

A Distant View of Close Reading: On Irony and Terrorism around 1977

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ABSTRACT:

In his article “A Distant View of Close Reading: On Irony and Terrorism around 1977,” György Fogarasi investigates the contemporary critical potentials of close reading in the light of recent developments in computation assisted analysis. While rhetorical reading has come to appear outdated in a “digital” era equipped with widgets for massive archival analysis (an era, namely, more keen on “distant,” rather than “close,” reading), Paul de Man’s insights concerning irony might prove useful in trying to account for the difficulties we must face in a world increasingly permeated with dissimulative forms of threat and violence. The article draws on three major texts from 1977: de Man’s draft on “Literature Z,” his lecture on “The Concept of Irony,” and the first and second Geneva Protocols. The reading of these texts purports to demonstrate the relevance of de Man’s theory of irony with respect to the epistemology of “terrorism,” but it also serves as an occasion to reflect upon questions of distance, speed, range, scale, or frequency, and the chances of “rhythmanalysis.”

Keywords: close reading, distant reading, irony, terrorism, rhythmanalysis.

One of the key moments in Paul de Man’s unremitting fascination with literary language, and with textuality in general, is his emphatic turn to rhetoric and to the perplexities of irony in particular. While this move has come to appear outdated in a “digital” era equipped with widgets for massive archival analysis (an era, namely, more keen on “distant,” rather than “close,” reading), de Man’s insights concerning irony might prove useful in trying to account for the difficulties we must face in a world increasingly permeated with dissimulative forms of threat and violence. In this essay, I am first going to elaborate on the notion of close reading in its past and present critical settings. Then, I will discuss what I think to be the crucial moment in de Man’s investigations into irony. And finally, I will try to show how this may inform a critical attempt to understand the epistemological and legal challenges of “terrorism.” The argument

might also provide an occasion to reflect upon questions of distance, range, scale, speed, or frequency, and the chances of “rhythmanalysis.”

So, first: some initial remarks on “close reading,” with a selection of historical references and a few critical aspects. One could start with 1977. (I will return to this year two more times later on, for the sake of a casual metonymy that might serve as a memory prop in structuring or tracing the argument.) 1977 was the year when the legendary “Literature Z” course was implemented at Yale and first team-taught by Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman in the spring semester under the title “Reading and Rhetorical Structures” (Redfield, “Courses Taught by Paul de Man during the Yale Era” 182). This course and its original proposal, probably drafted by de Man two years before, mark a crucial moment in the institutionalization of the deconstructive practice of minute textual analysis in the United States. With an emphasis on “exegesis and interpretation,” the objective was to show students, through increasingly difficult texts, “the bewildering variety of ways in which such texts can be read” (de Man, “Course Proposal: Literature Z” 188).

The conception of “Literature Z” was not unprecedented. Its ambition had in fact close resemblance to the conception of another course, “Literature X” (“a course in slow reading”), envisioned some two decades earlier at Harvard, by Reuben Brower, in his 1959 essay on “Reading in Slow Motion” (Brower, “Reading” 9). The major concerns of slow reading, as formulated by Brower (and his colleague Richard Poirier) in the Preface to the 1962 essay collection *In Defense of Reading*, were threefold: confrontation with the work, attention to words, and insistence on formulating clear questions (Brower, Poirier, “Preface” viii). Interestingly, however, these initial declarations were immediately followed by a reference to “the current reactions against ‘close’ criticism” and the concomitant question of anachronistic methodology: “Hasn’t this sort of thing had its day—a day that has lasted some thirty-five strenuous years?” (ibid.). As mentioned above, we are in 1962 at this point, more than three decades after I. A. Richards’ revolutionary books on the *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1926) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) and two decades after John Crowe Ransom had published *The New Criticism* (1941), which came to be the label for the critical tendency toward close textual analysis.

As recent histories of the practice and the very phrase of “close reading” have convincingly shown, this tendency was not at all limited to the otherwise rather diverse company of the “New Critics” (I. A. Richards, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks), let alone their deconstructive successors (like de Man or Hartman). As part of a modern “rhetorics of scale,” the method of close reading was progressively applied in primary, secondary and college education from the late nineteenth century (Jin, “Problems of Scale in ‘Close’ and ‘Distant’ Reading” 105, 109), and can, in fact, be traced back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Biblical exegesis, or even further, to formulations in ancient rhetorical thought (Hancher,

“Re: Search and Close Reading” 122-24). In the wake of these rhetorical and hermeneutic traditions, the notion of close or slow textual scrutiny seems to have gained additional momentum in the romantic discourse on poetry, as the Wordsworthian warning against the “rashness of decision” in the Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads* clearly testifies. The Google Books Ngram Viewer chart on the frequency of the expression “close reading” between 1800 and 2000 (as produced and presented by Hancher, “Re” 127) seems to support the claim of a gradual progression, but upon closer look, it also seems to show a slight steepening of the rise in frequency both after World War II and in the late 1970s, which might indicate the spread of New Criticism and deconstruction, respectively. So, in the end, the customary association of the phrase with these latter tendencies is not that mistaken. Mark Tansey, for instance, would hardly have featured de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* in his painting entitled *Close Reading* (1990), had not deconstruction made its own immense contribution to the improvement of close analysis in the previous one or two decades.

