

On Jacques Derrida's "Paul de Man's War"

VII

Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Peggy Kamuf

Saturday, 24 December 1988, 5 A.M.

What is a thing?

What remains? What, after all, of the remains . . . ? [*Quoi du reste . . . ?*]

Ergo je suis—the question of the thing. It is going to be necessary once again to quibble [*ergoter*].

(This morning's decision: upon waking, take notes on what remains of certain of my dreams, before they sink back into oblivion. Retain in particular those—they are finally rather rare—that already have a verbal consistency. This promises them an ideal identity, an autonomous existence of sorts, at the same time lighter and more solid. For me, the duration of these words is like the solitary persistence of a wreck. Its form run aground is stabilized in the sand. One might see it surge up through the morning fog in the manner of a damp ruin, jagged, covered with algae and signs. A chance as well for the deciphering to come when the thing resists. The promise of work and reading, at least for a little while. On Saturday, day of rest, distraction, or meditation, I will reassemble these remains while reflecting them a little. Filtering and ordering. We'll see what can be saved of them. But to float on the surface [*surnager*] does not necessarily mean to survive [*survivre*] . . .)

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Longtemps je me suis, for a long time I have¹—been interested in the “biodegradable.” In the word or the thing? Difficult to distinguish, in any case in this case. It is a question of the case. The case: what falls, the fall [*la chute*], the falling due [*échéance*], or the waste [*déchet*]. In French, one also speaks of the “chute de papier.”² *On the one hand*, this thing is not a thing, not—as one ordinarily believes things to be—a *natural* thing: in fact “biodegradable,” on the contrary, is generally said of an artificial product, most often an industrial product, whenever it lets itself be decomposed by microorganisms. *On the other hand*, the “biodegradable” is hardly a thing since it remains a thing that does not remain, an essentially decomposable thing, destined to pass away, to lose its identity as a thing and to become again a non-thing. Preliminary question, this night or in the small hours of the morning, thinking again of the amnesia of which a culture is made: Can one say, figuratively, that a “publication” is biodegradable and distinguish here the degrees of degradation, the rhythms, the laws, the aleatory factors, the detours and the disguises, the transmutations, the cycles of recycling? Can one transpose onto “culture” the vocabulary of “natural waste treatment”—recycling, ecosystems, and so

1. Almost all the paragraphs on these two pages begin with a sentence that is playing, in a semiparodic or citational mode, with other texts. “What is a thing?” is a question that returns in numerous texts of Heidegger that have often been interpreted by Derrida, notably in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1987), and *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987). This question, in this very form, was both treated and parodied in *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln, Nebr., 1986). A book constantly worked over by the motif of the remainder or of “remnance” [*restance*], as will be the present article, *Glas* began thus: “*Quoi du reste?*” On this subject, see as well Derrida’s *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, Ill., 1988). As for the “Ergo je suis” and “Longtemps je me suis,” these are more transparent allusions. The difficulty in translating the famous “Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure” from the *Recherche du temps perdu* is well known. There are at least three English versions. I cannot tell whether, with a smile or a groan, Derrida is here alluding to time lost. But, as we shall see, he often rises early to note down his dreams.—TRANS.

2. That is, the surplus or residue that falls or that overflows when large quantities of paper are cut (for books or newspapers, for example).—TRANS.

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on—along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the “environment” in our societies? (Recall, but with vigilance—it’s true I was just waking up—the “logic of the unconscious,” censorship and repression, displacements and condensations. According to such a “logic,” whose pertinence is, I believe, considerable but limited, nothing is destroyed and thus no “document” “biodegrades,” even if it is, according to some criterion or other, the most degraded or the most degrading. As soon as the unconscious is in the picture, no law could regulate purification or reassure the ecologists. Those of “nature” and those of “culture.” Unless the unconscious is already an ecosystem regulated by so many laws, and so on.) But can one say that, given this or that condition, one publication is more biodegradable, more quickly decomposed than another? Often, going from one to the other within the same hour and the same place, we read one thing that we know has resisted or will resist centuries of erosion and hermeneutic microorganisms, and then another thing that, from the very first page, we know we will forget on the plane even if it was nevertheless necessary to read and X-ray it while sighing all the way to the airport (“Why me again? Was it really necessary to read this? These lines are made to self-destruct, after a very brief passage; they poison themselves even before poisoning others, and carry within themselves their own microorganisms, and so on”).

I wouldn’t know how to qualify or delimit my interest in the question of the “biodegradable”: scientific interest? philosophical? ethico-ecological? political? rhetorical? poetic? prag(ram)matological?³ As for the word “biodegradable,” which is not a thing and which in any case one cannot reduce to the state of the thing called “natural,” no more than one can reduce its presumed “support” (paper, magnetic tape, diskette, and so on), how to define it?⁴ Does it designate a rigorous concept? Does it have a proper meaning? And if it has a figurative meaning, which one? Must one prescribe “sound,” nonpollutable rules for its use?

Tonight brought three other series of questions—but lacking for time, I will try to answer them some other Saturday.

3. This word was forged by Derrida to designate the internal and necessary link between two types of research, “at the intersection of a pragmatics and a grammatology,” in “My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies,” trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell, in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, Literature*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore, 1984), p. 27. There, the questions of the remainder, waste, the fall, and decay, which will come up often in this diary, are treated at length, as well as in the works cited in note 1, especially *Limited Inc.* —TRANS.

4. “Microbiological purification is generally associated with the assimilation of oxidizable organic wastes, which includes, for example, domestic sewage effluent and various industrial effluents such as those from paper manufacturing and food processing. The degradation of many hydrocarbons also proceeds to some extent by microbial action. A pollutant that is subject to decomposition by microorganisms is termed biodegradable” (Jay Benforado and Robert K. Bastian, “Natural Waste Treatment,” in *McGraw-Hill Yearbook of Science and Technology*, 1985 (New York, 1984), p. 38.

1. Is not the word “biodegradable” a recent artefact? All words in a so-called natural language are also, in their own way, artefacts, of course. But “biodegradable” overloads language with a supplement of artifice. It adds a prosthesis to it, a synthetic object, a modern and unstable graft of Greek and Latin in order to designate primarily that which is opposed to the structure of certain products of modern industry, products that are themselves artificial and synthetic, from plastic bags to nuclear waste. Is this synthetic object, the word “biodegradable,” biodegradable? One might think that this very artificial word, this pluri-etymological, technoscientific, and synthetic composite is more decomposable than some other word. It would be called on to disappear or to let itself be replaced at the first opportunity. What is more, it barely belongs to a language. Is this foreigner, this graft—a little Greek, a little Latin, a little technoscience—first of all English, French? Will I have the time to look up the archive of the word? And what if it had decomposed itself, and so on? Well, precisely, it is perhaps this parasitic nonbelonging and this character of artificial synthesis that render the word less biodegradable than some other word; because it does not belong to the organic compost of a single natural language, this strange thing may be seen to float on the surface of culture like the wastes whose survival rivals that of the masterpieces of our culture and the monuments that we promise to eternity. A question is taking shape; I don’t know what will remain of it: like biodegradable, nonbiodegradable can be said of the worst and the best.

2. Consequently, can one make a figure of the word “biodegradable”? Can one say, figuratively, “the biodegradable word”? Can one say of a word that it is biodegradable? And, along with the word, everything that is attached to words, everything that delivers itself over to words, everything that is delivered up by words? A *publication*, for example, a problematic but very strict notion that I am distinguishing provisionally from the text in general? In the publication, distinguish, if possible, the survival of the support (paper, magnetic tape, film, diskette, and so on) from the semantic content that also takes place, has a “place.” Major question of the historicity of ideal objects (Husserl, the *Krisis*, the destruction of the archive,⁵ the biodegradable, and so on).

3. Is not what we call rhetoric a large discourse, itself in a constant state of recycling, of that which in discourse submits to composition, decomposition, recomposition? These processes could affect the very essence of language and the proper meaning of words. Can one speak nonfiguratively of biodegradability with regard to the identity attributed to a supposedly proper meaning? As a result of the action of certain bacteria (here, what are the “bacteria” of language? and the parasites

5. See Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. Leavey, ed. David B. Allison (Stony Brook, N.Y., 1978).—TRANS.

and viruses that I've talked about at length elsewhere? Leave this connection for another occasion), the aforementioned proper meaning would decompose in order to pass, having become unrecognizable, into other forms, other figures. It would let itself be assimilated, circulating anonymously within the great organic body of culture, as would one of those metaphors called "dead."

Practice the most intractable vigilance, I said to myself last night in a half-sleep, with regard to all this bio-organicist rhetoric, if indeed a certain use of the word "biodegradable" gives in to that rhetoric. All the more so since, within its own physico-chemico-biological order, the concept of biodegradability is probably not fixed by definitive and rigorous limits. No doubt it is believed to be useful, pragmatic, provisional, and destined for recycling transformations.

