'what appears to be without affect ... instantiates nothing but a different degree of affective intensity' (Abel, 2009: 50). De Man's project then generates an affective charge *through* its movements beyond humanism. Even if its encounter with the demise of the human is not followed up with an attention to the body, technology or more traditional forms of materiality, this project presents an instance of posthuman affect.

Materiality and/as affect in Paul de Man

Marco Abel's *Violent Affect* (2009) is one of the few studies that combines an interest in de Man with an engagement with affect theory. There, Abel commends de Man's work for destabilising 'an Enlightenment discourse of rationality, understanding, logos, and judgment' (58) that has traditionally occluded the deterritorialising force of affect. For Abel, de Man's work deconstructs the possibility of a stable 'critical position outside the text that allows for the production of moral value judgments' (68). Yet, according to Abel, de Man's work cancels its best insight because it takes recourse to another form of false certainty: the unchanging truth of criticism's inevitable failure. Through his refusal to let go of this categorical inevitability, his efforts 'remain intrinsically tied to a representational economy', and his work ultimately 'does not displace the system of signification and meaning itself' (69–70). For Abel, it is only Deleuze who decisively moves beyond the impasse that de Man managed to locate. Only Deleuze, that is, pushes beyond representation to the plane of affect.

Abel's account repeats the customary institutional story of the persistence of the human in de Man and the inevitable break that was to occur between de Man and Deleuze. That his reading focuses only on the 1973 essay 'Semiotics and Rhetoric' is its main weakness. Indeed, an attention to the issues that occupied de Man in the years right before his death in 1983 demonstrates that the impasse, which he diagnosed as early as 1973, resurfaces in his late work as an affective encounter with what he called 'materiality'. De Man's late work, in other words, already generates posthuman affects as it negotiates the limits of representation, and the impact of matters that escape representation. De Man's posthumanism, then, consists in his recognition that the affective force which animates as well as undoes humanism cannot become the object of sovereign judgement. The main reason is that it inevitably implicates the observer, who cannot remain unaffected. This resonates with Wolfe's (2010: 122) assertion that 'the "post-" of posthumanism ... marks the space in which the one using ... distinctions and forms is not

the one who can reflect on their latencies and blind spots while at the same time deploying them'. This assertion in turn echoes the central insight of de Man's book *Blindness and Insight* (1983).

During the last years of his life, de Man was engaged in an interrogation of what he called 'aesthetic ideology': this label also served as the title of a posthumous collection that brings many of the texts associated with this project together. Part of this investigation, and of the projected book that was never finished and was to be titled *Aesthetics, Rhetoric, Ideology*, was an intense engagement with the work of Kant, Hegel and Schiller. Particularly in two essays on Hegel ('Hegel on the Sublime' and 'Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*'), in work on Kant (the essay 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant' and a lecture on 'Kant's Materialism') and in a lecture on Kant and Schiller ('Kant and Schiller'), de Man engages with the demise of humanism under the rubric of materiality.

De Man's various discussions of Kant and Hegel follow a similar and easily recognisable pattern. De Man begins by carefully reconstructing the 'architectonics' (a term he borrows from Kant) of these thinkers' philosophical systems, only to show how the stability of their systematic philosophies depends on one particular domain: that of the aesthetic. Within that domain, it is especially in the articulation of the category of the sublime that their, and especially Kant's, texts reveal these systems' radical inconsistency when read carefully. De Man (1996: 73) notes that for Kant, 'the third *Critique* corresponds to the necessity of establishing the causal link between critical philosophy and ideology, between a purely conceptual and an empirically determined discourse'. In other words Kant's discussion of the aesthetic faces the monumental task of cementing the link between the transcendental and the metaphysical, and thus of guaranteeing 'the possibility of philosophy itself' (73). In the case of Hegel, the aesthetic must guarantee nothing less than the passage 'from the objective to the absolute spirit' (106). The stakes could hardly be higher: the consistency of two of the foundational theorisations of modernity hangs in the balance. As de Man makes clear, '[w]hether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that' (92). Thus the critical purchase of a whole intellectual tradition threatens to be unsettled by de Man's readings. In this way, de Man carefully prepares the stage where posthuman affect can emerge.