Brower himself began to experiment with slow reading as early as 1942 (Jin, “Problems” 122). Upon closer examination of his 1962 Preface, one might even hear a tone of sarcasm in his inclination “to think of the situation as a kind of melodramatic allegory, with something called the New Criticism in the role of obnoxious but doomed dragon” (Brower, Poirier, “Preface” viii). For him, the project of slowing down was to counterbalance what he felt as the dehumanizing effects of contemporary mass-culture as it invaded both families and universities, and the new vogue for “speed reading” in high school curricula (Hancher, “Re” 121). It was meant to promote critical analysis in the modern “flood of words and images,” to strengthen resistance to easy historicizing or moralizing reductions, and also to protest against the growing “inhumanity of the Humanities” (Brower, “Reading” 5, 18). In the face of mass-education (“display lectures before audiences of five and six hundred” and “machine-graded examinations”, *ibid.*), Brower insisted on class interaction and critical feedback (“careful criticism of written exercises”, *ibid.* 16). Thus, next to close reading, a practice in what he called “close writing” was to ensure the ability of articulated and nuanced self-expression, and the further enhancement of critical attitudes.

Paul de Man was a teaching fellow at Harvard during the fifties, and was closely related to Brower and his innovative pedagogy (Waters, “Paul de Man” xiii-xiv). He even contributed an essay to the 1962 volume *In Defense of Reading*. Twenty years later, already at Yale for more than a decade, he famously set Brower’s teaching practice as an example for the “the critical, even subversive, power of literary instruction” (de Man, “Return to Philology” 23). Even though de Man had serious reservations concerning the “anti-historical bias” of the New Critics (de Man, “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism” 20), and expressed his doubts about the aesthetic unity of the artwork as an organic whole devoid of historical implications, he was fascinated by the dimensions

opened up by close textual criticism. The critical potential of close reading was something he experienced during his cooperation with Brower. But he also inherited Brower's predicament, an accusation this time not simply of "blocking the road" anachronistically by a method that had seen better days, but of perverting it into what de Man himself called, perhaps infamously, "the hard porn of theory" – a scandalously excessive mode of superclose reading, that moves closer and closer, to ever smaller bits and occurrences in a text, until (but is there an "until"?) its close-ups show nothing but the pure formalism of pornographic grammar (de Man, "Blocking the Road" 190).

Today, long after de Man's death in 1983 and the omission of "Literature Z" (later renamed "Literature 130") from the Literary Major curriculum at Yale after 1989 (Redfield, "Courses" 181), close or slow textual analysis is still a wide-spread practice in literary studies, from psychoanalytic or gender criticism to postcolonial readings or various historically oriented modes of investigation. Due to its "eminently teachable" character (Jin, "Problems" 109), it has even become an integral part of the literature and literacy segment of the 2010 Common Core State Standards Initiative, whose purpose is to promote analytical and critical skills in US primary and secondary education (Hancher, "Re" 125, cf. "Common Core State Standards" 3, 10, 35, 60). But close reading is also a method growingly under siege—this time not from the side of avuncular morality, as was the case in the early 1980s, but from the side of its own formal opponent, "distant reading," a method in computer-aided analysis. Of course, one could discuss other related methodologies, like "algorithmic criticism" or "macroanalysis," but for the sake of brevity, I will confine myself to "distant reading." (For "algorithmic criticism", see Ramsay, *Reading Machines*, and for "macroanalysis," see Jockers, *Macroanalysis*.)

According to its propagator and prime practitioner Franco Moretti and his 2013 book *Distant Reading* (a collection of essays published over two decades), distant reading consists in "identifying a discrete formal trait and then following its metamorphoses through a whole series of texts" (Moretti, *Distant Reading* 65). Moretti happily countersigns Jonathan Arac's definition of this method as "a formalism without close reading" (*ibid.*), while he himself occasionally prefers to call it "serial" reading or "quantitative" analysis. For Moretti, "the trouble with close reading" (48) is its limitedness to a (small) canon and its adherence, thus, to a secularized theology. Since, according to him, an authentic knowledge of literary history has to take into consideration the "great unread" (the 99.5 per cent of works that disappear into oblivion), such knowledge "cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts – secularized theology, really ('canon!') – that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies" (67). It has to expand its scope, and for that purpose it requires "sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits" (*ibid.*). The "New Haven" style of analysis (which, as we have seen, is not only a certain "Yale"