One may also follow (I did it in *Mémoires*)⁶ a certain itinerary of de Man as that of a progressively acute thinking of disjunction, that is, a progressively coherent critique of the "symbolist" and organicist totalization. Culler puts it well: "This political context gives a new dimension to de Man's attempt—from the early critiques of Heidegger to his late critiques of phenomenality—to undo totalizing metaphors, myths of immediacy, *organic unity*, and presence, and to combat their fascinations" ("Paul de Man's War" and the Aesthetic Ideology," pp. 780–81; my emphasis).

"*Quoi du reste . . .*" Case and *chute de papier*, paper scraps.

More often than ever before, with the case of what has become a "case" in the newspapers—the "de Man case"—I have wondered: What will remain of all this in a few years, in ten years, in twenty years? How will the archive be filtered? Which texts will be reread? I have a few hypotheses, of course; I will not formulate all of them publicly, but at some later time I ought to say why, sometimes, I prefer to abstain.

I have never confused—indeed I have never stopped urging others not to confuse—traces or writing generally with what is said or written in books and newspapers, with archives and "publications." Thus the question "what will remain?" does not concern only, as I see it, libraries and the academic world. It is, like the question of the remainder⁷ in general, more vast, more reticent, more divisible, and thus more difficult. Even if one could draw a rigorous borderline around a particular journalistic-academic culture, which I do not believe is possible, the question "what will remain?" would still be of interest here. It has already been displaced, with great speed, in this limited sequence of history ("the

6. See Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Eduardo Cadava, and Jonathan Culler (New York, 1986).

7. See above, notes 1 and 3; although the remainder, the remains, the rest are used here to translate "le reste," there is an untranslatable remainder: "reste" is also the form of the familiar imperative, "stay," as in "reste avec moi," stay with me.—TRANS.

de Man case”) after scarcely more than a year, since the beginning of the “public” events, that is, since the moment when (must I recall this once again?) I myself believed (me, and none of those I am being urged to respond to in *Critical Inquiry*) I had to take the initiative to propose public discussion and, quite simply, publication of what is called today Paul de Man’s *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943* and *Responses* (about 1000 pages!).⁸ Since then, people are beginning to forget the articles and the names of so many confused, hurried, and rancorous professor-journalists. Even if I wanted to recall here those articles and those names, I couldn’t do it. What has saved a few of them from oblivion, according to a formidable paradox, a perverse law of cultural memory, have been the corrections, the responses, the calls to order and honesty—when, that is, certain newspapers have consented to publish them.

But if someone were tempted to conclude from this, judging by appearances and good sense, that these precipitous and compulsive publications were essentially “biodegradable” because destined in advance to oblivion, I would right away protest: the use of this figure demands many more precautions, as I would like to try to demonstrate. Conversely, the serious work of students, of young and not-so-young researchers on or in the wake of Paul de Man—and I am not the only one able to testify to this—has done nothing but grow in number and quality. This is even spectacular. One need not be a prophet to be able to predict that, like the books of Paul de Man (how many have been published since his death?), the articles and books that are proliferating on the subject of his work will have a longer and richer destiny—not an infinite one, of course, one cannot assert that about anything—but a much more interesting one in any case. (That is why, with the exception of Jonathan Culler’s response, which reproaches me for a certain “exceedingly severe statement” to which I will return, the “critical responses” to which I am urged to reply by *Critical Inquiry* appeared to me to be so behind the times and thus so tedious. They were behind the times from the beginning, if one can say that, but have become more and more so as of this date, and notably in relation to all the analyses and all the information we have at our disposal from now on.) Nonetheless, after some reflection, which, alas, does not mean that my decision is the right one, I have made it my duty to respond, to leave nothing without response. Yet, even as I force myself to face up to these attacks (half a dozen of them, what a disproportion!), I will advise the exacting reader to ignore this dossier, including my diary, and especially, especially to read, besides the work of Paul de Man (yes, again, again: the books published during his life and those that have been added since his death), the large quantity of

8. See de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988), and *Responses: On Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism*, ed. Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan (Lincoln, Nebr., 1989).

research it has inspired, not only in the United States, as well as the two volumes I mentioned above.

The *difference in the predictable survival* of these texts is strange, for at least *three reasons*:

1. The richness, the rigor, and the fertility of Paul de Man's work. One may or may not agree with him, in general or on a particular point. The *two* things are possible and *both* have happened *to me*, be it a question of theory or politics, and concerning the most decisive stakes. This has not escaped the notice of those who have been willing to read each of us, with any lucidity and good faith, for more than twenty years. But it is not necessary to be in agreement with him *about anything* in order to recognize that the debates in which he participated, like the contribution he made to them, have an unquestionable—and moreover rarely questioned—*necessity*.

2. It is to the extent to which this original work is difficult to ignore that the articles from 1940–42 have resurfaced. People are not interested in *all* the writings of *all those* who pass as politically above suspicion, and simply for this latter reason. Fortunately. People are much less and too little interested, alas, in the writings and actions that are infinitely more serious and culpable, politically, than those of the young journalist Paul de Man. But the simple fact is their authors did nothing else or nothing better. A worrisome paradox, a disconcerting law of cultural memory: everything thus happens as if de Man, by his relentless work, by the richness of what he wrote or taught during almost forty years in the United States, had saved from immediate “biodegradation” some old newspaper articles that no one would have otherwise gone and exhumed (for this, there had to be an admirer of the succeeding generation, a whole generation of admirers and disciples; the ambivalence and resentment accumulated elsewhere, which had nothing to do with the war, at least with *Le Soir* of 1940–42, will have done the rest). Perhaps even de Man wished this to happen, secretly or unconsciously. Perhaps he foresaw it even as he denied it. Until the end, he denigrated his own work as juvenilia and inadequate essays. And that is a little what I had meant to suggest by titling my article “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War” (trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* [Spring 1988]: 590–652). Montherlant's phrase quoted by de Man ventured something on the subject of the “biodegradability” of press publications. I was especially interested in the paradoxes or complications that were *overlooked* by this phrase and in particular by its citation. First of all, I was interested in the history of this phrase, in its possible survival, in the “nonbiodegradability” of this strange artefact, a sort of nuclear waste (I will have to come back to this next Saturday or later).

3. Those who have sought to exploit these revelations, those who have given in to the temptation to annihilate, along with the work of a whole life, all that which, from near or far, came to be associated with

it (“Deconstruction,” they say),⁹ have produced, in spite of themselves, a premium of seduction. In spite of themselves? Perhaps, I am not sure of that. In any case, too bad for them. It is an effect that may be deemed perverse. One had to have a lot of ingenuousness and inexperience not to have foreseen it. Many of those who have taken part in this crusade against de Man and against “Deconstruction” are getting more and more irritated: now it turns out that, in part thanks to them, people are talking more and more about that which the crusaders wanted, without delay, to reduce to silence by denouncing the alleged hegemony that seems to cause them so much suffering. They should have thought of that. “Things” don’t “biodegrade” as one might wish or believe. Some were saying that “Deconstruction” has been in the process, for the last twenty years, of extinguishing itself (“waning,” as I read more than once) like the flame of a pilot light, in sum, the thing being almost all used up. Well, here they go and think they see, at the bottom of the little bit of oil remaining, a black stain (the specter of 1940–42, the diabolical de Man!). Certain this time that they will be able to get rid of it, without further delay and thus without any other precaution, they rush forward like children in order to wield the final blow and destroy the idol. And, of course, the flaming oil spreads everywhere, and now here they are crying even louder, angry with their own anger, frightened by their own fear and the fear they wanted to cause. Without them, would it have consumed itself; would the thing have been degraded on its own? False or useless question: too late, they were on the program, as was the unconscious.

Saturday, 31 December, 6 A.M.

Reread last night five of the six “critical responses.” It’s true, as I noted last week, these people are frightened. And so they want to frighten. A familiar scene. They are frightening sometimes, it’s true. What I see of them frightens me, I won’t hide the fact, and I will even say why. But—a distinction I hold to and always uphold, especially when I write—this fear does not intimidate me.

