

The Suspension of Reading: Wordsworth's “Boy of Winander” and Trauma Theory

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This article offers a close reading of the different versions of Wordsworth's “Boy of Winander”-passage and of an important exchange between Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man on this passage in the 1960s, in which “reading” and “theory” are contrasted as two mutually exclusive options that cannot be combined in one critical account. This tension between reading and theory is then deployed to offer a critique of the field of trauma theory, which has explicitly instituted itself as both a theory and a reading practice. I develop the position of Hartman in order to contrast trauma theory's prevailing fascination with theory, which invests in the figure of a “fall” and in the notion of “undecidability,” with the (to my mind, more promising) possibility of an account of the experience of reading, which consists in the “suspension” of theory and deploys a notion of “indeterminacy” that ultimately gives a more satisfying account of the implication of the reader in the relation between literature and trauma.

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I. Suspending the collapse

The peculiar structure of trauma studies, as it has instituted itself in the field of literary studies, can, in the most schematic terms, be stated as follows: in defining itself as a field of *study*, it had to admit its ambition to understand an object that it, as the study of *trauma*, at the same time redefined as an event of non-understanding. In the words of Cathy Caruth, trauma is not defined in terms of “the event itself” but, rather, “solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception,” and “the force of this experience would appear to arise precisely in the collapse of this understanding” (Caruth 1995, 4, 7). It is the maximal distance this

redefinition installs between the object (which is the “force” of a “collapse”) and its understanding – or at the very least something carrying the “force” of understanding – that disallowed traditional exegetical methods, modelling the transition from a textual object to its understanding, to function as the grounding paradigm for trauma studies’ program of understanding non-understanding. The one instance that still could be invoked as a ground seemed to be deconstruction, as the latter had become popularly available as the pre-eminent negotiation of non-understanding, error, misreading, etc. That Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, two of the major figures in the field, had been associated with Yale as colleagues and students of Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, important precursors of the study of trauma, of course strengthened this association, and gave currency to the signifier “trauma *theory*.”

Not that theory has proven entirely comfortable with its invocation as the ground for the understanding of a collapse. In a recent assessment of Caruth’s practice, Ortwin de Graef, Vivian Liska, and Katrien Vloeberghs suggest an analogy between trauma theory’s founding gesture of shifting its object from “the event itself” to the “structure of experience” and the way it relates to deconstruction. Where the power of the theoretical shift is “redoubtable,” because “it always courts the risk of unduly generalizing traumatic experience to the point of banality, scandalously slighting the suffering whose testimony gave it its foothold” (de Graef et al. 2003, 248–249), the institution of trauma theory itself “can be conceived as a recovery of alleged textualism from its eclipse in neo-historico-post-colonial culturalism” (p. 250), which raises the question whether the “theory” in “trauma theory” is more than “the empty signifier with which trauma theory seeks to deny its own collapse into a therapy of the imagination, which theory used to deconstruct as aesthetic ideology” (p. 252). Trauma theory’s conversion of a “collapse,” then, is itself a collapse, and this collapse is not theory.

Similar reservations are registered in Petar Ramadanovic’s sketch of trauma theory, which focuses on Felman’s “Education as crisis,” which he reads as a self-conscious repetition of de Man’s 1967 text “Criticism and crisis,” a repetition that establishes a “move from the rhetoric of crisis to the rhetoric of trauma” (Ramadanovic 2001, 8). Ramadanovic comes to “ask the obvious questions about the difference between de Man’s and Felman’s readings of Mallarmé” and wonders whether Felman does not stop “short of the two critical gestures of scrutinizing the origin of discourse and of

turning the reading back upon itself" (p. 11). These two gestures constitute the true radicality of de Man's reading of the notion of "crisis," and lacking those, all talk of crisis is "simply characteristic of the state when an entire edifice threatens to collapse" (p. 6). The suggestion is, then, that trauma theory abandons its truly radical theoretical imperative precisely in its fascination with the pathetic figure of a "collapse," of a "fall," which erects the collapse of understanding into a monument to non-understanding that fuels "the productivity of negative pathos," and (dis)qualifies trauma theory as "a theology of pathos" (Hamacher 1989, 179–182).

Caruth's reading of de Man in her *Unclaimed Experience*, arguably the book that did most to consolidate the institution of trauma in literary studies, offers an almost too obvious instance of the deployment of the lurid figures of "falling" and "collapsing" in trauma studies' disingenuous suspension of deconstructive rigor; near the end of her reading of de Man's "story of the falling body" as "the story of the impact of reference," the recuperative scenario of the mobilization (as a "therapy of the imagination") of a statement of unavailability becomes apparent:

In de Man's text ... the impact of reference is felt in falling; in the resistance of the *example of falling* to a phenomenal or perceptual analogy that would turn it into the mere figure of an abstract principle. In naming a befalling, de Man's text no longer simply knows what it says ... To capture the reality of this falling is the task that falls upon us as we read the very particular story of de Man's writing. (Caruth 1995, 89–90)

It is because the recuperation of "the example of falling" as a task *falling upon* the student of trauma, i.e., as a *productive* crisis (see Belau 2001, 34), is always also a suspension of the rigor of theory that Caruth's self-advertised deconstructive line of trauma theory exposes itself as neither theoretical nor radical.