Having established the crucial importance of the third *Critique* in the first movements of his essay on 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', de Man zooms in on the analytic of the sublime. De Man notes that Kant not only introduces a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, but also a further subdivision between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. De Man, who redefines the mathematical sublime as a system of tropes, goes on to explain the intrinsic need for such a subdivision. He shows that the mathematical sublime exceeds itself in a way that forces Kant to come up with a supplementary linguistic model which is then located in the dynamic sublime: '[t]he transition from the mathematical to the dynamic sublime ... marks the saturation of the tropological field as language frees itself of its constraints and discovers within itself a power no longer dependent on the restrictions of cognition' (1996: 79). The peculiar ascriptions of agency in this and other sentences makes clear that, in de Man's view, the movement of Kant's text cannot be 'accounted for in philosophical terms' (79). Rather, they respond to compulsions and contingencies that cannot be reduced to extant discursive

norms. As these forces assert themselves at the very site that de Man has defined as the crux of Kant's system, the reader cannot help but respond with a feeling of unease and awkward anticipation due to de Man's intermittent intimations of systemic collapse. This is particularly the case because de Man insists that in the final analysis, the dynamic sublime does not *solve* the tensions that the mathematical sublime raises; instead, 'it appears as another version of the difficulties encountered in the mathematical sublime' (79). This is a case of what Arkady Plotnitsky (2005: n.p.) has described as de Man's signature textual movement: '(an enactment of) a decoherence of figures and tropes', that is, a carefully and deliberately staged and necessarily affect-producing experience of the loss of connection and consistency. This is also a carefully cultivated encounter with the limits of the human.

De Man makes this affective dimension explicit when he goes on to note that the main difference between the discussion of the dynamic sublime and that of the mathematical sublime is that the former 'concentrat[es] on affect rather than on reason', as the 'dialectic of reason and imagination is now mediated by affects, moods and feelings' (1996: 80). While most readings of de Man's text have underlined de Man's translation of the various moments of Kant's sublime into linguistic principles (Warminski, 2001: 12), the movement of de Man's text makes more sense if we read it as an affective itinerary. Kant's text, de Man writes, is hardly 'a tight analytical argument', but rather 'a dramatised scene of the mind in action' (1996: 86). Kant's main rhetorical device for this dramatisation is the personification of reason and the imagination; yet when these personified faculties are linked with affect the familiar recuperative scenario of the sublime (the movement from terror to pleasure) is interrupted. In the official scenario of the Kantian sublime, the imagination transforms a negative affect into a magisterial sense of apathy; it 'overcomes suffering, becomes apathetic, and sheds the pain of natural shock' (86). In this way the imagination manages to coordinate the effects of affect with the demands of reason, and to allow reason to end up triumphant in this customary understanding of the Kantian sublime. The official sublime, in other words, streamlines 'a modulation between moods or affects, the passage from shocked surprise (*Verwunderung*) to tranquil admiration (*Bewunderung*)'; it transforms an 'astonishment that borders on terror (*Verwunderung, die an Schreck grenzt*)' into 'a feeling of tranquil superiority' (84).

By casting the sublime in these affective terms – a decision that finds emphatic support in Kant's text – de Man presents it as a paradigmatic case of the reterritorialisation of nonsubjective and asignifying affect onto a subject; the sublime, in other words, is the recuperation of autonomous affect as human emotion. While the initial moment of the sublime seems to subvert subjectivity, the second moment converts it into 'the best ego booster available' (1996: 85). Yet, just as the shift from a tropological linguistic model (the mathematical sublime) to a performative one (the dynamic sublime) leaves a residue that no linguistic system can contain, the wished-for dynamic of affective recuperation leaves a remainder that the architectonics of Kant's system cannot incorporate in its 'organic unity of systems' (87). Accordingly, what *happens* in Kant's text does not happen through linguistic performance, but rather 'at the point of the "transition" or the "intersection" of the disarticulation of two divergent systems' (Warminski, 2001: 25). It is in the interstices between systems, which de Man's essay so carefully

seeks out, that the charge of affect emerges in a way that undercuts the customary understanding of the Kantian sublime.

This remainder surfaces in de Man's discussion of Kant's insistence that we approach objects that can produce sublime effects *in a nonteleological manner*. Kant gives the example of the heavens and of the sea. Seeing heaven as sublime, Kant writes, requires that we resist judging it on the basis of 'concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings'; instead, 'we must regard [heaven], just as we see it, as a distant, all-embracing vault'. In the case of the sea, we must not approach it 'as a vast kingdom of aquatic creatures', 'but merely by what the eye reveals' (Kant, quoted in de Man, 1996: 80). A sublime form of vision requires that we let ourselves be affected by the sight of natural objects and do not enlist these visions in an economy of emotions and rationality; as de Man insists, '[n]o mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven' (82). De Man emphasises 'the primarily *negative* mode of the imagination' that is demanded here: rather than constructing images that reason can work with, the imagination must subtract all associations, projections and anticipations, and merely consider the objects of nature 'previous to any understanding' (81). It would not do to call this mode of vision 'literal' as that would enlist it in a semantic economy in which it could potentially be figurated or symbolised – which it emphatically cannot. Sublime vision rigorously escapes the dialectic between thing and meaning, between object and subject. 'The only word that comes to mind,' de Man writes, 'is that of a *material* vision, but how this materiality is then to be understood in linguistic terms is not, as yet, clearly intelligible' (82).