Those who have read me, in particular those who have read “Paul de Man’s War,” know very well that I would have quite easily accepted a genuine critique, the expression of an argued disagreement with my reading of de Man, with my evaluation (theoretical, moral, political) of these articles from 1940–42, and so on. After all, what I wrote on this subject was *complicated* enough, *divided*, tormented, most often hazarded

9. Derrida writes “la déconstruction,” thereby underscoring the singular and general sense conferred by the definite article. Since English drops the article altogether in this case, we have substituted a capital initial (“Deconstruction”) to convey this sense and will do so wherever Derrida similarly calls attention to this misapprehension.—TRANS.

as hypothesis, *open* enough to discussion, *itself* discussing *itself* enough in advance (on every page, indeed within every sentence, and from the very first sentence) for me to be able to welcome questions, suggestions, and objections. Provided this was done so as to demonstrate and not to intimidate or inflict wounds, to help the analysis progress and not to score points, to read and to reason and not to pronounce massive, magical, and immediately executory verdicts. Five of the six “responses” that I reread last night are written, as one used to say, with a pen dipped in venom. Less against the de Man of 1940–42, perhaps, than against me (I who said things that were nevertheless judged by Culler “exceedingly severe” against de Man and who have *nothing whatever to do* with everything that happened; I who, at the time, was rather on the side of the victims—shall I dare to recall this once again and will they forgive me for doing so?—struck by a *numerus clausus* that it will be necessary to talk about again). Less against me, in truth, than against “Deconstruction” (which at the time was at year minus twenty-five of its calendar! This suffices to shed light on this whole scene and its actual workings). How can the reader tell that these five “critical responses” are not “responses,” critical texts or discussions, but rather the documents of a blinded compulsion? First of all, the fact that they are all *monolithic*. They take into account none of the complications of which my text, this is the very least one can say, is not at all sparing. They never seek to measure the possibility, the degree, or the form, as always happens in an honest discussion, of a partial agreement on this or that point. No, everything is rejected as a block; everything is a block and a block of hatred. Even when, here or there, someone makes a show of being moved by my sadness or my friendship for de Man, it is in order to get the better of me and suggest that I am inspired *only* by friendship, which will appear ridiculous to all those who have read me. Inspired by friendship means for those people misled by friendship. How foreign this experience must be to them!

Come on, am I going to waste time and paper (recyclable or not), spend the time and the money of my readers in commenting on someone who, for example, seriously wonders whether de Man knew that Kafka was Jewish (“How much did the young journalist really know about Kafka and his Jewishness?” [“Jacques Derrida’s Apologia,” p. 791]) and, in the same breath, cannot resist the urge to associate the names de Man and Göring? Is it still possible to correct a professional “historian” who, having once defined de Man as an “academic Waldheim,” shows no regret for that and still today, apparently, has no idea of the enormity of a formula such as: “Only a small number of French and Belgian intellectuals cast their lot with the Nazis, as de Man did” ([“The Responsibilities of Friendship: Jacques Derrida on Paul de Man’s Collaboration,” p. 800]!!! good God! He should do a little work, this guy. Such a show of ignorance

appears all the more dismaying in that the best historians of this period are American and the best literature on this subject is in English, supposing, that is, that a historian reads only one language)? What's the point, on the other hand, of discussing with someone who, taking constant cover behind some history books, nevertheless compares de Man to Mengele, or at any rate gives in to the same compulsive desire to associate the two names in an analogy ("Response to Jacques Derrida," p. 775)? Or with still someone else who, in all seriousness, compares de Man to the author of Tintin ("in the case of Paul de Man, as in the similar case of Hergé" ["On Paul de Man's War," p. 766])?

It's really too much, too much confusion and dishonesty. Am I going to have to point out that (1) de Man could not not know that Kafka was Jewish (even if, for obvious reasons, he could not add a note saying "you know, I know, let's not forget it, Kafka is Jewish and his work is moreover on the index, as everyone knows"); (2) French or Belgian intellectuals collaborated *in very large numbers* and, alas, in much more serious ways; (3) de Man was neither Waldheim, nor Göring, nor Mengele, nor an author of comic books. These elementary reminders risk insulting my readers, even if, despite their impatience, they wanted for a moment to have a good laugh. And yet, it will indeed be necessary to respond and to do so, precisely, out of respect for the readers, and for the ethics of discussion, if anything can still be done on that score. So on these points and on *all* the others, I will respond. I've made my decision. Telephone C.I. [. . .]

5 P.M.

There are now so many examples of this! One of the most necessary gestures of a deconstructive understanding of history consists rather (this is its very style) in transforming things by exhibiting writings, genres, textual strata (which is also to say—since there is no outside-the-text, right—exhibiting institutional, economic, political, pulsive [and so on] "realities") that have been repulsed, repressed, devalorized, minoritized, delegitimated, occulted by hegemonic canons, in short, all that which certain forces have attempted to melt down into the anonymous mass of an unrecognizable culture, to "(bio)degrade" in the common compost of a memory said to be living and organic. From this point of view, deconstructive interpretation and writing would come along, without any soteriological mission, to "save," in some sense, lost heritages. This is not done without a counterevaluation, in particular a political one. One does not exhume just anything. And one transforms while exhuming. The presumed signatories of certain documents, for example, have no interest perhaps in seeing these documents assured of survival. Difficult to know how best to serve them, and what is true generosity. When someone writes a bad text or a nasty text [*un mauvais texte ou un texte mauvais*], is

he or she asking to be saved or lost? And which response, in this case, is the most generous, the most friendly, the most salutary, the most just? The response or the nonresponse? It happens that people write bad things, libels or lampoons in which they know they are wrong or do wrong, but they do so, precisely, with the sole aim of provoking a response that will make them stand out and put them on stage, even if it is to their detriment and provided that a certain visibility is thus assured. And with public visibility comes the chance to endure. In this case, what to do? What would you be doing by responding “no” to someone who says to you “beat me so at least people see me or hear me crying and don’t forget me”? No one gets out of such a situation unscathed, on one side or the other. I will have to return later to the relation between this scene, the proper name, and cultural “biodegradability.” [. . .]

9 P.M.

Jonathan Culler contests and discusses certain remarks of mine in order to advance the understanding of things and shed light on those things that (I acknowledged it, said it, and said it again in “Like the Sound”) sometimes remain enigmatic for me. In so doing, he does not seek to manipulate, inflict wounds, or denigrate. His procedure is honest. First of all because it is addressed to me. Not only to me, of course, but also to me, that is, to someone with whom one does not agree, to be sure, but with whom one discusses, and whom one is not trying from the outset to insult—in his intentions, his person, and his work. Even if he does not agree with me, he recognizes that I opened a debate (p. 783); he clearly condemns that which must be condemned in this or that article of 1941 (p. 779) without trying to mix everything up, without raging furiously [*s’acharner*] in the void in order to execute a dead young man, a dead old man, and a dead dead man, as others do who can no longer contain their violence against the name of a departed and only raise their heads above the funerary urn, their hands still shaking, so as to cry out for death and threaten again those who try to convince them and appease them, to reason with them by saying to them calmly, “I think you are wrong, but even if you are somewhat right, you ought to calm down a little. We’ll talk about all this again when you will have regained your composure.”

So in return I will address myself to Jonathan Culler, and later I will attempt, perhaps in an open letter, to explain to him why, on the contested point, I believe I must, with certain nuances, maintain what I wrote on the subject of de Man’s wartime articles; that is, that “the *massive, immediate, and dominant* effect of all these texts is that of a *relatively* coherent ideological ensemble which, *most often and in a preponderant fashion*, conforms to official rhetoric, that of the occupation forces,” which are lines that, along with so many others in a similar vein, the five other “respondents”

seem not to have even read, that they cannot not have read, and thus they pretend *dishonestly and in bad faith* (I am weighing my words carefully) to know nothing about. It would be necessary to invent a new category here. “Bad faith” or “denegation” are insufficient. We’re talking about something that falls between the “I-cannot-read” and “I-do-not-want-to-read” [*je-ne-peux-pas-lire et je-ne-veux-pas-lire*]. This new category, which has a relation to the question of the “remainder,” naturally displaces the category of responsibility. How can one pronounce judgment against someone who can/will not read [*ne “pveut” pas lire*]? How could one bear him or her any ill will? [*Comment pourrait-on lui en vouloir?*]. Moreover, I bear these five no ill will; I have nothing against them; I would even like (if only in order to avoid this spectacle) to help them free themselves from this frightened, painful, and truly excessive hatred. What are they afraid of exactly, and what are they suffering from? Even if I happen to respond harshly to them, it will be with this concern, and especially the concern for the public, moral, and political consequences of this whole debate.

Was I “exceedingly severe” with de Man as Culler says? Or not? Culler on the one hand, the five others united on the other, thus seem to be saying, with regard to the same text—“Like the Sound”—*absolutely contradictory* things, at the extreme opposite from one another. Well, they can’t all be right at the same time. So I wonder whether between the two, perhaps . . . (Get it? Will they see what I mean? No? Yes . . . yes, yes, they will see very well, nothing more to add, I could stop there, they will see very well that *the question is other and elsewhere*).

11 P.M.

So, none of them saw, none of them read that in “Like the Sound” the *question is other and elsewhere*, the question that preoccupies me, for example, the question of response and responsibility. At bottom and in the final analysis, I did not try to be either severe or indulgent. Or equitable in some *juste milieu* between two iniquitous judgments. Or to convince anyone that one must be severe or indulgent.

Midnight

Later, it will take time, people will understand that in this whole affair, and a few others, there are better things to do than to know whether one ought to be severe or indulgent. [. . .]