I want to argue that the problem with this sort of reservation about trauma studies is that the insistence on the resistance of deManian textuality to its undue generalization into a therapy of the imagination does not infect the logic of Caruth's argument. Caruth writes: "[de Man's] story of the falling body ... thus encounters, *unexpectedly*, the story of a trauma" (Caruth 1996a, 7); "It is de Man's *unexpected* association of theory with falling that, I will suggest, constitutes the original insight of his theory" (p. 74, italics mine). In the same way that trauma's "structure of experience" is rendered traumatic by the radical impact of the event, the

institution of trauma theory is only strengthened by the resistance of theory, which only *unexpectedly* gives way to its therapeutic inflation. Trauma theory's rhetoric of surprise, in other words, recuperates the critique that insists that de Man's fall has fatally crushed its resurrectional potential by investing the reaffirmed radicality of this unavailability into the "force" of a surprise that obligates its suspension in a therapy of the imagination. Because trauma study performs its operation of suspension in the name of its avowed fascination with falling, I want to suggest, an unwitting perpetuation of this fascination must finally be less fruitful than a focus on this operation of suspension.

Such a focus need look no further than the very body of work trauma theory invokes as its ground, that of de Man: as Neil Hertz has insisted, "hanging" is one of de Man's elective "lurid" figures. In the (probably 1979, see Hertz 1989, 102 n. 1) essay "Wordsworth and the Victorians," for instance, de Man comments on the "remarkably consistent pattern" revealed by the occurrences of the word "hangs" (or "hung") in Wordsworth: "A full-fledged theory of metaphor as suspended meaning, as loss and restoration of the principle of analogy beyond sensory experience, can be elaborated on the basis of Wordsworth's use of 'hangs'" (de Man 1984b, 89). De Man first came to talk of Wordsworth's "hangs" in a 1965 paper presented in an MLA session organized by Geoffrey Hartman, a lecture that opens with de Man's praise for Hartman's 1964 book *Wordsworth's Poetry*, and which goes on to read Wordsworth's "Boy of Winander"-passage. He revisited the passage in 1966 and in the 1967 text "Time and history in Wordsworth," and his explicit substitution of the imagination's relationship to time for that to nature in Hartman has recently been qualified as crucial in the forgetting of Hartman's "formative role in the turn to trauma" (de Graef et al. 2003, 255). In "Time and history," de Man allegedly

arises as a central figure in relation to trauma theory: his emphasis on a missed experience ..., and his formulation of a belated relation between an act and its coming to consciousness, prefigure Caruth's formulation of "unclaimed experience" and her most important insights into the structural characteristics of trauma. (Whitehead 2003, 279)

This is, indeed, precisely what de Man claims at the end of his text: "The contact, the relationship with time is ... always a negative one for us, for

the relationship between the self and time is necessarily mediated by death" (de Man [1967] 1987, 17). This generalized statement of a missed experience (the legacy passed on to trauma theory) is, however, as the rest of de Man's conclusion makes clear, itself only enabled by missing another experience, which is unsurprisingly said to be one of "falling":

To describe this movement of dissolution [of "time's manifestation"], as it is perceived in the privileged language of the imagination, is to describe it, not as an actual experience that would necessarily be as brusque and dizzying as a fall, but as the generalized statement of the truth of this experience in its universality. Dissolution thus becomes mutability, asserted as an *unfailing* law that governs the natural, personal, historical existence of man. (p. 17)

The realization that this truth that trauma theory will suspend as a fall understands itself as the *exclusion* of a fall may already begin to suggest that de Man's legacy may be more forbidding than the simple transmission of an irrecoverable, lucidly unpathetic negativity. What, indeed, is this "actual experience" that must be forgotten? And what is the price of this active forgetting? In the rest of this article, I will argue that this "actual experience," "as brusque and dizzying as a fall," is that of reading, and that the suspension of reading is necessary for the articulation of a theory of falling. The very moment in de Man that trauma theory suspends as a radical fall, in other words, only comes about because of an earlier suspension of reading. In a sense, then, my point will be that trauma theory cannot have its cake and eat it too: as "a speaking and listening practice" (Toremans 2003, 303–304), and as a reading method, it is precisely the opposite of the suspension of reading it still invokes as theory. In order to illustrate that opposition, I will trace the dense textual history of Wordsworth's "Boy of Winander"-passage, first in its different Wordsworthian versions, and then in its readings and theorizations by Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man.

II. Wordsworth in Winander

The textual history of Winander begins in 1799, when William Wordsworth ventures his first draft of the "Boy of Winander"-passage. It is not too hard to see how Wordsworth's note on "The Boy of Winander" in his Preface to the 1815 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* already sets his poem on the trail of the genealogy of trauma studies:

Guided by one of my own primary consciousnesses, I have represented a commutation and transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents, to plant, for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the imagination. The Boy, there introduced, is listening, with something of a feverish and restless anxiety, for the occurrence of the riotous sounds which he had previously excited; and, at the moment when the intensesness of his mind is beginning to remit, he is surprised into a perception of the solemn and tranquillizing images which the poem describes. (Wordsworth 1993, 379)

What is most remarkable here is, first, Wordsworth's stated ambition to bequeath this poetic representation "for immortality," and second, the connection between the Boy's sudden experience of "surprise" and the "solemn and tranquillizing" images that are the outcome of this surprise. As these tranquilizing images are also said to be the ones "the poem describes," these two statements add up to a question of representation; more specifically, the device of the boy's traumatic surprise seems to be the vehicle for the communication "for immortality" of the tranquilizing "commutation" between "internal feelings" and "external accidents" the poem represents. The traumatic nature of the experience, therefore, appears as a feature only of the *structure* of the "surprise," whereas its *meaning* serves as a tranquilizer to this shock, and thus overrides the negativity of the trauma into an assertion of the mutually beneficial economy of nature and imagination. It is as the repeated failure of Wordsworth's attempt to have the text of his poem approximate this wishful statement of its operation that the textual history of his revisions can most fruitfully be read.