but also a certain “Harvard” legacy, the sources of which reach back to decades and centuries) is called into question for being insensitive to patterns larger than a human glimpse could contain. In contrast, computation-assisted archival analysis (of databases produced by a minute work of coding) makes hitherto unseen phenomena visible through “seriation,” visualizing patterns of power and ideology no one has seen before. As a recent study has convincingly stated, with reference to developments from 2005 to 2015, literary studies has recently seen a growing need for visualized results, and “the increasing value of visualizations” is undeniable for both close and distant readings (Jänicke, Franzini, Cheema, Scheuermann, “On Close and Distant Reading in the Humanities” 4). Yet, while the digital visualizations of close readings are merely external additions to results achieved manually (ibid. 5-6), the visualizations of distant readings are part and parcel of the analytical process, forming the *raison d’être* of the whole investigation. In an earlier book on distant reading, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), Moretti himself demonstrated how different types of visualization might serve different computer-aided or hand-made investigations. Graphs may represent, along a temporal axis, the rise and fall of various genres, or of specific formal features within a given genre (*Graphs, Maps, Trees* 15-16); maps may provide us a picture of the spatial dissemination of, say, British or French novels across Europe, or the locations of objects of desire across Paris in metropolitan narratives (ibid. 55, see also Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*); and trees can help us imagine the evolution of genres, the morphological evolution of detective stories, for instance, in terms of the presence or absence of clues in the narrative (ibid. 73-75). Through an analysis of 7,000 items, distant reading is able to show, for example, how the titles of British novels have drastically shortened during the eighteenth century, from the time of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived...* (a book still bearing a whole micro-narrative on its title page) to the age of, say, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. (These are my examples. Moretti’s analysis focuses on a slightly later phase, from 1740 to 1850, *Distant Reading* 179-210.) In Moretti’s account, these results testify to the negative correlation between the size of the market and the length of titles. He also demonstrates two other ways in which titles serve as perfect ads for novels: through their growingly figurative style, which activates consumer interest, and their tricky grammatical formulas, which themselves create expectations concerning narrative content (the use of definite or indefinite articles, or of “the x of y” structure). All this is missed if readers confine themselves to the close scrutiny of the tiny portion of works provided by the canon. Memorable cases of directing close attention to works or phenomena outside the canon can of course easily be brought up (from Leo Spitzer’s orange juice advertisement analysis, to Raymond Williams’ close commentary on television program sequences, Roland Barthes’ essays on contemporary popular mythologies, or de Man’s witty reflection on a scene in the TV

sitcom *All in the Family*). But one could argue that such moments became memorable precisely because they were perceived as exceptional, and as such, they were the prime constituents of the sex appeal of the critical discourse or critical oeuvre in question.

The continual emphasis on minute formal traits also means, however, that distant reading in no way attempts to do away with the method of close reading in its entirety. It rather purports to complete it by combining the scrutiny of individual textual elements with a technologically expanded sensitivity to larger patterns: “we must learn to find meaning in small changes and slow processes” (*Distant Reading* 192). Such combination of what is “small” with what is “slow” calls for the connection of “close” with “fast” (or “distant”) modes of reading. It means the combination of “top down” zooming-in and “bottom-up” zooming-out movements (Jänicke, Franzini, Cheema, Scheuermann, “On Close and Distant Reading” 10-11). And that is precisely what Moretti advocates when he urges a “quantitative study” whose “units are linguistic and rhetorical” (*Distant Reading* 204). In the case of the historical evolution of genres, such a mode of combined analysis would complete the spatial close-ups of rhetorical reading with the temporal bird’s-eye views of distant reading. It would attempt to technologically miniaturize in time what has been sensually enlarged in space.

That said, the picture still remains unfavorable for old school critics. In an era that seems to turn “the *longue durée* into a fetish” (Hayot, “A Hundred Flowers” 66), there is little glory for minute textual analysis. Without the addition of distant perspectives, close analysis remains blind to large-scale historical processes. A close reader (like de Man) will never see the forest for the trees, and like the dumb guy in the map game near the ending of Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” he is doomed to be a loser and an object of ridicule in the eyes of the smart serial analyst (Moretti) who has a long-range perspective and therefore an insight into the socio-economics of literature and the hidden forces of history, overarching decades or even centuries. The aforementioned passage in Poe’s narrative might help us put Moretti’s method into perspective and view distant reading itself somewhat more distantly:

“There is a game of puzzles,” he [Dupin] resumed, “which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word—the name of town, river, state or empire—any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight

is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident.” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 222)

Within the logic of the narrative, the Prefect’s microscopic search is bound to remain unsuccessful, because the purloined letter is concealed by its very obtrusion or self-evidence, that is, by not being concealed at all. In this map game between thief and police, everything seems to depend on “range,” as Dupin rightly notes (214). Everything depends on the range of the search. The police seem to have missed it, so the witty detective needs to zoom out from the picture in order to notice what otherwise would have escaped attention even without concealment.

In the rivalry between close and distant readers, in fact, something more is at stake. While close readers merely use their mental and bodily capacities even as they sometimes risk the articulation of larger historical patterns, a distant analyst relies on technological prostheses with almost immense memory and speed. On top of that, with the addition of teamwork, an exponential advantage is granted to those working around digital humanities labs today. Solitary close readers will never be able to catch up with them. Whatever their “deinotic” powers, legendary figures like de Man are dinosaurs of the past, and their extinction from the history of literary criticism is just a question of time.