Since more room must be found in the “ecosystem” of an archive (the NEH is already concerning itself with these problems of storage for American university libraries, and the process will have to accelerate), let us suppose that one day the complete collection of *Critical Inquiry* has to be destroyed or moved. A young librarian is hastily given the task of

indexing on computer the abstracts of the questions or the principal theses treated there. He comes across our dossier. Something of it has to be saved at all costs, since the journal received an award for “Best Special Issue of a Journal” (from the Conference of Editors of Learned Journals) for the Spring 1988 issue. So the young man has to summarize the two issues on Paul de Man in two sentences, preferably by citing some words in quotation marks (that looks more authentic). I see the sentences stretching across the green screen: “Seven authors accuse an eighth of having engaged in an ‘exceedingly severe’ ‘apology’ on the subject of a ninth author, apparently dead for six or forty-six years. The eighth has as much trouble understanding as he does making himself understood.” [. . .]

Here is the most problematic thing in the “double binding” figure of the “biodegradable”: the worst but also the best that one could wish for a piece of writing is that it be biodegradable. And thus that it not be so. As biodegradable, it is on the side of life, assimilated, thanks to bacteria, by a culture that it nourishes, enriches, irrigates, even fecundates but on the condition that it lose its identity, its figure, or its singular signature, its proper name. And yet, is not the best way to serve the said “culture,” indeed the “agriculture,” “the natural-culture-of nature” (these words are no good. I keep them only in quotation marks; in fact I keep them just long enough to wear them out and throw them away like useless waste products, but ones that are perhaps very resistant, like the mutism of the quotation marks) to oppose a certain resistance to living biodegradability? Is it not the case that, as “nonbiodegradable,” the singularity of a work resists, does not let itself be assimilated, but stays on the surface and survives like an indestructible artefact or in any case one which is less destructible than another? Important question of *physis* beyond the opposition nature/culture. I have never been convinced by what Heidegger has said on this subject. And precisely because of the *remains* that remain to be thought. Try later to show how the proper name—the proper name function—finally corresponds to this function of nonbiodegradability. The proper name belongs neither to language nor to the element of conceptual generality. In this regard, every work survives *like and as* a proper name. It shares the proper name *effect* (because there is no *purely*, uncontaminable proper name and no absolute indestructibility) with all other proper names. It shares and divides [*partage*] this effect in all its parts, even beyond its title and the name of its presumed signatory. In the manner of a proper name, the work is singular; it does not function like an ordinary element of natural language in its everyday usage. That is why it lets itself be assimilated less easily by culture to whose institution it nevertheless contributes. Although more fragile, having an absolute vulnerability, as a singular proper name it appears less biodegradable

than all the rest of culture that it resists, in which it “rests” and remains, installing there a tradition, its tradition, and inscribing itself there as inassimilable, indeed unreadable, at bottom insignificant. A proper name is insignificant. But there are several ways to be insignificant. More or less interesting. One might as well say that meaning is not the measure of interest—or of wearing away [*usure*].¹⁰

Saturday, 7 January, 6 A.M.

In my response, I ought to set out from a fact that will have escaped no reader’s attention: like the fingers of the same hand, the five insulting texts all take aim at the same principal target, that “deconstruction” about which the authors visibly understand nothing, I mean really nothing, and this goes equally for all of them. What can I do? “Deconstruction” is for them *the* threat, the common and public enemy. *This* war is the most urgent in their view. Since the five authors take no account of that most massively obvious fact, which I clearly pointed out (p. 649), to wit, that what happened in 1940–42 in Brussels cannot, by definition, have anything to do with deconstruction, their argument cannot be taken seriously. Nor, therefore, can anything which follows from that argument in the five “responses,” which is to say just about everything. I could stop here. It so happens, moreover, that deconstruction has no more relation with what may have happened in a Belgian newspaper in 1940–42 than it does with the uninformed, uneducated, and grotesque descriptions (I am weighing my words carefully) that these five “respondents” give of it. It goes without saying that I will not be able to dissipate such dense confusions about “Deconstruction” in a few sentences. I give up trying in advance. I will merely point out that for all these people the “de Man case” offers what they believe is a propitious occasion to attack what they *believe to be* “Deconstruction.”

Demonstration:

1. One of them takes aim at the “standard deconstructionist practice” (p. 794) or what, according to him, would be “entirely typical”: “the failure to distinguish between existential and rhetorical categories (and the tendency to reduce the former to the latter) is an earmark of the mode of philosophizing that has been given currency by de Man and Derrida” (p. 792). And, of course, so that it might be clear that my case is more serious than de Man’s, he adds: “I, for one, believe (and so do many others) that there is a strongly mystifying element in de Man’s writings—sometimes almost (though never quite) as mystificatory as Derrida’s apologia for de Man” (p. 796). This definition of the “standard

10. See Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Bass (Chicago, 1982), pp. 209–71. —TRANS.

deconstructionist practice” and what would be “typical” within that “practice” is gratuitous, confused, perfectly irrelevant. I recognize nothing whatsoever in it, close up or from afar, and especially nothing of what I myself (since it is a question of me) may have ever thought or written. As for the sentence that begins “I, for one, believe (and so do many others)”: what can it prove? Only this: someone believes that what he believes is true and interesting, and (classic technique but far too crude for anyone to be taken in by it) he wants to make others believe that he has an army of people behind him who believe as he does, who believe as he does that what they believe is true and even interesting. Everything, thus, still remains to be proved. And even if one could prove that “so do many others,” that would not prove that they are doing anything more than believing or that their belief brings the least proof that their belief has the least value.

2. Another respondent concentrates his whole argumentation around what is derisively called “the prestige of deconstruction” (“Resetting the Agenda,” p. 805) and announces clearly that if one fails to clear de Man (which, need I remind anyone, is something I never sought to do; see pp. 599, 600–610, 616–19, 621–23, 631, 633, and *passim*), deconstruction would be definitively compromised and “the wager will be lost” (!) (p. 805; I shall not fail to come back to this scene, one of the most comical ones in this whole corpus).

3. Another respondent lays into what he believes to be “the deconstructive method” (p. 799) and believing, since he has obviously never read me,¹¹ that it consists in taking no account of the “context” (!!!) and of “authorial intention,” here he is ready to give me a lesson in deconstruction: “But of course Derrida’s appeal to context and to authorial intention constitutes an abandonment of the deconstructive method” (p. 799). Then, by substituting “post-structuralist” for “deconstructive,” he leaves me the choice only between “the unified subject” and “the post-structuralist critique of the unified subject.” Ah, if only things could be that simple! Ah, if only one knew what a “subject” was and whether it could be only “unified” or “nonunified”! After having recalled the “post-structuralist critique of the unified subject,” just so many words that have no meaning for me and that one would have a lot of trouble articulating with anything I have ever written, the same author calmly adds this, which has no meaning for me: “But Derrida apparently doesn’t believe

11. Derrida has underscored on numerous occasions that deconstruction cannot be defined or practiced as a method. “*Point de méthode* [No method/point of method],” he writes in “The Double Session” (Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago, 1981], p. 271). See also Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Derrida and “Différance,”* ed. Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Ill., 1988), p. 3.—TRANS.

the critique of the unified subject applies to de Man" (p. 801). Come on, would anyone ever have talked or heard talk of deconstruction for more than ten minutes if it came down to such derisory dogmas or such stupid monoliths as these (of the sort: "I don't believe there is any context! There is no authorial intention! There is no subject! No unified subject! We have to stop paying attention to these things!"). One shows considerable contempt for many colleagues or students if one believes they are silly enough or credulous enough to interest themselves in such simple and pitiful discourses. Unless it is quite simply reading that is the object of one's contempt and one's fear. *On ne peut pas lire*.

It is thus still a question, and at the cost of the crudest sort of maneuvers, of displacing the accusation and the verdict by making the attack converge on thought, theory, "Deconstruction" today and now. This is a program whose utterance was given its first (and also its most obscene) form by the same author already almost a year ago: "The important question about de Man, however, is not what he thought about Jews; the question concerns the relationship between his secrecy about his past and his literary theory."¹²

4. For another respondent, the stakes are even more precise. It is a question of nothing less, *in conclusion and to conclude*, than of handing down a verdict while pretending to deplore "the turn the deconstructive project, originally so liberating, is now taking" (p. 775). As if what happened to de Man in 1940–42 could constitute a "turn" or a "turning" of the "deconstructive project" in 1988!

5. For another, finally, the actual accused in this comic-book trial is once again, in conclusion, deconstruction. "What is indeed striking in deconstruction is that it escapes confrontation with historical development. That does not imply that it is linked to rightist thought [ah, good, at least there's that: *merci m'sieur*] (its technique [I have explained a hundred times why deconstruction was not essentially a "technique"] can be used either for 'fascist' [some proof, please, some arguments, some examples, at least one example!] or 'liberal' purposes), but it implies that this method [I have explained a hundred times why deconstruction was not essentially a "method"; see also above, note 10] rarely confronts historicity [I have explained a hundred times why deconstructive reading and writing took into account, more than any other, both "history" and the history of the concept of history; as for "Paul de Man's War," its historical content and its reference to historical referents is richer than that of the five "critical responses" put together]. Because history reveals the 'decidable' [who ever said the contrary?], which sometimes means guilt" [did I not say just that, and precisely in the case of de Man? See above; I am not going to reproduce this reference on every line] (p. 766).

12. "Letters," *The Nation*, 9 Apr. 1988, p. 502.