The first attempt is found in the JJ manuscript from 1799, where we read only the first part of the poem, written in the first person. In this first version, the structure of the event as a "sudden shock of mild surprise" is captured in an as yet unproblematic iterative pattern. The young boy would "stand alone" "many a time" (ll. 176, 173),

And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mockd my skill
Then, often, in that silence while I hung
Listening a sudden shock of mild surprise
Would carry far into my heart the voice
Of mountain torrents. (ll. 185–190)

The pencil revisions on the manuscript occur exactly where the 1815 note told us to look for them: instead of "*often*" "a *sudden* shock of mild surprise," we get "*sometimes*" "a *gentle* shock of mild surprise" (Wordsworth

1993, 87; italics mine). In the light of Wordsworth's stated intention, this shows how the structure of trauma resists its mobilization as a neutral medium and threatens to depress the good news it is meant to convey; it is then the imperative of this conveyance that dictates the tranquilization of the structure of trauma into a gentleness that befits the content of its intended communication.

These two tranquilizing revisions will find their way into the first published version of the text, in the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In this version, the first person is shifted to a third-person account that suspends the identification between poet and boy. The generic requirement to function, in this context, as an independent and completed lyrical ballad, however, compels the complementation of the inconsequential first scene by a second one:

Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
The vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs
Upon a slope above the village school,
And there along that bank when I have pass'd
At evening, I believe, that near his grave,
A full half-hour together I have stood
Mute – for he died when he was ten years old. (ll. 26–32)

Given Wordsworth's successful tranquilizing of trauma in the first scene (in the 1799 pencil revisions), and his ambition of yet having the structure of trauma function as the vehicle for the transmission of the intended meaning, this ballad offers a remarkable relocation of the trauma: its locus is doubled and extended, first, to the poet, standing "a full half hour" "mute," and, because of the anticlimactic revelation in the last line, also to the reader, suddenly surprised into the knowledge of the death of the boy.¹

In anticipation of the rest of the text's history, it is instructive that the hermeneutical contract of the *Lyrical Ballads*, by explicitly implicating the reader in the operation of the poem, seems to offer the most successful sustainment of the tranquilization of the trauma in the first scene, while most emphatically holding out the hope for its (traumatic) conveyance in its figuration of reading in the second. The subsequent incorporation of the text in the 1805 *Prelude* offers a very different setting: this unpublished text remained unread by the public while the poet was alive; the anticlimactic revelation of the boy's death is therefore moved to the beginning of the second scene, having no public to effect its mildly traumatizing impact on. This impact, however, is registered in one crucial

change from the 1800 version: the “often” that had been overwritten by “sometimes” in the 1800 ballad version returns in the lines “At evening, I believe that oftentimes/A full half-hour together I have stood/Mute” (ll. 420–422). The repeated “suddenness” of trauma which an earlier revision had seen reason to overwrite here reasserts itself, carrying the morphological marker of the failure of this overwriting (“-times”) as it returns in the reduction of the hermeneutical success of the *Lyrical Ballads* to the merely self-read narrative of the growth of the poet’s mind. Small wonder, then, that in the 1850 *Prelude*,² the “oftentimes” again disappears (even at the cost of compensating for its metrical felicity by the rather underdetermined change from “At evening” to “On summer evenings”), and the restored gentility of the poet is more explicitly prefigured in that of the boy: instead of the irruption of “pauses of deep silence” in the 1805 “when it chanced” (l. 404), the mitigated trauma now occurs “when *a lengthened* pause/Of silence came” (ll. 381–382; italics mine) – a lengthening that is also inserted in the account of the poet at the grave, whose “full half-hour together” becomes “a *long* half-hour” (l. 421, l. 398; italics mine). What Wordsworth’s revisions give Hartman and de Man to read, I suggest, is their attempt to ensure this continuity between boy and poet, i.e., the suspension of the trauma of the transition from the one to the other, as a compensation for the disappearance of a reader whose implication (in the 1800 ballad-version) had more successfully suspended that trauma. Their respective readings, then, will present two versions of the relations between reading and trauma.

III. The fall of reading

The history of Winander continues in Hartman’s 1964 book *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, where it is the passage’s prefiguration-and-fulfillment of tranquilization (emphasized in the 1850 repetition of “lengthened” as “long”) that Hartman singles out as one of the privileged illustrations of the thematic opposition structuring his monumental interpretation of Wordsworth: Wordsworth’s election of a “binding” to nature (Hartman 1964, 231), which Hartman calls “akedah” (p. 225), over an “apocalyptic” “type of experience” (p. 225), which attempts to separate the imagination from nature in its “strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things” (p. xxii). Because

Hartman's book also explicitly coins the signifier "trauma" (pp. xvi, 134) to name Wordsworth's intimations of his separation from nature, Hartman must want the Winander-passage to function the way Wordsworth wanted it to function in the 1815 note: "trauma," that it, is an experience whose *structure* is that of a "sudden surprise," while its message is *yet* the lesson of the mutual dependence of nature and imagination. And just as Wordsworth did only temporarily succeed in making his representation of trauma convey this message by denying the force of the traumatic surprise in his successive revisions of this text, Hartman can only convey his interpretation by conflating these different versions. Hartman notes "a beautiful diminuendo" (p. 19), not, however, between "both" versions he considers, but between the "gentle" and the "mild," and between the two parts of the passage: the "completed sketch" becomes "nicely rounded by converting a figurative death into an actual" (p. 20). "The space or ellipsis between paragraphs one and two," then, "points to that [the boy's developmental] impasse, or precarious transition" (p. 21). It is this last "or" that points to Hartman's (Wordsworthian) ambition to include the (temporary) achievement of the lyrical ballad in the *Prelude's* narrative of "*emergence* itself, our unsteady growth into self-consciousness" (p. xvi). The relation of the first to the second scene then becomes one of prefiguration, which unsurprisingly can only be stated by turning to the composure of the "lengthened pause" in the 1850 version (which is not one of the versions Hartman professes to be reading).