Seen from a distance, however, close and distant readings might appear in a curiously symmetrical relation, as the poles of a double infinity (analyzed by de Man in his readings of Pascal and Kant), or somewhat closer to our topic, as the two poles of what Walter Benjamin has famously termed, with reference to photography and film, the “optical unconscious.” With this phrase Benjamin pointed to the way cinematic technology may assist in the observation of segments and events in space and time which the human eye is unable to behold:

Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up [*Großaufnahme*], space expands; with slow motion [*Zeitlupe*], movement is extended. And just as enlargement [*Vergrößerung*] not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly “in any case,” but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion [*Zeitlupe*] not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them [...] This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching [*Dehnen*] or compressing [*Raffen*] a sequence, enlarging [*Vergrößern*] or reducing [*Verkleinern*] an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the

optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” 265-66, cf. “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” 500)

Although, for obvious historical and technological reasons, Benjamin focuses mainly on enlargement or slow motion (or standstill), at the end of the above passage he also points to the other direction: the possibility to accelerate or miniaturize images by “compressing a sequence” or “reducing an object.” In contrast to de Man’s rhetorical close-ups, Moretti’s bird’s-eye view perspectives seem to be completing the Benjaminian project. Should Benjamin be living at this hour (say, in the age both of superslow recordings and time-lapse videos), he would most certainly move the toilsome database-assembling work of his *Arcades Project* (in some ways itself a socio-economically oriented effort at “distant reading” *avant la lettre*) from Paris to California, and would be directing the Literary Lab at Stanford, with Franco Moretti perhaps on his side as research assistant. (Moretti makes sporadic references to Benjamin anyway, even though he never gives him due attention. See, for instance, his reliance on Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s competitive poetics, or his reference to the Benjaminian theme of distraction: *Distant Reading* 70 and 174.) Similarly, with the improvement of technology and the subsequent progress of digital humanities, the concept of literary studies, and more specifically, of reading itself, might nowadays be subject to change just as the concept of art and of artistic creativity (conceived according to the traditional art forms of painting and theatre) was shown to undergo traumatic changes with the appearance of photography and film, according to the epigraph from Valéry at the beginning of the third version of Benjamin’s essay, or again—coming back to our own age—just as the concept of music is undergoing an immense transformation today (if one considers what musical composition, musical instrument, or musical performance mean today, things unimaginable in the age of Benjamin).

Symptomatic of the trauma of this change is the way the very act of reading is being denied from “distant reading” by critics like Jonathan Culler, who claims that Moretti’s practice is “scarcely reading at all” (Culler, “The Closeness of Close Reading” 20). In a tone of cultural pessimism, Culler expresses his misgivings about „an age where new electronic resources make it possible to do literary research without reading at all” (ibid. 24). Related to this is Culler’s conviction that, all appearances to the contrary, the real contrast to close reading is not distant reading (which, as we have just seen, does not even count as reading), but “sloppy” or “casual” reading, one which produces hasty reductions (ibid. 20). Although this notion has been taken up by others (Hancher, “Re” 125, Jin “Problems” 106, 118-20), and has been supported by additional arguments (e.g. the real meaning of closeness as densi-

ty, Hancher, “Re” 124), the effort to do away with distant reading by not even considering it a real rival, seems to me somewhat hasty, for it fails to critically account for the long tradition of thought that has associated speed (or distant look) with superficiality. Another recurrent claim worth mentioning is the concern over “scientism.” This concern seems highly legitimate as a critical gesture targeting the fetishized status of scientific discourse, but it is oblivious of the historicity of that discourse and the fears surrounding it, most particularly, the fact that a couple of decades ago close reading itself was perceived as too scientific or too technical, and was, accordingly, taken as a threat to what seemed at that time a more natural mode of reading (Jin, “Problems” 118–20). Such gestures of denial or negation, just as the very eruption of the “reading wars” (Hensley, “Shifting Scales” 340), testify to the scale of the changes taking place in and around the techniques and technologies of reading, as well as the very concept of reading itself.

The question of irony is itself closely related to the issue of perceptibility and the difficulties of detection, which are the focal points of Benjamin’s study and Poe’s narrative. De Man’s most sustained treatment of this problem in the lecture on “The Concept of Irony” (held on April 4, 1977, at Ohio State University), actually starts and ends with this very question: how can you find out, how can you locate or demarcate, how can you detect or define irony?