It is helpful to linger on this last sentence a bit longer in order to see how the notion of materiality enters de Man's analysis. In spite of the promise encoded in the words 'as yet', de Man's work will never arrive at a more substantial determination of this notion. At the same time, de Man clearly indicates the limitations of his project, as the only form of cognition he is willing to entertain is understanding 'in linguistic terms'. As described above, this limitation has to a large extent pre-empted any encounter between de Man and posthumanism. Given that Kant's material vision interrupts a scenario of emotional reterritorialisation, it seems preferable to understand it in *affective* terms. And as materiality, in the above sentence, is marked as a moment on indetermination, as a limit to intelligibility and as a marker of cognitive disorientation, it functions as an intractability and asignifying affect that disrupts the wholesale conversion of *Verwunderung* into *Bewunderung*, of shock into 'the tranquility of spent emotion' (1996: 85). Materiality indicates that even a state of affectlessness cannot but generate a second-order affect that undoes the fanciful progression in the official version of the Kantian sublime from the 'pain of the failure to constitute the sublime' to 'the pleasure of the imagination' (76) and replaces it with a more open-ended affective potential.

De Man concludes that Kant's discussion of the sublime juxtaposes two incompatible notions of the architectonic, without resolving the contradictions between them. On the one hand, there is the 'organic unity' that brings together different forms of knowledge in one larger concept and that, as de Man notes, is figured as a body, 'as a totality of various limbs and parts' (1996: 88). On the other hand, there is the material vision that undoes this articulated whole by disarticulating it,

a process that leaves the body in place while disconnecting the different parts. The result is what we could call a body without organs: hence de Man writes that we ‘consider our limbs, hands, toes, breasts ... in themselves, severed from the organic unity of the body’ (88). Because of the unresolved contradictions between these two incompatible visions, then, the aesthetic is undone ‘as a valid category’ (89) and does not guarantee the stability of Kant’s philosophical edifice; de Man’s account renders Kant’s attempt to streamline feeling inoperative. This account leaves the reader with a disarticulated body that cannot organise its parts into an organic whole and cannot immunise itself from affect. Even if de Man concludes his essay rather characteristically by translating affective openness into a linguistic vocabulary and describing ‘the prosaic materiality of the letter’ (90), the return to the linguistic does not make the disarticulated body and the posthuman affect it has generated disappear.

De Man’s analysis has the same double temporal structure as other posthumanist interventions: *institutionally*, it situates itself as occurring *after* humanist efforts to make the aesthetic the placeholder of human dignity, while the *content* of the analysis shows that this tradition was never a coherent construction in the first place. Even if de Man focuses on only one privileged textual moment, as Warminski (2001: 25) notes, ‘once this “textual event” happens, occurs, it inevitably gets disseminated throughout the text’, and contaminates the whole of the system in which it takes place. In his essay on Benjamin, de Man (1986: 89) describes this dynamic as ‘the materiality of the letter, the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that slippage disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost’. De Man’s reading of Kant shows that the recourse to feeling in traditional accounts of the sublime, even if only to a condition of affectlessness, in order to bolster human dignity is an impossible reterritorialisation of an essentially nonhuman, nonsubjective affective charge.

In his two essays on Hegel, de Man follows the philosopher’s lead in taking his distance from Kant’s vocabulary of feeling. For Hegel, Kant has trivialised the sublime ‘by putting so much emphasis on the particularity of the affects in which he rightly chose to locate it’ (1996: 109). Still, de Man finds an irreducibly material moment in Hegel’s account of recollection (*Erinnerung*), which, as the German term makes clear, is traditionally understood as ‘the inner gathering and preserving of experience’ (100–01), an interiority of which the ‘sensory manifestation’ of art and literature is in its turn the external form (100). De Man is unambiguous about the high stakes, as well as the vulnerability, of the aesthetic in Hegel’s system: ‘[n]owhere else do the structure, the history, and the judgment of art seem to come as close to being systematically carried out, and nowhere else does this systematic synthesis rest so exclusively on one definite category ... called the aesthetic’ (92). De Man’s reading shows that the dialectic of interiorisation and exteriorisation depends crucially on the mental faculty of memorisation (*Gedächtnis*) – the ‘learning by rote of *names*, or of words considered as names’, a process that logically depends on the writing down of these names (102). Writing down a list of names counts as a moment of exteriority, to be sure, but decidedly not of (the) exteriorisation (of an interiority). Far from animating the beauty of art and literature, then, the idea ‘makes its sensory appearance ... as the material inscription of