What I find particularly tedious in this quintext is that, with very few exceptions, it is composed and thus decomposed by *two motifs*:

1. There is, *on the one hand*, that which I already said myself and that they repeat in a more or less confused way while claiming nevertheless to counter me thanks to forgetfulness or to denegation (or to *on ne peut pas lire*); for example (but I'll proliferate the examples and later make a list of them), everything in my text that is, in Jonathan Culler's words, "exceedingly severe" (p. 777) against de Man and that ought not to have passed unnoticed by the six authors.

2. There is, *on the other hand*, the objections to which I had responded in advance, in an explicit fashion. I will redemonstrate this later, and, out of concern for clarity, thoroughness, and economy, I will propose *two tables*: a table of *concordances* or *redundancies*, of *concorredundances* (that which I already said and that it was useless—*redundant*—to repeat, especially to use it against me with arrogant bad faith) and a table of *discordances* (what I had already contested and that, once again, they did not understand, read, try to read, or pretend to read). Point of information: the recourse to the category of the *je ne peux pas lire* (I can/will not read), supposing that it can even be used in the first person, would not exclude the old notions of lie, bad faith, denegation, in short, the philosophy of consciousness or the unconscious, up to the point where both must also be exceeded. This would concern as well whatever one may be tempted to say about "responsibility" or the "biodegradable." [. . .]

Noon

Composition, decomposition. Everything that is "biodegradable" lets itself be decomposed or returns to organic nature while losing there its artificial identity. But everything that is "biodegradable" does not have the same property or the same qualities (richness, fecundity, and so on). In classical terms: the organic is not the living; natural life is not the whole of life, and so on. If one still relies, provisionally, on this figure transposed into the field of culture, then one may say: all writings and all discourses, all forgotten works are not victims of an injustice and have not become, to an equal extent, the ferments of the coming culture. Moreover, today, our means of archiving are such that we keep almost all published documents, even if we do not keep them in what used to be called living memory and even if libraries are obliged more and more often to destroy a part of their wealth. This is only an appearance: the originals or microfilms are elsewhere, kept safe for a long time, barring nuclear war or "natural" catastrophe. But there is an essential limit to this cultural transposition of the natural figure (I mean of this "return to nature" of a biodegradable artefact). What would an ecosystem be for discourses? An institution is also an attempt to calculate and control

symbolic ecosystems, which is obviously impossible in a rigorous fashion. Come back to this next week.

These two tables may also be read as timetables or computer screens. Like those that are displayed in train stations or in airports, they announce delayed departures and arrivals: delay in relation to what I *already* said or in relation to what I *already* responded or said about my objection. But how to calculate such a delay? And once the delay is calculated, what would remain? That is a question I would have liked to treat, some Saturday when I had nothing to do. (Out of concern for space, I will limit myself to the points not directly addressed in the diary.)

TABLE OF CONCOR(REDUN)DANCES

(or, that which I *already* said and which, therefore, one should have avoided repeating, especially while claiming to oppose me with it)

"CRITICAL RESPONSES"	"PAUL DE MAN'S WAR"
p. 766, ll. 1–11	pp. 601–2, 604, 607–10, 621–23
p. 769, l. 30ff.	p. 604
p. 770, l. 4ff.	p. 606
p. 770, ll. 20–21	pp. 604–6
pp. 770–71	pp. 604–7
p. 771, ll. 32–45; p. 772, ll. 1–11	p. 604 and passim
p. 772, l. 16	p. 636, ll. 6–8
p. 775, ll. 6–10	pp. 604–5, 621–23, 631 and passim
p. 777, ll. 6–9	p. 598, ll. 18–40
p. 790, ll. 16–17	p. 604 and passim
p. 791, ll. 19–28	pp. 621–23
p. 793, ll. 9–11	passim
p. 802, l. 5ff.	pp. 599, ll. 11, 29–30; 600, l. 1
p. 805, l. 15	pp. 590, l. 1ff.; 593, ll. 2–5 and passim
pp. 806, l. 45; 807, ll. 1–8	pp. 604–10, 616–19, 621–23

TABLE OF DISCORDANCES
(or, the objections to which I had *already* responded)

“CRITICAL RESPONSES”	“PAUL DE MAN’S WAR”
pp. 765–811	pp. 590, ll. 1–3; 651, ll. 7–11
p. 766, ll. 1–11	pp. 599–652
p. 766, ll. 18–19	pp. 590–652 <i>passim</i> , especially 646–48
p. 773, ll. 11–12	p. 637, l. 4ff.
p. 773, ll. 19–21	p. 637, l. 4ff.
p. 773, l. 29	p. 637, l. 4ff.
p. 775, l. 26ff.	pp. 648–49
p. 784: title	pp. 590–652; in particular, 599, 600, 601, 604, 605, 607, 610, 616–19, 621–23, 631, 639
p. 785, ll. 23–25	pp. 590, l. 1ff.; 639, l. 38ff.
p. 786, ll. 3–5	pp. 593, 640, 646 and <i>passim</i>
p. 786, l. 13ff.	p. 602, l. 32ff.
p. 787, ll. 37–38	pp. 599–600, 605, 607–10, 616–19, 621–23, 631, 636
p. 788, ll. 30–31	pp. 599, 600, 604, 607–10, 616–19
p. 788, ll. 36–40	pp. 621–32
p. 789, l. 37	pp. 621–32
p. 789, l. 38ff.	pp. 621–23
p. 790, ll. 1–4	pp. 621–23, 626, notably ll. 14–15
p. 790, l. 5	pp. 621–23, 632
p. 790, l. 29	pp. 631–32
p. 791, ll. 19–28	pp. 621–23
p. 792, ll. 12–22	pp. 606–32
p. 793, ll. 5–8	pp. 604–10, 616–19, 621–23, 631, 638
p. 793, l. 24ff.	pp. 636–37, notably ll. 8–16; 639, l. 7
p. 794, l. 17	p. 631, ll. 17–18; 639
p. 795, ll. 17–19	p. 642
p. 796, ll. 20–23	p. 606
p. 796, ll. 41–42	pp. 648–49
p. 797: title	pp. 590, 592, 594, 595, 596, 597, 639 and <i>passim</i>
p. 797, ll. 12–13	pp. 604, ll. 18–19; 638 and <i>passim</i>

- p. 798, ll. 19–22 pp. 599, 604–5, 607–10, 616–19, 621–23, 631
- p. 799, ll. 3–4 p. 647
- p. 799, ll. 12–30 pp. 637, 639, 647
- p. 799, ll. 38–41 to p. 800, ll. 1–2 p. 647
- p. 800, l. 10ff. pp. 637, notably l. 8; 638–39
- p. 800, l. 35ff. pp. 635; 648, notably l. 14
- p. 801, l. 34ff. p. 624, l. 36ff.
- p. 802, l. 5ff. pp. 599, l. 11, ll. 29–30; 600, l. 1
- p. 802, ll. 21–23 p. 647, n. 50, notably, l. 6ff.
- p. 804–805 pp. 648–49 and passim
- p. 804, ll. 11–12 pp. 635, 640, 648–49
- p. 804, ll. 14–15 pp. 607–10, 616–19, 621–23
- p. 805, l. 15 (a somewhat special case; I had averted, set aside, or voided the objection by saying the same thing; yet, since this happens more than once, there would have to be another table to take account of this rhetorical situation. I trust the reader to make the distinctions.) pp. 591, l. 1ff.; 593, ll. 3–4; 596, l. 14ff.; 606ff.
- p. 805, ll. 28–31 pp. 606–7ff.
- p. 806, ll. 9–11 pp. 599–634
- p. 806, ll. 34–42 pp. 604–5, 607–10, 616–19, 621–23
- p. 806, l. 45 to p. 807, ll. 1–12 pp. 604–21
- p. 807, l. 14 pp. 600, 605, 607, 623, 631, 635
- p. 807, l. 40 to p. 808, l. 15 pp. 616–21
- p. 808, ll. 29–30 pp. 624, l. 45; 625, l. 30
- p. 809, ll. 10–14 pp. 623–31 and passim
- p. 809, ll. 27–29 pp. 606–23
- p. 810, l. 29 p. 646
- p. 811, ll. 9–30 pp. 635, 648–49 and passim

Saturday, 14 January, 7 A.M.

A text, a verse, an aphorism, a *bonmot* (the Germans, Kant for example, used to write this as a single word, like biodegradable) can survive a long time, thus resisting the “biodegrading” erosion of culture, for all sorts of reasons not all of which are to be credited to them or to their author.

They resist time just as do what in French are called “pearls.” Durable because hard [*durs*]—and hard to digest.