As far as Poe is concerned (if I may come back to “The Purloined Letter” just for a moment), the example of the map game is slightly misleading, for it is not simply its trivial size or position (its relative largeness or “hyper-obtrusive situation”) that will make the purloined letter vanish from the eyes of the police, but its figural dissimulation as well. Largeness or obtrusiveness is merely an illustration for an unhidden object that nevertheless escapes attention just because the range of the search does not match the range of the object’s placement. But the letter also escapes attention in a wholly different manner, through figural transformation, by appearing not for what it is. Thus, its obtrusive placement is but a surplus addition, an overinsurance, or a simple joke, as compared to its figural reshaping. It still looks a letter all right, but what kind of a letter is another question. As Dupin underlines, “the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, redirected and resealed” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 225), to look as if it were just another everyday piece of paper, a shabby document of no special significance. Poe’s narrator expressly calls our attention to the risk of perpetual error, so apparent in the inefficiency of the police, but presenting a latent threat to anyone who would commit himself to search either “too deep” or “too shallow” (215), for “deep” and “shallow” are part of the same system of search and thus exposed to the same fatality. What would be necessary is not simply a shift *within* the range of the search (a shift from close to more distant scrutiny), but a shift *from* “range” as such, a shift from perception to reading, from the literal to the figural, a radical shift in the heuristics of the search itself. The letter is radically out of range, for no actual range

can sufficiently guarantee its detection. Thus, no distant look will find it either, let alone close scrutiny. Dupin's success is only partially due to his distant perspective, for what one would need to notice instead of the trees, is not even the forest, but a shape or pattern in the wilderness which has but a remote resemblance either to trees or forests, and may have nothing to do with vegetation altogether. Earlier in the narrative the narrator explains why allowing "no variation of principle" and sticking to "one principle or set of principles of search" produces no results (216-17). Mere calculation or mathematical reasoning will not do. It must be supplemented by a poetic sense for "ruses" (220). Dupin is an analyst only insofar as he is "both mathematician and poet" (*ibid.*), i.e., only insofar as he is ready not only to shift but also to quit ranges. Trying to poetically combine several principles or even invent new ones will not guarantee success either, but might at least increase his chances of detection.

Likewise, irony for de Man is not in fact a problem whose solution lies with close reading, even though close reading may and does certainly pose this question in the clearest way possible, and "the bewildering variety" of interpretive possibilities mentioned in the course proposal for "Literature Z" might certainly make students alert to the readable traces and bifurcations of figurality. If irony poses a problem that only a truly rhetorical reading might be able to tackle, then one could even feel compelled to stop using the terms "rhetorical" reading and "close" reading synonymously. Granting to the former what the latter can hardly attain, we should perhaps try to elaborate a notion of rhetorical reading that is no longer unconditionally devoted to proximity. (This is by no means an easy task in an age not only of fervent technological speeding, but also, as a backlash, of "slow" movements in food consumption, city-life, work, sex etc.) Difficult as it may be to acknowledge, the detection of irony has little to do with approximation or slowing down. But it has little to do with distancing or acceleration either. It has nothing to do with scale, range, or frequency, nor with speed, tempo, or rhythm. It implies alteration, change, dissimulation. All appearances to the contrary, irony is not homologous to a practice of simple "close" reading (which, as Brower and Poirier have pointed out, is still aiming at "confrontation"), as it is certainly not homologous to a practice of distant reading either, however inventive and illuminating it might be in other respects.

The decisive moment in de Man's lecture comes at the point where he quotes and comments on fragment 668 from Friedrich Schlegel's series of fragments *Zur Philosophie*: "Irony is a permanent parabasis." By that point in the lecture, we have heard a lot: first, an introductory portrayal of irony's resistance to definitional control; secondly, criticism's resistance to that ironic resistance, with Wayne C. Booth representing American criticism as dumb *alazon* and the German critical tradition figuring as smart *eironeia* (the latter being itself divided and complicit in dumbly reducing irony when it comes to praising or blaming the scandalously undecidable chapter "Eine Reflexion" in Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde*;

for a lucid reading of the “running double entendre” of this chapter, see Redfield, “*Lucinde’s* Obscenity” 138-47); thirdly, the three common ways of reducing irony: deeming it as an artistic device, inserting it into a dialectic of the self, and inserting it into the dialectic of history (note that at this point, de Man implicitly distances himself from his earlier treatment of irony in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” as a dialectic of the self, but his very gesture of an *autocritique* also ironically re-inscribes him in that same dialectic); and fourthly, the minute analyses of two of the *Lyceum* fragments: fragment 37 (in the context of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*), whose reading culminates in a notion of allegory as a narrative of the interaction between trope and performance, and fragment 42, whose reading leads de Man to focus on the disruptive element of parabasis (or anacoluthon) as the external linguistic form of an internal mood or sense.

At this point, we are in fact back to the initially criticized attempt of Booth whose question “Is it ironic?” needed such external markers for a reply. Clearly enough, de Man has to do otherwise: external markers (even those of parabasis or anacoluthon) will not do justice to the difficulty involved in the demarcation or definition of irony. It is at this moment that he turns to the Schlegelian notion of permanence, of irony as a *permanent* parabasis, extended (with an allusion to his reading of fragment 37) as “a permanent parabasis of an allegory of tropes.”

As de Man underlines, the element of permanence is “violently paradoxical,” for how could an interruption which presupposes continuity happen “at all points,” “at all times” in a discourse?