names' (102). As in Kant, the philosophical system is disarticulated and founders on the impossibility of distinguishing between the merely material and the aesthetic – an indistinguishability that cancels the latter as a stable category.

Even if the essays on Hegel seem to add little to an understanding of materiality as the name of an affective force, they raise the question of the dynamic that relates materiality to the aesthetic, and to the humanism that the aesthetic is supposed to sustain. I have already noted that de Man's project (de Man, 1996) is not a traditional ideology critique that pierces through layers of obfuscation in order to reveal a base reality; instead, it is a form of reading that seeks to circumscribe a force that unsettles the textual constructs in which de Man traces them. When de Man then describes memorisation – 'the material inscription of names' – as 'the truth of which the aesthetic is the defensive, ideological, and censored translation' (102), this implies that one of the effects that this force generates is its own denial and domestication in the false certainties of humanist discourse. This dynamic is the avowed subject of de Man's lecture on 'Kant and Schiller', in which he paints Schiller's work as the humanist domestication of the 'incisiveness' and the 'critical impact' of Kant's insights. While Kant, as we saw, 'had interrupted, disrupted, disarticulated the project of articulation' (134) that the aesthetic was supposed to carry out, Schiller celebrates the unproblematic transcendence of the aesthetic. In Schiller, and the 'enlightened humanism' he stands for, 'the [Kantian] disruption of the aesthetic as return to the materiality of the inscription' (146) is trumped by an affirmation of the superiority of the human mind. Schiller's humanism, in other words, is a 'regression from the event, from the materiality of the inscribed signifier' (134). This regression, in which the subversive force of affect is contained by attaching it to the human, resembles nothing so much as 'the *capture* and the closure of affect' (Massumi, 2002: 35) that occurs when affect is recoded as emotion and enlisted for a particular human perspective. Even if the slippage from Kant to Schiller that de Man aims to capture in his lecture proves impossible to describe in (de Man's) linguistic terms, it can be understood as a reterritorialisation of affect. If de Man's late work prefigures theories of affect, affect theory, in turn, provides the resources for an understanding of that work. It is only from this posthumanist perspective that de Man's posthumanism becomes visible in terms that are not merely linguistic.

Conclusion: affect and critical posthumanism

De Man's texts on Kant, Hegel and Schiller comprise a repeatedly staged encounter with a moment of disarticulation and of uncertainty that appears under the name of materiality. While this materiality is nothing so stable as a substance, it has the force to destabilise the systems in which it surfaces; the lecture on Schiller strongly suggests that ideologies such as Schiller's, which present themselves as humanist, are erected as a *defence against* or a *regression from* the nonhuman force of materiality. At the same time, de Man's reading of Kant's sublime suggests that there is an intimate connection between materiality and affect as an asignifying, nonsubjective and deterritorialising force. Schiller's recuperation of these affects as

human possessions makes it possible to recognise the humanism that he instantiates as what Terada (2003: 3) has called the ‘ideology of emotion’. While ‘discourses of emotion’ such as de Man’s and Kant’s describe emotion ‘as nonsubjective experience in the form of self-difference within cognition’, the ideology of emotion ‘tells a supplementary story in which emotion fills in the difference it registers’ (3). De Man’s posthumanism makes visible a dynamic of affective deterritorialisation that uproots the humanism that aims to contain it.

De Man reminds posthumanism of the unsettling forces of materiality and affect. These are forces that posthumanism tends to overlook as it invokes empirical grounds in search of a new transcendental system; in this way, materiality and affect are perhaps unlikely resources for the critical posthumanism that this issue calls for. Accordingly, Terada (2005) has warned that many prominent interpretations of de Man recuperate his account of materialism in the service of a ‘philosophically reactionary transcendentalism’. This approach, Terada writes, ‘retranscendentalizes materialism rather than understanding materialism as something that detranscendentalizes form’ (n.p.). The domain of affect represents nothing so tangible as the empirical basis for a new empiricism that believes it has freed itself from the unsettling forces of deconstruction. As David Cecchetto (2011: 28) remarks, ‘efforts to articulate posthumanism as an overcoming of deconstruction are doomed’ to repeat the errors that deconstruction has so patiently unearthed. If critics of affect theory (Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011) have cast doubt on its scientific credentials, Claire Colebrook (2012: 144) has recently suggested that de Man can offer an alternative to a posthumanism intent on recovering a ‘neurally-based, neutral or realist foundation’; his work, Colebrook writes, reminds posthumanism to shift ‘the style of problems from the readability to the unreadability of affect’.