De Man's 1965 lecture "Heaven and earth in Wordsworth and Hölderlin" explicitly introduces Hartman's anti-apocalyptic reading to announce the difference it wishes to make. Hartman's definition of apocalypse enables de Man to put the "avowedly sinister" question to the Winander-passage whether the "connection" between "heaven and earth" can indeed, *pace* Hartman, "be called a 'marriage' and whether the mediating entity is indeed nature" (de Man [1965] 1993, 138). The sinister answer opens with the moment "while [the boy] hung/Listening," which de Man glosses as follows: "It is as if, at the very moment that the analogical echo fails us, the stable ground of an interwoven world were taken away from under our feet and we were left suspended between heaven and earth" (p. 142). In terms of de Man's ambition to overturn the analogical metaphysics of Hartman's anti-apocalyptic reading, it is clear that he must

want the boy's suspension to acquire the pathos of a fall. Because this is explicitly not what occurs in (any single version of) the poem, this (thematic) inflection has to be reached by another way, and this proves to be the way of the scheme of refiguration borrowed from Hartman. De Man continues by stating that the reappearance of the word "hung" in the "second section of the poem" "furnishes us with the thematic link uniting the two apparently disjointed parts" (pp. 142–143):³ the "hanging" here is done by "the Churchyard" – which for de Man suffices to cast the lesson of the scheme he borrowed from Hartman in a more properly apocalyptic existential light. To strengthen this revision, de Man returns to the 1799 rhetoric of "suddenness" (which is the word precisely missing in the 1805 version that he is reading, and that he *must* read in order to find the thematic linking that will retroactively convert the boy's "hanging" into a "fall"):

The scene of the boy surprised by the sudden silence is in fact a prefiguration of his death, the growth of a consciousness from the assumed safety of an analogical world to the precarious world in which consciousness sees itself suspended ephemerally upon an earth in whose stability it does not share, hung from a heaven that has cast it out. (p. 143)⁴

It is thus because the hanging recurs as the predicate of a churchyard and because a churchyard indexes death that the boy's hanging is retroactively refigured as a prefiguration of this death and thus acquires the "suddenness" of a fall that does not occur in the text, i.e., that was necessarily missed in a first experience of reading the poem.

That this structure of rereading is obviously the very structure of experience as trauma theory will adopt it becomes clearer in de Man's 1966 revision and extension of his reading of the Winander-passage in "Wordsworth and Hölderlin," originally delivered as a lecture in German. The scheme of refiguration is here renamed as the "experience of the temporal relation between the act and its interpretation," which is said to define the predicament of our interpretation of romanticism. De Man goes on to apply this temporality in his reading of the Winander-passage,⁵ which often repeats his 1965 reading verbatim, but ends up restating the authenticity of the "true language of the imagination" (i.e., the achievement of the second part of the poem; de Man [1965] 1993, 143) in terms of the precedence of interpretation as the preservation of the act (i.e., of the first part):

The interpretation is possible only from the standpoint that lies on the far side of this failure [i.e., the experience of a failed act], and that has escaped destruction thanks to an effort of consciousness to make sure of itself once again. But this consciousness can be had only by one who has very extensively partaken of the danger and failure. (de Man [1966] 1984a, 58)

Wordsworth, then, like Hölderlin, "replaces the violent temporality (*reissende Zeit*) of action with the sheltering temporality (*schützende Zeit*) of interpretation" (p. 63). The "general structure of poetic temporality" is that "it lends duration to a past that otherwise would immediately sink into the nonbeing of a future that withdraws itself from consciousness. It is thus an act through which a memory threatened with its own loss succeeds in sustaining itself" (p. 64).

The explicit valorization of the (second) moment of interpretation in the poem's narrative points us more directly to the ending of "Time and history." The interpretive moment, as an authentic "poetic temporality," is not only the achievement of the transition from the boy's "mimic hootings" to the "experience of mortality" (de Man [1965] 1993, 143) that de Man records as his experience of the reading of the progression of the poem; because it is valorized as an achievement of progress, it is said to be "capable of stating" this transition, and therefore credited with having (autobiographically) *produced* this narrative of its own overcoming of analogical echoing (pp. 142–143). The temptation is, in other words, to state the achievement of the poetry while making the actual experience of reading the progression that constitutes that achievement in the poem entirely dispensable.⁶ The tension that will disfigure "Time and history," in other words, is the increasingly imperative choice between the experience of reading and the theoretical assertion of trauma.