Parabasis is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register. [...] Irony is not just an interruption; it is [...] the “permanent parabasis,” parabasis not just at one point but at all points, which is how he [Friedrich Schlegel] defines poetry: irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted. Critics who have written about this have pointed out, rightly, that there is a radical contradiction here, because a parabasis can only happen at one specific point, and to say that there would be permanent parabasis is saying something violently paradoxical. But that’s what Schlegel had in mind. You have to imagine the parabasis as being able to take place at all times. (de Man, “The Concept of Irony” 178-79)

Indeed, how could an interruption happen just anywhere, at any time? The answer is, in my understanding at least: it does *not* happen for sure, but it *can* happen, or rather, it *might be* happening unnoticed at any single point. Which means: it is happening undetectably, one cannot decide whether it is actually happening or not. Kevin Newmark has defined de Man’s Schlegelian notion of irony as a “dissimulated readability” (“*L’absolu littéraire*” 913). Irony’s readability is indeed dissimulated,

but not only in its resistance to academic grasp (or conceptualization), rather, it is concealed in its more prosaic resistance to tracing or detection. It is a potentiality, a potential threat, but since you cannot exclude this possibility, the potential itself is actual and threatening. Irony is the threat of a threat, the actual threat of a potential threat, the “possibility of disruption” (as de Man puts it earlier, 169), the actual possibility of a potential disruption. Here de Man’s discussion abounds in notions of danger and threat (or terror, for that matter).

Irony is not just a double code, for de Man. But it is not just a disruption between two codes either (not a mere parabasis or anacoluthon). It is the *possibility* of such a disruption. Irony is a matter of duplication (or even multiplication), of alternate lines of semiosis or reading, the major difficulty being that while for all duplicates one would need a moment of bifurcation where duplication occurs and from where one could attentively try and follow or construe both levels of meaning (successfully or not), first one would need to locate those points of bifurcation, but they themselves might be implicated in a logic of duplicity due to an earlier (or later) bifurcation, wherefore it is impossible to judge whether a bifurcation actually occurs or not on a given spot. What remains, albeit ineluctably, is the mere *possibility* of its occurrence.

One is reminded here of other Schlegelian formulations which de Man could just as well have quoted, formulations from the fragment series “Fragmente zur Litteratur und Poesie” which pair the notion of permanence with that of concealment or imperceptibility. Just a couple of examples: “In the fantastic novel, the parabasis must be permanent” (Fragment 463), or “In the novel, the parabasis must be dissimulated, not explicit as in ancient comedy” (Fragment 397). Unlike comedy, which for Schlegel is “parody, rather than irony” (Fragment 521), the novel is ironic because the disruption is self-dissimulating and remains utterly implicit. The appraisal of irony as something disturbingly alocal or atypical leads Schlegel to a contempt for localities in the sense of detectable parabases, and a high esteem for linguistic sceneries which allow for no localization: “The *scene* of a good novel is the *language* in which it is written; *localities* that are uniquely and properly parabases are worth absolutely nothing” (Fragment 407). In spite of Schlegel’s sometimes enthusiastic formulations, irony is first and foremost a threat. It has an “explosive” character. Its potential disruption is the potential eruption of violence, the violence of a “cutting edge,” which irony actually is according to its Greek idiom, not only able to kill at some moment in the future, but able to *be killing* right now without recognition.

Elsewhere, in his guest editorial preface from 1979 to an issue of *Studies in Romanticism* (a preface Sarah Guyer has extensively analyzed in “At the Far End of This Ongoing Enterprise...” 77-92), de Man speaks of a murderous act unrecognizable for the target (de Man, “Introduction” 498). In another preface from the same year, this time to *Allegories of Reading*, the imagery is hardly less ambivalent. Speaking of deconstruction as a “power of inventive rigor,” de Man mentions how it

regularly gets misrepresented as either a “harmless academic game” or a “terrorist weapon” (*Allegories of Reading* x; in “Return to Philology” he speaks about “critical terrorism”, 23). The customary and certainly most legitimate way to read this (and other such formulations) is to assimilate them to a scheme of rhetorical magnification or minimization, which for de Man is always a sign of anxiety. But in the context of irony (and *Allegories of Reading* is deeply implicated, in fact culminates, in the quandaries of irony, with its last chapter “Excuses” originally entitled “The Purloined Ribbon,” and with its epigraph from Pascal, warning against the fearful symmetry of the double infinite of too slow and too fast reading)—so, in the context of irony (an irony that might escape both zoom-in and zoom-out strategies), one could also risk a different reading of the antithesis of “harmless academic game” and “terrorist weapon,” one which takes these images at face value for a moment, and thinks of terrorist weapons as eminently self-disguising tools for the annihilation of adversaries. A terrorist “weapon” must really seem to be just a harmless (academic or other) “game.” Like the “cutting” edge of a boxcutter, or the “explosive” potential of a commercial airplane (to mention but two elements from 9/11 iconography), it must appear to be just another peaceful everyday device used by civilians for utterly harmless purposes. A terrorist, like the figure of the partisan in Carl Schmitt’s theory, must ironically dissimulate his or her means of combat. Is there a way to confine such dissimulation within boundaries and to subject danger to calculation?