The quintext numbers too many pearls for me to count. I bet that some of them will be passed on to posterity. If one day I respond, as I have the intention of doing, in *Critical Inquiry*, could I make a bet there? Can one make bets in such a serious journal? A liberal journal has to accept that bets are made in its pages. All the more so since, with its liberal, pluralist concern to maintain public discussion without privileging any side (an irreproachable policy, especially if its principle could be rigorously and sincerely applied), this excellent publication is managed by wise men and women and responsible intellectuals. Thus they also know—it’s the logic of debates, bets, auction bids, and bidding wars—that this can serve the prosperity of the institution, I mean the promotion of the journal that is urging me to respond at a single blow to six articles at once! Six against one! The idea that an army has been mobilized against an article that was, moreover, also commissioned of me, does not displease me altogether, but all the same, what effrontery! What a number of fronts I must confront! I hope that all of this is proportional to the seriousness of the question, but I am not sure it is.

So I will make a bet. What is it? I bet that the longest life will be granted to a parenthesis. This one, let’s read it and reread it: “at Harvard and in the Boston area (where deconstruction and feminism were and continue to be a recurrent theme)” (p. 765). The article, fortunately very brief, a page and a half, begins in the mode of the autobiographical and autopromotional epos. Let’s read, reread: “In 1982–83, I was preparing my volume on the Belgian cartoonist Hergé¹” (the footnote refers the reader to *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin* [Paris, 1984]) (p. 765).

Let’s imagine, in centuries to come, an enormous archive having been biodegraded or recycled, that a young reporter-journalist or an archeologist-tourist (metempsychosis of Tintin) comes across some remains, for example this glorious incipit (“In 1982–83, I was preparing my volume. . . *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin* [Paris, 1984]”), and next this parenthesis miraculously saved from the disaster: “at Harvard and in the Boston area (where deconstruction and feminism were and continue to be a recurrent theme).” Let’s suppose that this journalist-reporter-archeologist has in fact just found these debris of *Critical Inquiry* in very bad shape on a beach at Cape Cod or in the wreck of an old boat, a kind of “Unicorn.” (Will American readers have read, in the Tintin series, *The Secret of “The Unicorn”* or *Red Rackham’s Treasure* by the same Hergé? I have just reread them, doing my homework; they are really devoid of interest, very overdone out of a certain snobism, one more difference between de Man and Hergé, which I mention for those who may still be harboring the incongruous idea of comparing them. As for their politico-ideological histories, there is simply no common measure between them.) Tintin II would try to understand, to reconstitute the “context” and, as they will still be saying

centuries from now, “the authorial intention.” What is more, he had earlier got his hands on a fragment from an old debate in *Critical Inquiry* on the question of beaches and authorial intention. Here’s how Tintin’s distant descendent might imagine things for himself: “So this author meant that at this time there was a place, two places at most (one or two? he says Harvard and then Boston), in the United States I suppose, and nowhere else, where one could locate a center, a double center of ‘recurrence,’ the recurrence not of a disease, but of a ‘theme,’ of a ‘recurrent theme’: ‘deconstruction and feminism.’ In this region of a state of the United States and nowhere else, in the United States and nowhere else. ‘Deconstruction and feminism’ were thus a ‘theme’ at this time?” he asks himself. “What is that? One theme or two? Are deconstruction and feminism the same thing, or two symptoms of the same epidemic recurrence?” Our detective, who is getting more and more perplexed, may well continue to wonder: “Unless deconstruction is to feminism as the Boston area is to Harvard, if I am reading correctly (‘at Harvard and in the Boston area [where deconstruction and feminism were and continue to be a recurrent theme]’). This double theme, these two things, at any rate, ‘were’ *already* recurrent in the past, which is *already* a lot. But there is worse to come; it ‘continues’ to be, in those days, ‘a recurrent theme.’ To have been recurrent, that’s already a lot, but to continue to be recurrent, is that not really too much? The trouble or problem or ill must have been very serious. Apparently indestructible. Insufficiently energetic medicine. Happily the pernicious theme seems to have been concentrated at that time in ‘Harvard and the Boston area.’ Verify that.”

Intrigued, more and more fascinated by the glimmers of this cryptic notation, our clever sleuth tries to reconstitute the whole sentence and the whole paragraph, first in order to understand, but also out of honest respect for the authorial intention of the departed author of *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin*. From the first sentence of the paragraph, he believes he may conclude that between, on the one hand, this thing which is holding sway with such “recurrence” in “the Boston area,” that is, deconstruction (which the author oddly calls a “theme”) and, on the other hand, a certain de Man, there must have been a relation, to be sure, but also that this de Man must have been a feminist. Whether he knew it or not! Otherwise, what would this allusion to feminism, this other “theme,” be doing here? Unless it was never possible, at this time and in this region of the world, to dissociate deconstruction and feminism, wonders now our disconcerted tourist-archeologist (Tintin couldn’t do better). And so, whether he knew it or not, this de Man must have been a feminist because those “in the Boston area” were interested in him no doubt for reasons of “deconstruction and feminism.” As soon as one has contracted a recurrent deconstructionism, one must have contracted a little feminism, at least by contagion, even if one doesn’t know it. It’s finally the same virus. Let’s read:

That is to say that, as far as I know, several people at Harvard and in the Boston area (where deconstruction and feminism were and continue to be a recurrent theme) were aware of de Man's former affiliation with rightist circles. One can ask why it took five more years for the "scandal" to appear: why this "sudden" revelation after several years of silence and dissimulation? Compared to the fact that Hergé had constantly been confronted with his political past, one can wonder how strongly Paul de Man's "secret" was kept. [P. 765]

Pulled up short, the little decrypter is plunged down a well of amazement since he must be amazed in his turn before this mark of amazement. He says to himself: "Here now is an author who is amazed. He is amazed that a 'secret' was kept for many years. He even seems to be accusing someone of it (who? he names no one), whereas for him and for 'several people' 'at Harvard and in the Boston area,' this 'secret' was not a secret. But then why did they not reveal it themselves? Whom is this author accusing exactly? By any chance would he be so bold as to accuse those who in fact made this 'secret' public, being in truth *the first ones* to do so? The first ones to do so: would it by any chance be these very ones whom the author seems to accuse? How strange, how strange."

More and more intrigued, but also convinced that this author, instead of accusing heaven only knows who (since he names no one), would have done better to take right away the initiative that he reproaches others for having taken too late, whereas he acknowledges that he was in a position to take it four years earlier, our little archivist reconstitutes the first paragraph of the text. The latter thus begins (we have not forgotten and will never forget) with: "In 1982–83, I was preparing my volume on the Belgian cartoonist Hergé¹. . . . *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin*," and so on. This paragraph indeed confirms that the author of the aforesaid *Métamorphoses* flatters himself for having been aware, already at this time, of the articles by de Man in *Le Soir*, and even for having talked about them one "afternoon with a colleague from Boston University whose specialty is the hunting of presumed French fascist intellectuals" (p. 765). Monologue of the future little journalist-reporter-archeologist who is acquiring a taste for philology (I remember Tintin in *The Secret of "The Unicorn"*: "Look now! You'll see that the message of the parchments is right." Captain Haddock: "Thundering typhoons! The numbers and the letters are completed."): "Now who could this be, this professor at Boston University specialized in hunting? That won't be easy to discover, today, and I'm certainly not going to hunt down the hunters, especially in a university: 'a colleague from Boston University whose specialty is the hunting of presumed French fascist intellectuals.' I wonder who that could be. So there were intellectual hunters at this time, and intellectuals who made a profession of tracking other intellectuals? In sum, hunters

specialized in the fanatical pursuit of a certain type of prey [*gibier*]? Intellectuals trained, equipped, motivated for the hunt (first of all fascinated by the said prey, as always, according to the well-known process of identification), intellectuals who finally were interested in nothing else? In any case, the hunter and the author of *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin* knew it all, according to the latter, but they never said anything about it publicly. And yet here is someone who accuses heaven knows who, since he names no one, for not having published the thing until five years later. But who published it exactly? And for the first time? In the most public way? Perchance, might it not be within the population afflicted by the 'recurrent theme' ('deconstruction and feminism') that one finds someone who, with no previous knowledge, would have decided that everything had to be published from the first moment he became aware of the 'secret'? So he is the one who would be within his rights to accuse the silence, the cowardice, the thoughtlessness, or the bad faith of those who, saying they had the newspapers in their hands and drawing from that fact not the least public consequence, having proposed neither republication, nor analysis, nor the most open discussion, now have the nerve to lecture those who *did* do all that."