At the opening of "Time and history," de Man invokes Hartman as his aid to resist the temptation of theory: "the path I'll try to trace by this direct commentary overlaps with that proposed by Hartman in more places than I will have time to mention. It diverges from it on at least one point of some importance" (de Man [1967] 1987, 5). In spite of this difference of "one point," de Man here repeats his dedication to arrive at this point by the same path as Hartman, i.e., through the experience of reading the progress of the poem. De Man, in other words, sets himself the task of finding in this progression both a trauma and its overcoming. The

boy's "hanging," in short, must become a "fall" (without the rather silly detour through the churchyard):

The fundamental⁷ spatial perspective is reversed; instead of being centered on the earth, we are suddenly related to a sky that has its own movements, alien to those of earth and its creatures. The experience hits as a sudden feeling of dizziness, a falling or a threat of falling, a *vertige* of which there are many examples in Wordsworth. (p. 7)⁸

In case anyone is tempted to think that the grammar or the imagery of an "experience" hitting as "a falling" must make sense in de Man's Flemish or French: it does not. The sentence's peculiar infelicity merely betrays that de Man's desire to have the fall and its experience occur in the poem overrides the impossibility to attribute them to a faller or an experienter, an impossibility stemming from the fact that in Wordsworth's text the wished-for fall simply does not occur. In the project of saving the experience of reading, this wishful location of a fall in (the experience of) the text allows de Man to go on to indicate Wordsworth's effort of relieving it. The main carrier of this effort is the "long, extended period of continuous duration" the poet spends at the grave, as it was in Hartman, but in an important difference, the moment in the first part "corresponding" to this long half-hour is not the boy's "lengthened pause," but rather the moment the fall is "cushioned" "when the uncertain heaven is received into the lake," in the lines following the ones on which the fall was imposed (p. 8).

This is by no means an obvious step in de Man's reading: the very "uncertainty" of the heaven has already served to announce the "fall" in the boy's hanging in all three of de Man's readings of the poem. The reason it must yet precariously double-times as a "relief" – and not the "lengthened pause" perfectly available in Hartman's reading – is, I suggest, that it occurs, in Wordsworth's text, *following* the "hung," unlike the "lengthened pause" which, as it occurs before the "fall," would offer the relief before the trauma it is supposed to relieve has befallen. Only in this reading can the radicality of Wordsworthian temporality be experienced, and can the cushioning be said to offer only a "temporary respite": "the fall here is not prevented, but made tolerable" (de Man [1967] 1987, 12). The relation between "fall" and "respite," as two moments readable within the narrative⁹ of the experience of reading, is at this moment the same as

that between "act" and "interpretation" or that between "prefiguration" and "fulfilment," i.e., as the structure of trauma.

This is, however, only the narrative part of the story. "Time and history" goes on to state the valorization of Wordsworth's temporal perspective, and the definition of this perspective displays de Man's most radical shift from his earlier readings by turning to the autobiographical origin of the poem. I quote this statement at length:

The structure of the poem, although it seems retrospective, is in fact proleptic. In the second part, Wordsworth is reflecting on his own death which lies, of course, in the future, and can only be anticipated. But to be able to imagine, to convey the experience, the consciousness of mortality, he can only represent death as something that happened to another person, in the past ... The objectification of a past self, as that of a consciousness that unwittingly experiences an anticipation of its own death, allows him to reflect on an event that is, in fact, unimaginable. (de Man [1967] 1987, 9)

As the follow-up of a reading that took great pains (and violence) to situate an actual trauma in the progression of the poem, this statement must surprise us: the consciousness that was the result of this tenuous progression is here in effect projected as *anterior* to the progression the poem describes, which declares the labor spent on the doctoring of this progression entirely irrelevant to the authenticity found outside of the poem. The achieved temporality is later in the text said to be "more originary, more authentic than the other [i.e., than "the progression toward history"]"; "it envelops the other, but without reducing it to mere error"; the historical world, now, "asserts itself *within* the knowledge of its own transience" (p. 13). Here it becomes clear that the "actual experience" that is "brusque and dizzying as a fall" that is excised from de Man's "generalized statement of the truth of this experience in its universality" is, precisely, the experience of reading. "Time and history" thus announces de Man's crucial decision against the experience of reading and in favor of theory.

Take the following moment in "Time and history" where de Man is commenting on the Winander-text's prolepsis-disguised-as-retrospection:

The reflection is not separable from the language that describes it, and the half-hour of the end also clocks the time during which Wordsworth, or ourselves, are in real contact with the poem. Hartman is quite right in saying that the poem "becomes an extended epitaph," though one might want to add that it is the

epitaph written by the poet *for* himself, from a perspective that stems, so to speak, from beyond the grave. This temporal perspective is characteristic for all Wordsworth's poetry – even if it obliges us to imagine a tombstone large enough to hold the entire *Prelude*. (de Man [1967] 1987, 9; first italics mine)

It is the particular infelicity of the example of the *Prelude* as an unread epitaph that sharpens our awareness of the shift that occurs between the first and the second sentence. Whereas in the first both Wordsworth and the reader (de Man declaring himself to be one such reader) are identified as addressees of the epitaph, the assertion in the second that it is “written by the poet *for* himself” (which is true enough in one, trivial, sense) in effect spells the end of the role of the reader (and recalls Wordsworth's ambition to plant his seeds “for immortality”). It is because, as one of de Man's later revisions states, in the case of the epitaph it is “never possible to be both the one who wrote it and the one who reads” (p. 9 n. 9) that de Man can develop the opposition between thematics and rhetoric. What we witness here is what Neil Hertz in another context has described as the absence “from de Man's critical account” of “any thematization of the reader-critic's own fascination” (Hertz 1990, 13).¹⁰ As my sketch of the textual history of the composition of the poem has already indicated, this abandons a crucial dimension of the operation of Wordsworth's poem, and one which is immediately linked to the issue of trauma.¹¹