As in the *Theory of the Partisan* Carl Schmitt himself has shown, the above question has been one of the major propelling forces behind the 1949 Geneva Conventions which form the bulk of what has come to be called “international humanitarian law,” that is, the modern laws of war. They represent an effort to frame the war on field and sea along a principle of distinction between combatants and non-belligerent persons, defining the rights and obligations of those who are not participating in the fights, who are *hors de combat*, like the sick, the wounded, the shipwrecked, but also like, among others, medical personnel, negotiators, prisoners of war, and of course, civilians.

In order to come up to the above principle of distinction, the Geneva Conventions had to limit partisan camouflage and make irregular troops and militia conform to a chivalric heritage of open and straightforward confrontation. Article 13 of the First Geneva Convention formulates four criteria (taken over from the Second Hague Convention of 1899): “a) that of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates; b) that of having a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance; c) that of carrying arms openly; d) that of conducting their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war” (*Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols*). Limiting myself to a restricted focus, it is the second and the third of these criteria (points b and c) which need more attention. Belligerents are expected to indicate their belligerent status by clear markers “recognizable at a distance,” and by an equally clear demonstration of their fighting potential (through

a clearly noticeable possession of weapons). Once these criteria are fulfilled, members of the adversary or persons out of combat are both able to demarcate the danger, and may decide whether they want to keep their distance or prefer to engage. Should any of these criteria be unheeded, the danger becomes difficult, if not impossible, to calculate or estimate, and people are exposed, beyond control, to an all-pervasive threat, potentially turning into violence at any moment, which in turn can only be perceived after the fact, when the victim might no longer be able to perceive anything at all.

The attempt to exclude camouflage (or figural modes of engagement) seems however to go against the grain of warfare as such, since war has always been an art of camouflage to some extent, well before the emergence of partisan (or terrorist) operations. So the question is not how one could get rid of camouflage in its entirety but how one could frame it by drawing a distinction between its legitimate and illegitimate forms. Such a distinction was introduced on June 8, 1977, in the First Geneva Protocol, where it appeared in Article 37 as a difference between “ruses of war” and “perfidy,” with a clear intent to prohibit the latter:

PROHIBITION OF PERFIDY

1. It is prohibited to kill, injure or capture an adversary by resort to perfidy. Acts inviting the confidence of an adversary to lead him to believe that he is entitled to, or is obliged to accord, protection under the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, with intent to betray that confidence, shall constitute perfidy. The following acts are examples of perfidy:

(a) The feigning of an intent to negotiate under a flag of truce or of a surrender;

(b) The feigning of an incapacitation by wounds or sickness;

(c) The feigning of civilian, non-combatant status; and

(d) The feigning of protected status by the use of signs, emblems or uniforms of the United Nations or of neutral or other States not Parties to the conflict.

2. Ruses of war are not prohibited. Such ruses are acts which are intended to mislead an adversary or to induce him to act recklessly but which infringe no rule of international law applicable in armed conflict and which are not perfidious because they do not invite the confidence of an adversary with respect to protection under that law. The following are examples of such ruses: the use of camouflage, decoys, mock operations and misinformation. (*Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols*)

While both ruses and perfidious acts are aimed at misleading the adversary, the former “infringe no rule of international law applicable in armed conflict”, because they “do not invite the confidence of an adversary with respect to protection under that law.” In other words, mere ruses do not injure the frame that would mark the spatial or temporal borders of warfare, and thus, they preserve a deep mutual confidence between the conflicting parties, a trust in one another’s good faith, which is also an implicit trust in a future peace (a rather Kantian principle, which also appears in the authoritative commentary on the 1977 Geneva Protocols, see Sandoz, Swinarski, Zimmermann, *Commentary on the Additional Protocols* 436). Perfidy, on the other hand, involves a limitless arsenal of trickery. As the Latin term *per-fidia* reminds us, perfidy implies the perversion or perforation of faith, belief or confidence (*fides*). It implies the breaking of a promise, whereby one abuses or betrays another person’s faith in someone else’s promising. And since to make promises is conceived here as an exclusively human ability (an assumption one should not take for granted, but the critical examination of which is most certainly beyond the scope of the present analysis), one can only commit perfidy by pretending to be another human. One cannot commit perfidy by pretending to be a cliff, a bush, or a cow. One can only do so by pretending to be a human, another human, someone else: one who is harmless, who is non-combatant either in the sense of being (perhaps only temporarily) unwilling or unable to combat (a negotiator, or a wounded or sick soldier), or in the sense of not having engaged in the violence at all (a civilian, a protected person, or a member of the medical services, for instance). Although the list given in the above cited article is a list of human individuals, we may add, for the sake of accuracy, that international humanitarian law also recognizes protected objects (like medical vehicles and buildings), so perfidy may in fact involve nonhuman entities, if they are used for military purposes. But again, such entities may have protected status only inasmuch as they are marked by humans, if they are singled out by protective emblems (of the red cross, red crescent, red crystal etc.), that is, if they become conveyors of a human promise of harmlessness or neutrality.