Let's leave him there, our Tintin of centuries to come, with his hypotheses. If he had also found the last paragraph of the same author on the subject of "preferred ignorance," we can imagine his indignation. It would be necessary to invoke the energetic speech of Captain Haddock: "*Mille tonnerres de sabord, Zigomars, Gargarisme, Emplâtres,*¹³ here's someone who claims he knew things that he did not talk about for years and still he dares to accuse those who, in the first place, made the thing absolutely public. He accuses them, says he with incredible cheek, of having 'preferred ignorance.'" "In the case of Hergé, whose work was banned in Belgium until 1947, he spent the rest of his life (he died in 1983 [that, along with his Belgian origins, is indeed the only thing he had in common with de Man]) rewriting the first adventures of Tintin in order to dissimulate his previous political mistakes [should de Man have done or could he have done the same? "Comparative" questions on the modes of circulation, duration, and degradability of the Tintin comic books and the different types of de Man's writings]. In the case of Paul de Man, who was still remembered in Belgium as a former rightist intellectual [a lie or a dishonest simplification; see on this subject the private and public attestations not

13. The English translation of *The Secret of "The Unicorn"* renders one such outburst of Captain Haddock's vivid epithets as follows: "Me, the culprit? You dare accuse me? . . . Miserable earthworms! . . . Sea-gherkins! . . . Slave-traders! . . . Sea-lice! . . . Black-beetles! . . . Baboons! . . . Artichokes! . . . Vermicellis! . . . Phylloxera! . . . Pyrographers! . . . Crab-apples! . . . Goosecaps! . . . Gogglers! . . . Jelly-fish!" At which point, Tintin interjects: "Captain! Captain! Calm yourself!" (Hergé, *The Secret of "The Unicorn,"* trans. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner [1946, 1959; Boston, 1924], p. 29). See p. 61 for the moment when Tintin solves the message of the parchments.—TRANS.

only in “Paul de Man’s War” but in *Responses*], ignorance was preferred in the American academic world—ignorance not only among his friends and disciples but also in theory” (p. 766). But who exactly preferred ignorance, I ask, if not the author of *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin*? It is difficult, moreover, to imagine what ignorance “in theory” of these articles could possibly mean. As far as I’m concerned, in any case, I took account of them and took my responsibilities as soon as I became aware of the said articles, that very week, something which the author of *Les Métamorphoses de Tintin* confesses he never did, no more than did his hunter colleague (now who can that be exactly?).

So I’ve made a bet: these pearls will be passed on to posterity, even if they are not destined to have the long life of nuclear wastes. But people will have understood very quickly that my interest in these pearls and this bet was only a pretext for advancing the following *nontheorem* on the subject of the figurative “biodegradability” of what are commonly called texts, or at least, let’s put it more strictly, of publications. One cannot wager publicly on the survival of an archive without thereby giving it an extra chance. As if the wager on the survival itself contributed to the survival. Thus, the wager cannot take the form of a *theoretical* hypothesis on the subject of what will happen objectively in an autonomous field. That is why I spoke of a *nontheorem*. Like any discourse on the wager, a wager intervenes performatively in the field and partially determines it. It feigns “objective” and theoretical speculation while in fact it performs a practical transformation of its object. It is perhaps in part thanks to my wager, my public wager in the very place of its publication, that the phrase I have in effect just celebrated will become celebrated (“at Harvard and in the Boston area (where deconstruction and feminism . . .)”). I did nothing more than say it deserved it. But such an evaluation was already a chancy and violent intervention. Perhaps I exaggerated, on purpose or not on purpose. Perhaps none of this deserved so much attention. (Generalize again this nontheorem on the impossibility of any historical metatheorem, a fortiori of any foretelling. And recall as well, besides the original elaboration by de Man of the opposition performative/constative, his text on Pascal’s wager.)¹⁴ By definition, and this is why there is wagering and performative intervention of the wager, no calculation will ever be able to master the “biodegradability” to come of a document.

14. See de Man, “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,” in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 1–25. On de Man’s reading of Pascal, allow me to recommend the admirable text by Geoffrey Bennington, “Aberrations: de Man (and the Machine,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, 1989), pp. 209–22. This vigilant, questioning, and inventive reading is exemplary in many respects, in particular those we are discussing here.

All evaluations, in truth all texts, are war itself on the subject of this survival. Paul de Man's war means also that.

There is a moral question here, and even the example of one of those conflicts between obligations without which no decision and no responsibility would really have any meaning, I mean disquieting meaning, the only meaning that it ought to have. A calm and assured responsibility is never a responsibility; it's good conscience. The moral question is at least double:

1. Is it necessary to respond to every interpellation, to everyone no matter who, to every question, and especially to every public attack? The answer is "yes," it seems, when time and energy permit, to the extent to which the response keeps open, in spite of everything, a space of discussion. Without such a space no democracy and no community deserving of the name would survive. But the answer is "no" if the said interpellations fail to respect certain elementary rules, if they so lack decency or interest that the response risks shoring them up with a guarantee, confirming in some way a perversion of the said democratic discussion. Yet, in that case, it would be necessary that the nonresponse be appropriately interpreted as a sign of respect for certain principles and not as contempt for the questioner or, especially, for the third party—reader or listener—whom one presumes should be the principal addressee of such an exchange, however difficult or improbable that exchange remains. It is rare that all these conditions come together and are clearly assured. It happens that a response may be a nonresponse, and nonresponse is sometimes the best response. An immediate degradability then annuls the archive of this response without response, which is thereby submitted to a kind of originary amnesia. We therefore see the latter at work at the very heart of the event, whatever it may be. The "organic" figure of biodegradability thus appears, already, to be of doubtful relevance. At least in the presumed literality of its point of origin.

2. Another question, another double bind. When the interpellation is disastrous (weak, ridiculous, violent, indecent, in bad faith, or whatever one wishes to imagine), does the most generous gesture consist in responding or not responding? Is it better to abandon the interpellation to its spontaneous degradability, which destines a discourse to rapid oblivion? Or rather to save it from that fate by pretending, at least, to take it seriously, thinking always of the responsibility one has with regard to the third party? But in this case, to save it means also to send it to its ruin, to confer a certain duration on that which one judges to be inept. To make a text last, that is, to contribute to assuring the conditions of public exhibition, may thus be also a perverse gesture, a sign of aggressivity toward the authors. Do everything to avoid that, if it is possible.

In their bottomless overdeterminability, these two questions are made still worse by the formidable ambiguity of the very concept of (bio)degradability. To be (bio)degradable means at least two things: on the one hand,

the annihilation of identity; on the other hand, the chance to pass into the general milieu of culture, into the “life” of “culture” while enriching it with anonymous but nourishing substances. It will thus be necessary to come back to this concept and this figure, their analysis remaining up until now insufficient. (Is not the question finally that of the proper name, of what is called the proper name or at least the singular mark of the event, of the date? Come back to this.) [. . .]

10 P.M.

Feeling discouraged this evening. I will never manage to respond to this quintext. Since I have made the tally of the arguments and made clear, in the two tables, that there is nothing in these five diatribes which I have not already said (for example, as Culler points out, my “exceedingly severe statement” against the de Man of 1940–42), or to which I have not already responded in a detailed fashion, what remains? Very few rational arguments, the theater of petty passions, some of whose mechanisms and old rhetorical tricks I really must try to describe. But, all the same, I am not going to go back over everything and repeat myself in detail. I am not going to request that people reread what I wrote or, one more time, that they reread de Man. While I’m on the subject of rereading de Man, any careful reader will have noticed to what extent the things I said about the duty to read or reread de Man irritated my “critical respondents,” with the exception of Culler. Three out of the five of them even said so. This request for reading (isn’t this rather normal? what less could one ask for?) seems extraordinary to them, even exorbitant. What is more, I never said that *it was necessary at all costs to read* de Man or anybody else, but, and this is quite a different thing, that *if* at least one claims to speak about all this, it is a good idea to read, even better to reread, preferably everything one can. As we shall see, three of the critics *react* in an analogous fashion—I do not say identical—to this requirement, one that is nevertheless elementary. An intense and recurrent reaction (a “recurrent theme”?): it comes back three times in conclusion like a groan of protest (“Ah, so one would have to read, read de Man, and from A to Z?” “Hey, do you see that, he asks us, on top of everything else, to read de Man! and even to reread him!”). This single protest shows to what degree, whether one’s talking about de Man or “Deconstruction” in general, the question is also that of a fierce resistance to reading, with all the forms that can be taken by “*pu*,” the category of *on ne peut pas lire*. I will thus cite *three examples*:

First example: “We must now reread de Man from A to Z: this is the recurrent theme [again! and in another “critical response”!] in the apologetic literature that has been appearing since late 1987” (p. 796). After having been associated with “deconstruction and feminism,” the “recurrent theme” finds itself here associated, in its literality and by another of my

censors, with the duty to read. Might it be a question of the same thing, in the three cases, and of the same “theme”? The two authors who have recourse to the same expression seem to be as amazed by the recurrence as by the theme. Here is someone, for example (a professor I am told), who is amazed that anyone would ask him to read or reread that which he, nevertheless, wants to talk about, and that he wants to condemn. And he makes yet another accusation: all the writing that appeals to reading de Man is “apologetic”! Or, if you prefer, all this apologetic literature is characterized by a strange obsession with reading, by this compulsion to read! There are those who go so far in their insolence as to try to infect us with, even impose on us their recurrent perversion, and to give us orders: so read! But we’ll not let ourselves be talked into it. And, in fact, they don’t.