As the editors of “Time and history” inform us, de Man presented this lecture again “around 1971 and 1972” (de Man [1967] 1987, 5 n. 4). The result of this revision is a “second layer” in the text, which transcribes de Man's revisions of crucial parts of the text. In his 1970s revisiting of his pre-“Rhetoric of temporality” self, de Man identifies Hartman with the option he decided against: “My entire exposition could be seen as a gloss on a sentence in Hartman's admirable book on Wordsworth in which he speaks of the need, for Wordsworth, ‘to respect the natural (which includes the temporal) order’ if his poetry is to continue ‘as narrative’” (p. 13 n. 14). It is this adherence to the poem's narrative that de Man's 1970s return discovers to be the element he has, in the meantime, most radically overcome. This overcoming is commonly situated in “The rhetoric of temporality,”¹² a text which repeats both the figure of the fall and the interpretation of Wordsworth. The fall there appears in the discussion of Baudelaire's “De l'essence du rire,” which serves as the scaffold for de Man's development of irony, which is said to be “unrelieved

vertige, dizziness to the point of madness" (de Man [1969] 1983c, 215). The heroics of this fall is that it avoids "the return to the world" and rather maintains "the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality" (p. 217). Irony thus "appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one sudden moment ... irony is instantaneous like an 'explosion,' and the fall is sudden" (p. 225). The truly interesting thing is that this ironic fall is here constructed *not* as the experience of Wordsworth, but rather as "the reversed mirror-image" of the allegorical form that Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal" illustrates; using *both* allegorical duration *and* ironic instantaneity is called the "truly perverse assignment" singled out for the novel, and only carried through in Stendhal (p. 226).

The discussion of "A Slumber" indeed shows de Man denying Wordsworth the precedence of such a successful perversion. The poem is discussed along the lines of the 1967 reading of the Winander-passage; de Man notes how the facts that "the death alluded to is not the death of the speaker" and that "the poem is in the third person" enable the "point of view of a unified self that fully recognizes a past condition as one of error and stands in a present that, however painful, sees things as they actually are." What is removed is the narrative dimension that, in de Man's reading experiences, led to this unified self – the narrative is, in fact, now said to be a consequence of "the ideal, self-created temporality engendered by the temporality of experience": "the fundamental structure of allegory reappears here in the tendency of the language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject." It is the sentence before, however, that most radically qualifies this denegation as the excision of the fall of reading: "The 'now' of the poem is not an actual now, but the ideal 'now,' the duration of an acquired wisdom. The actual now, which is that of the moment of death, lies hidden in the blank space between the two stanzas" (de Man [1969] 1983c, 225). It is this blank that has become the ground of trauma theory's conversion of non-understanding. In Timothy Bahti's reading of this passage, de Man here exemplarily refrains from "disclosing" or "revealing" the meaning of this blank – instead, he "remark[s] it as the mark of an absence" (Bahti 1989, 253). What the textual history of the Winander-passage suggests is that this absence is the site of the determinate loss of an experience of reading that

was figured as a fall, and which de Man has decided to remove from Wordsworth in the name of irony. Allegory and irony can smile at each other as “the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time” (de Man [1969] 1983c, 226), if only to suspend their collapse in a more fundamental experience of reading.

IV. The suspension of reading (and the fall into theory)

De Man’s shift from the hang-up of reading to the fall into theory has, to my best knowledge, best been described in the early work of Tilottama Rajan, most succinctly in her 1985 article “Displacing post-structuralism: Romantic studies after Paul de Man.” Rajan’s text calls for the “elaboration” and “complication” of “rhetorical structures” by “[n]arrative thematizations” (Rajan 1985, 452). And as Rajan knows, “it is partly to his [de Man’s] own earlier work that one turns for alternatives” (p. 468). For Rajan, the loss of the turn away from consciousness to rhetoric is post-structuralism’s neglect of “the role of the reader in the literary transaction” (p. 468), which coincides with the neglect of narrative. Rajan sums up the difference between post-structuralism and the experience of reading:¹³

But there is a difference between seeing through and living through a poem’s figures.¹⁴ Rhetorical analysis makes us aware that truth is ultimately mere figure. Psychological and applicative reading shift the context from the ultimate to the local, and make us aware that truths are figured, dis-closed, in concrete situations which implicate them in a moving army of metaphors and human relations. (p. 472)

It is this concretion in lived experience that de Man’s fall into theory avoids. It is, also, the dimension that Hartman’s response to “Time and history,” already in its title, “Self, time, and history,” begins to reclaim.

This 1974 lecture (first published in 1975) begins with the resurrection of metaphor – the figure de Man had reduced to the “linguistic slight of hand” of a metalepsis (de Man [1967] 1987, 10 n. 9):

I find it difficult to take a position without recourse to a venerable metaphor, that of the *theatrum mundi*. I stand in what is roughly defined as contemporaneity, but the backdrop against which my words echo is much older, and may be defined as a controversy between progressivist and antiprogressivist philosophies of history. (Hartman 1975, 284–285)

Hartman then turns to Winander to remark that this passage's progressivism shows "no easy progression; the structure, in fact, is that of an interrupted pastoral" (p. 286). It is because the passage "imagines a break in self-development, by evoking a great divide with the Boy on one side and the Man on the other" (p. 286), that it is finally a truer version of progression: "The path that leads, in 'The Boy of Winander,' from invocation to echo to mute reflection is the only one" (p. 291). Hartman himself remarks that this phrase slips "from [the] initial metaphor of the theater to that of pathfinding" (p. 291), i.e., from spectatorship to experience. It is unsurprising, then, that the "self" reclaimed in Hartman's title is not only that of the poet, whose "drama of individuation" (Hartman 1994, 632) we witness, but also that of the reader; Hartman observes how the absence of overt literary allusions in the passage regrounds this allusion "in the personal and mortal experience of time":