Article 51 on the “Protection of the Civilian Population” states the prohibition of terror: “Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.” But it is in fact the Second Geneva Protocol, also of 1977, that expressly and distinctively mentions “Acts of terrorism” as a practice to be prohibited (see Article 4 on the “Fundamental Guarantees” of humane treatment; for an earlier mention, see Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention). Terrorist practice appears here in a list which includes collective punishment, the taking of hostages, and slavery, among others, and which curiously concludes by a prohibition of “Threats to commit any of the foregoing acts.” If the otherwise much-debated word “terrorism” might here be read as a stand-in for practices of threatening, then this closing formulation seems to prohibit even the threat of such a threat, even the

promise of threatening (which itself is a promise). Doing so, it does not only produce a crack in the framing of the act it wants to delimit, but also refers us back to de Man's analysis of irony and his question concerning its "graspability," even by the inventiveness of close reading, or the inventory ("bewildering variety") of results such a reading may offer.

With the difficulties of "grasping," here again we come to the question of approximation and distancing, of slow or fast motion, which, in other words, is a question of scale, frequency, or rhythm. In his *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre underlies how "our senses and the instruments we have at our disposal" determine the world for us by delimiting how we can "grasp" it (*Rhythmanalysis* 83). With reference to the ancient Protagorean tenet ("man is the measure of all things"), he points to the epistemological and even ontological importance of scale: "another scale [i.e., other senses or instruments] would determine another world" (*ibid.*). A modification in ranges or frequencies will result in a different world offering itself to us.

The question of scale has, in fact, become one of uttermost importance in recent studies of terrorist organizations and efforts to counter them. The still unfolding "science of counterterrorism," the rapidly growing amount of mathematical models or statistical tools, indicates how scholars in applied mathematics and statistics try to help political and military decision makers grasp the "enormous amount of data that might hold critically important clues" and discern "important patterns" that might in turn assist security intelligence units in tracing the clandestine operations of terrorist cells (Memon, Farley, Hicks, Rosenorn, *Mathematical Methods in Counterterrorism*, 1-4). Such mathematical methods (coming from network theory, game theory, cryptography etc.) have a long history. "Frequency analysis," which formed the basis for the codebreaking method developed by Alan Turing during World War II and which even today is the basis for wi-fi codebreaking apps that analyze data traffic, was introduced by the Arabic pioneer of cryptography, Al-Kindi, and dates back as early as the ninth century. But as the example of the Second World War codebreakers in Bletchley Park shows, cryptanalysis can never be reduced to sheer mathematical formula, so it seems unwise to expect that codebreaking could ever become "just a numbers game" (Vincent, Wallace, „Lost Without Translation" 42).

The question of scale or rhythm remains highly important for any serious effort to tackle the problem of detection. Jacques Derrida, for instance, points to the potential evidence of "statistical analysis" or "statistics" (when he speaks of the recent fashionableness of the word "invention" or when he mentions Heidegger's silence about sexuality, *Psyche* 1: 22, 2: 9), but he also warns us about the growingly "micrological" level of technology and our consequent inability to evade or even perceive threat and violence: „One day it might be said: 'September 11' –those were the (good) old days of the last war. Things were still of the order of the gigantic: visible and enormous! What size, what height! There has been worse since. Nanotechnologies of all sorts are so much more pow-

erful and invisible, uncontrollable, capable of creeping in everywhere. They are the micrological rivals of microbes and bacteria. Yet our unconscious is already aware of this; it already knows it, and that's what's scary" ("Autoimmunity" 102). Derrida's alertness toward both directions (macroscopic and microscopic vision) might be an indication of their mutual importance, but it might just as well signal their ultimate insufficiency, not only in the sense that we would need their wise combination, but also in the sense, perhaps, that the very logic of the scale might not suffice when we come to face the challenge of the perfidious operations of terrorism, or the workings of irony. With the advent of "flexible" or "zoomable" readings (Hancher, "Re" 128; Jin, "Problems" 115), based on a peaceful co-existence or co-operation of close and distant modes of analysis, the "reading wars" may some day be left behind (English, Underwood, "Shifting Scales" 292), but even so, the unanswered question concerning the very status of scaling remains with us. If Poe's legendary investigator was right, and analysis has to go beyond mere calculation, then the purely mathematical logic of scales and frequencies will not be enough. But since one also cannot do without such adjustments of distance and speed, it remains just as hard to tell where exactly the chances of "rhythmanalysis" fade away.

Near the end of his talk on irony, having just displaced Kierkegaard's attempt at dialectical framing, de Man suggestively notes that "Irony and history seem to be curiously linked to each other" ("The Concept of Irony" 184). No explanation, no further elaboration follows, just the uncertain possibility of a future mastery: "This would be the topic to which this would lead, but this can only be tackled when the complexities of what we call performative rhetoric have been more thoroughly mastered" (ibid.). Whether this is a pessimistic understatement or an optimistic project, it is hard to tell. But to work on that "curious link" between irony and history seems an inevitable task that reading ("rhetorical," "close," "distant," or other) can hardly evade.

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