While posthumanists tend either to ignore the work of de Man or to take it to task for its insistence on language at the expense of technology or the body, admirers of de Man (Cohen, Miller and Cohen, 2001: xi) in their turn tend to proscribe an engagement with posthumanism because they misread the latter as a practice that naïvely ‘guard[s] the claims of human immediacy and perception’. The projects of Hayles, Wolfe and others make clear that posthumanism can accommodate and indeed has already accommodated the ‘unreadability of affect’. As I have argued in this essay, this unreadability surfaces in the posthuman affect of de Man’s late work. If critical posthumanism and de Man’s deconstruction can move beyond their refusal to read each other, they can encounter each other in a shared commitment to unreadability; it is in such an inability to read that the force of as yet unimagined forms of life can be felt.

Note

1. The question of ‘what being human means’ once we accept that human life is always implicated in nonhuman – artificial, animal or even supernatural – forms of life will also be pursued in a 2015 issue of the *European Journal of English Studies* on ‘the creature(ly)’, which will be guest-edited by Virginia Richter and me.

References

- Abel, Marco (2009). *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique after Representation*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Braidotti, Rosi (2006). 'Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity.' *Rhizomes*. 11.12. <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html>>.
- Callus, Ivan, Herbrechter, Stefan, and Rossini, Manuela (2014). 'Introduction: Dis/Locating Posthumanism in European Literary and Critical Traditions.' *European Journal of English Studies* 18.2: 103–20.
- Cecchetto, David (2011). 'Deconstructing Affect: Posthumanism and Mark Hansen's Media Theory.' *Theory, Culture, and Society* 28.5: 3–33.
- Cohen, Tom, Miller, J Hillis, and Cohen, Barbara (2001). 'A "Materiality without Matter"?' *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Eds Tom Cohen et al. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. vii–xxv.
- Colebrook, Claire (2012). 'The Calculus of Individual worth.' *Theory and the Disappearing Future: On De Man, on Benjamin*. Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller. Abingdon: Routledge. 130–52.
- De Man, Paul (1983). *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- De Man, Paul (1986). *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- De Man, Paul (1996). *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Derrida, Jacques (2002). *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- Foucault Michel (2002). *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Abingdon: Routledge. (First published in French in 1966; first English edition in 1970.)
- Hayles, Katherine N (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P.
- Hemmings, Clare (2005). 'Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn.' *Cultural Studies* 19.5: 548–67.
- Leys, Ruth (2011). 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique.' *Critical Inquiry* 37.3: 434–72.
- Liotard, Jean-François (1984). 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Régis Durand, Geoff Bennington, and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. 71–82
- Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Plotnitsky, Arkady (2005). 'Thinking Singularity with Immanuel Kant and Paul De Man: Aesthetics, Epistemology, History, and Politics.' *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*. <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/deman/plotnitsky/plotnitsky.html>>.
- Redfield, Marc (1990). 'De Man, Schiller, and the Politics of Reception.' *Diacritics* 20.3: 50–70.
- Redfield, Marc (2005). 'Professing Literature: John Guillory's Misreading of Paul De Man.' *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*. <<http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/deman/redfield/redfield.html>>.
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald (2011). 'Organic Shrapnel: Affect and Aesthetics in September 11 Fiction.' *American Literature* 83.1: 153–74.
- Tabbi, Joseph (1995). *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

- Terada, Rei (2003). *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Terada, Rei (2005). 'Seeing is Reading.' *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*. <<http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/deman/terada/terada.html>>.
- Warminski, Andrzej (2001). "As the Poets Do It": On the Material Sublime.' *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Eds Tom Cohen et al. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. 3–31.
- Wolfe, Carry (2010). *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.

Pieter Vermeulen is Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Leuven. He is the author of *Romanticism after the Holocaust* (Continuum, pb 2012) and *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature Affect, Form* (Palgrave, forthcoming). He is currently working on edited volumes on world literature (for Routledge), on the notion of the creaturely (for the *European Journal of English Studies*), and on recent developments in memory studies.