Take away the play of allusion, the comforting ground of literary-historical texture, and you place the burden of responsiveness directly on the reader. He must echo in himself a verse which he can only develop by the recognition that *de te fabula narratur*. The verse adjures him; demands grace of him; and no poet who reads so easily at first puts as resolutely and lasting a demand on the reader. We are asked to read in ourselves. (Hartman 1975, 291)

This is Hartman's most definitive assertion of the inherent link between trauma and the experience of reading, at the precise moment he refuses de Man's answer to the question of rhetoric de Man had forced into Hartman's mouth.¹⁵ This juncture will continue to structure Hartman's returns to the Winander-passage. In a lecture entitled "Reading and representation," Hartman asserts the transitivity of a "'missed encounter,' linked to trauma and its devious sequelae," one of which is the reader, as "a missed encounter also characterizes the scene of reading" (Hartman 1994, 91–92).¹⁶ He rephrases this situation as the paradox that "[w]hile our share in the conversation grows (there is, so to say, more circulation between text and reader) there is also more indeterminacy" (p. 93).

I will halt at this linking of the experience of reading with "indeterminacy" in order to oppose it to de Man's shibolethic "undecidability" as two versions of the afterlife of new critical ambiguity. For the new criticism, as we have received it, the linearity of the reading experience was never an issue; poetry occurred in non-historical time (i.e., as a *suspension* of

historical time), and its ambiguities could always be harmonized by drawing non-linear connections to elements in the poem that balance these complexities in increasingly richer harmonies. The connection to historical (“lived”) time, then, merely occurred indirectly in the return of the achieved *meaning* of harmony and order to the experience of historical time.¹⁷ The novelty of the phenomenological method we have seen de Man and Hartman share in the 1960s is then an emphasis on the temporality of reading, which is always also an emphasis on (if not an unproblematic restriction to) the linearity of the reading experience.¹⁸ This fidelity implies a refusal to suspend historical time in favor of a non-historical time in which the necessity of a temporal experience could be abandoned. It is only in the experience of reading that the necessity of interpretive determination, or decision, is enforced, as it is only in first taking seriously the temporal experience of poetry that the necessity to decide can occur and, more importantly, that the impossibility to decide, as a *condition* of undecidability, can be encountered. My sketch of de Man’s readings of the Winander-passage suggests that it is indeed in the attempt to record the experience of reading that de Man encounters undecidability as a condition *within* (the) historical time (of reading), and more precisely as a temptation to escape this impossibility by, impossibly, deciding. The radical choice facing de Man *as reader* is that between, on the one hand, a decision to *suspend* a decision (which remains within historical time), and, on the other, the decision to *fall* into a decision that can then be theorized as undecidability. Restated in these terms, I take Rajan’s point to be the following: only by acknowledging that undecidability is a decision to suspend decision that is enabled (and enforced) by the experience of “living through a poem’s figures” could de Man have avoided the reduction of “undecidability” to a merely theoretical signifier. That de Man has opted for a decision in favor of undecidability rather than for a decision in favor of decidability is too little too late, because he has already decided not to decide to suspend decision. The suspension (as “undecidability”) of the fall (a decision not to suspend decision) has already missed the one option for “suspension” that is the real alternative of this fall, and that requires the experience of reading. I take Hartman’s “indeterminacy” to name this decision in favor of suspension.

This allows me one final return to the issue of trauma theory. The lesson of my exercise can be stated most economically as follows: while trauma

theory has legitimized itself in the field of literary scholarship by invoking the theoretical rigor of deconstruction, and in the meantime instituted itself as "a speaking and listening practice" (Toremans 2003, 303–304), these two aspects only cross in their genealogy at the moment of an unavoidable decision between the *mutually exclusive* options of a "fall" and a "hanging." It is only the decision in favor of suspension that, in Hartman's program, incorporates the role of the reader and thus allows the transitivity that allows him to state that "[w]hat makes things 'cling together/In one society' we would now be tempted to identify as trauma" (Hartman 1994, 92). Trauma theory has not ceased to echo this ambition. Here is the last sentence of Caruth's introduction to her *Unclaimed Experience*:

In a catastrophic age ... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we all have taken from ourselves. (Caruth 1996a, 11)

It is clear that such statements warrant Hartman's reservation that "what is called the ethical may turn out to be, once again, a displaced evangelical intensity" (Hartman 1995, 549). And while there may be nothing wrong with trauma studies being merely "a therapy of the imagination," there is not really any ground to refer to it as a theory. Perhaps this is reason enough to admit the dependence of its therapeutic practice on a decision to suspend the very decision that has enabled the fall away from reading into theory. In an interview with Hartman conducted by Cathy Caruth, she quizzes Hartman on "trauma theory" as "a modern theoretical mode of writing." Hartman avoids the answer, saying: "Theory as a mode of discourse is anti-conversational, and links up with the pressure of trauma. I would prefer to focus here on literary knowledge: how literature is a mode of experience. In the non-pathological course of events, the 'unclaimed experience,' as you call it, can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge" (Caruth 1996b, 641). This is, indeed, what the study of trauma has to gain by ending its fascination with the fallen figure of de Man: the ability to stop immobilizing "literary knowledge" at the pathetic "limits of our understanding" (Caruth 1995, 4), and the right to reclaim the "literary" in "literary studies" as a necessarily non-theorized practice of literary reading.

NOTES

1. For a brilliant account of how Wordsworth's "third-person account of an experience which we know ... to have been his own" demands the participation of the reader, see Hertz 1967, 16–21 and 30–33. For a similar explanation of the addition of the second scene, see Hartman 1964, 20.
2. More specifically, in the 1831–1832 D manuscript.
3. The reason Hartman could not propose *this* repetition as the thematic link, but had rather to opt for the repetition of "lengthened" as "long," is clearly that it is not the poet who "hangs" in the second scene – which would be required in order to include this progression in the narrative of "our unsteady growth into self-consciousness."
4. This setting points to the mediation of Blanchot in the image of Hölderlin that de Man displays here and elsewhere. Cf. "Aujourd'hui, le poète ne doit plus se tenir entre les dieux et les hommes, et comme leur intermédiaire, mais il lui faut se tenir, se maintenir à l'intersection de ce double retournement divin, humain,..." (Blanchot 1955, 288–289). Hartman generalizes this image of the poet into that of man in an early text on Blanchot, the text where he coins "a new and hard concept of mediation" that will become central to his work (Hartman 1962, 163). See Harpham 1999, 207–210, for a sketch of Hartman's development that situates this text. For a reading of de Man's doctoring of Hölderlin in order to have his poetry fit in this violation of Wordsworth, see de Graef 1995, 88–92.
5. For a measure of the temporal complexities romantic poetry's *mise en abyme* of our relation to it introduces, see de Graef 1995, 114–120.
6. See Ray 1984, 197–198, for a useful sketch of the opposing demands of criticism and theory in the case of de Man. For de Man's awareness of this temptation at a moment that I will situate:

[the generality claimed by the critics discussed in *Blindness and Insight*] remains grounded in the initial act of reading. Prior to any generalization about literature, literary texts have to be read, and the possibility of reading can never be taken for granted ... This area of immanence is necessarily part of all critical discourse. (de Man [1971] 1983d, 107)

7. As will become apparent, this spatial perspective will turn out to be precisely the one *not* fundamental to Wordsworth – naming it "fundamental" anyway is then a clear indication that de Man is here describing the experience of reading the text, not Wordsworth's intention in its production.
8. As, indeed, there is one in de Man's early work:

Under the immense skies of America stretches earth essentially unmarked as yet by technology, earth and sky that swallow the monstrous cities of industry ... all quality soon becomes interior and leaves nothing of the world remaining but this vast, empty horizon in the center of which man finds himself deprived of all support save that of thought.

This experience is termed one that robs us of "a false serenity," and "man whom nothing protects from the sky and the earth is no doubt closer to the

- essential than the European" (de Man [1955] 1989, 30–31). The need to read this experience – provoked, it can be suggested, by de Man's displacement from Antwerp to the dizzying American dream – into Wordsworth becomes more interesting when juxtaposed to the young Hartman's embrace of Wordsworth after his displacement from Germany to England in 1939. In a text originally published in 1989, Hartman relates how "Wordsworth opened himself to my understanding as soon as I read him," an understanding that was obsessed with "continuity": "What held matter together? Why didn't the table before me disintegrate?" (Hartman 1996, 16–17). Harpham (1999, 212–216) explains this concern with "Wordsworth's inward grounding of an idea of ghostliness" as central to Hartman's work. This could be illustrated by any number of statements. For the most elaborate instance, see Hartman 1987, 22. The word *vertige* is prominent in de Man from 1967 through 1969; see also de Man [1969] 1983d, 215, and [1967] 1983b, 10.
9. Cf. "Interpretation could perhaps be called the description of an understanding, but the term 'description,' because of its intuitive and sensory overtones, would then have to be used with extreme caution; the term 'narration' would be highly preferable" (de Man [1971] 1983d, 108).
 10. This unthematized fascination yet remains readable in the different texts: "This note of uncertainty has in fact entered the poem before, when we were shocked into 'mild surprise' by the use of the word 'hung' at a place where we would have expected 'stood'" (de Man [1965] 1993, 142); "'The Winander Boy' is divided into two sections separated by a blank space, and all readers of the poem have been struck by the abruptness of the transition that leads from the first to the second part" (de Man [1967] 1987, 5).
 11. In a discussion of another Wordsworth poem that narrates an autobiographical event in the third person, Neil Hertz demonstrates how this strategy implicates the reader in "a chain of successive and analogous relations": "The chain exists in a mode of present time – call it the narrative present – which is a creation of the language of the poem, of the telling of the story, and in which traveller and poet and reader mutually participate" (Hertz, 1967, 20–21). See de Graef (1995, 85) for the persistence of analogy in de Man's reading.
 12. Cf. de Man on "The rhetoric of temporality":

With the deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology, it augurs what seemed to be a change, not only in terminology and in tone but in substance. This terminology is still uncomfortably intertwined with the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality that was current at the time, but it signals a turn that, at least for me, has proven to be productive. (de Man [1969] 1983c, xii)
 13. For Rajan's definitions of "post-structuralism" and "deconstruction," see Rajan 2002, 1–8. For the move through post-structuralism to the reader, see also Rajan 1980 and 1990a. Rajan 1990b elaborates the argument I am describing here.
 14. For a recent correction of the distinction, and an indication of its prevalence in the recent reception of de Man, see Terada 2005.
 15. Cf. de Man [1967] 1987, 5 n. 4: "no one has reached the point where this question of Wordsworth's rhetoricity can begin to be asked, except Hartman." A more accurate

- phrasing would be that Hartman has brought de Man to the point where the question of reading had to be asked in terms of rhetoricity in order to be avoided.
16. For an elaboration of Winander as an emblem of interpretation, see Hartman 1979.
 17. For this point, de Man's discussion of Empson and of formalist criticism's "controlled pseudo-ambiguity" remains relevant. See de Man [1956] 1983a, 235–241.
 18. For one of de Man's more categorical statements of a "phenomenology of reading," also commenting on the issue of linearity, see de Man 1996, 77–78.

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