These words (“apologetic,” “apologia”) almost always shock me. Sometimes they make me laugh. First of all because of their magical and visibly defensive repetition. They resonate from one end to the other of the same indictment, from its title (“Jacques Derrida’s Apologia”) to its final words (“Derrida’s apologia for de Man”), as if it were enough to keep hammering away forcefully at the same nonsense in order to produce an effect of obvious fact. What I wrote was so far from an “apologia for Paul de Man” (it is enough to reread it or to consult the two tables to be convinced of this) that certain of my statements appeared “exceedingly severe.” I repeated for tens of pages in a row, without the least indulgence, what I thought of certain “unpardonable” texts from *Le Soir* and of the collaboration with *Le Soir* as a whole. When I seem to “defend” de Man, and I never would have done it otherwise, it is always, as it is here once more, in the face of murderous caricatures, abusive simplifications, unjustified acts of violence by those (the most numerous, let’s not forget, in truth *the only ones* during several months and while I was writing my article) who have spoken out loud their dream of destroying once and for all the memory of de Man, of his work, and of all that one can associate with him from near and from far. And later, when there appeared some letters or articles (still *in response* and largely in the minority, whenever, that is, newspapers consented to publish them!) that “defended” de Man against the iniquity and the dogmatism of these monolithic verdicts, there was, as far as I know, *not one of them* that did not pronounce a negative and “severe” judgment on certain articles from *Le Soir*, notably on one of them; we all know which one. I do *not* know of *one* of de Man’s “friends,” the so-called apologists, who has not publicly condemned what there was to condemn in these articles. I could stop there; that should suffice to disqualify all this uncontrolled agitation, this indecent and impatient trepidation. What exactly do they want, all these accusers? to condemn a priori, without even a trial? In a block and without opening the file? To condemn without listening to the accused or to those who claim to read and to listen? Would they also like to condemn the books

of the accused? The friends of the accused? The readers of the accused? The readers of these readers? And why not their grandchildren? To condemn those who, without ever pleading Paul de Man's innocence and thus while pronouncing him guilty (within certain limits, of course, with restraint and precision, and this is the whole problem) still want to know what we are talking about? But what are people raging at? Where are we living? In which century? In which country?

It is thus grossly wrong and dishonest to speak of "apologetic literature." I am waiting for someone to show me a single text to have appeared up until now that does not recognize what I called—what *I* called, *before my detractors did*—"the most unbearable" (p. 621), "the *unpardonable* violence and confusion" (p. 623; read the rest of the paragraph, and *passim*; I am certainly not now going to re-cite and select, while isolating them, all my negative evaluations in order to reassure or embarrass my adversaries). I therefore assert that there was no apology, on any side, especially not on mine, unless one supposes apology to begin with this simple reminder: if you want to speak of someone, and especially if you want to condemn him in totality, without qualification and without appeal, read, read as much and as thoroughly as possible, with vigilance and honesty. Apparently this demand seems inordinate and intolerably apologetic to those who decidedly do not want to read or at least not de Man. That must be recognized as their right, but on the condition that they do not then claim to speak about what they refuse to read or, a still more intolerable obligation in their view, reread.

Second example. For another of my censors, the appeal to the duty of reading is not only the surprising "recurrent theme" of an "apologetic literature"; it is a "challenge." Reading, "a challenge"! Sigh of impatience: "a challenge we now hear regularly" (p. 775). Once again I will have to quote at length, a rule that should be more respected in every discussion and which I never fail to do.¹⁵ For reasons of intellectual rigor and of ethics. Here, then:

Derrida's own "exercice du silence" on such issues raises some hard questions, not only about this particular text but about the turn the deconstructive project, originally so liberating, is now taking. Is *context* always and only *verbal*: the judgment on the word by the word? "Those who, if they want still to accuse or take revenge," writes Derrida, "will finally have to read de Man, from A to Z" (p. 639). This is a challenge we now hear regularly, but its implication—that the issue is entirely *textual* (how do we read text X?) rather than *practical* (what choices did Paul de Man make?)—is deeply disturbing, suggesting as it does that Literature is All,

15. See in particular my responses in *Limited Inc.*, and "But, beyond, . . . (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Autumn 1986): 155–70.

that if de Man praised, say, Franz Kafka, he was somehow on the right side of history. Again, why is it imperative to read de Man from A to Z and not to read de Man's articles in the context of the related writings of the period? How indeed can these articles be understood without a knowledge of the events to which they were responding? In drawing a linguistic circle around such writings, aren't we once again worshipping at the shrine of the Sacred Text, this time the Sacred Text of the poet-substitute called "theorist"? [Pp. 775–76]

Faced with such a web of ignorance, confusion, and bad faith, it is my turn to sigh. Where to begin? Is it really necessary to waste all this time and so much paper, even if it is recyclable?

Yes, let's go *Aufklärer*, one more effort. Let's try to make things progress a little.

1. First of all, in order to attribute to the "deconstructive project" such a definition of context ("always and only *verbal*"), one would have to have never read (or in any case understood) a single line or the least letter of the texts that have defined this "project" (another inadequate word, but let's not bother). Since it is apparently a question of me in such a hallucination, I may be permitted to underscore that, for the last twenty-five years, I have not ceased to say and to recall exactly the contrary. No longer daring to ask that one read *me*, from A to Z, I ask only that one read—if, that is, one still wants to talk about me—at least between A, B, and C.¹⁶ There, one will discover that deconstruction begins by the deconstruction of the "verbal" limits set on the text and the context. This is, in particular, the meaning of a few of the words that this "critical respondent" may have overheard at a cocktail party: the deconstruction of phonocentrism, of logocentrism, and of phallogocentrism. Or again, "there is no outside-the-text" signifies that one never accedes to a text without some relation to its contextual opening and that a context is not made up of only what is so trivially called a text, that is, the words of a book or the more or less biodegradable paper document in a library. If one does not understand this initial transformation of the concepts of text, trace, writing, signature, event, context,¹⁷ one understands nothing about nothing of the aforesaid deconstruction—and that is indeed the case here, even if one ventures to qualify deconstruction as "originally

16. See in particular Derrida, "Limited Inc, a b c," *Limited Inc*, pp. 29–110, and "But, beyond"; see also Derrida, "Living On: *Border Lines*," trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York, 1979), p. 81, where Derrida writes: "This is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. What I am referring to here is not richness of substance, semantic fertility, but rather structure: the structure of the remnant or of iteration."—TRANS.

17. These last three words correspond in effect to the title of one of Derrida's texts, "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 307–30. See also "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Limited Inc*, pp. 1–23.—TRANS.

so liberating” (really???) . One has to take the time to do a little more work. I would be insulting my other readers if I continued to recall such elementary things.

2. For these same reasons, the opposition between “textual” and “practical” has no meaning for me, and especially not the one attributed to it here. This is why, moreover, deconstruction is much more “practical” and political than so many people believe or pretend to believe. And that is exactly what they cannot bear. I have often explained myself on this subject, even in this very journal when already responding to a couple of “critical respondents.”¹⁸ I was already struggling, in vain apparently, against the most obstinate resistance to reading and to analysis.

3. Who said “Literature is All”? Certainly not me, neither in “Paul de Man’s War” nor anywhere else. I am sure Paul de Man never said it. And as for the way he had, which is, moreover, very interesting, of treating a certain irreducible specificity of literature (which does not come down to saying “Everything is Literature”), the disagreement between us was public and known to those who do us the honor of being interested in our publications and our debates of more than fifteen years (see notably

18. See Derrida, “But, beyond.” An opposition analogous to that of “textual/practical,” but just as crude and in this case irrelevant, plays a caricatural, which is to say totally misleading, role in the second article that *The Nation* has just devoted to the “affair,” an affair that has become, in effect, good business [*une bonne affaire*]. After “Deconstructing de Man,” a year ago, now it’s “Debating de Man” (13 Feb. 1989; one has to admire at least the progress made in the titles. There is room for hope). With the same hastiness, in a confusion that has not abated in the last year or more, the same author organizes his whole article, well before the deadline (see below; he still wants to be first), months before the publication of the 700-page book that he is claiming to review, around the well-known frontier that is supposed to separate “textualism” and “historicism” (! why doesn’t this “historian” do any work? One has the urge to ask him a few very basic questions, such as: what is a “text” for you? And “history”? What have you read on this subject? Give us a few references). The result is sometimes outright laughable. By way of compensation, and since the author insists on having the right to the same “pardon” as others, I pardon this second series of errors and truncated quotations (of what I wrote on pp. 625, 637–39, for example), of obscene simplifications, of dishonest omissions, finally all these things that have now become familiar throughout the world, and still the same disdain for the most elementary forms of probity. This disdain now calmly authorizes itself, indeed ennoble itself with a quotation from Lindsay Waters (speaking of Paul de Man!) that the journalist from *The Nation* misuses by turning aside its destination. He seems to be saying that anything is allowed (to him) since, according to Waters, “for him [de Man in the 1960s who wrote for *The New York Review of Books*] it was part of the intellectual’s job to try to convey complex ideas for as general an audience as would receive them, despite the risks of distortion [and] the need to make deadlines.” In “Paul de Man’s War,” I indicated (for example, p. 591, ll. 30–31) the respect due the functions of the press and thus to the journalists who have a sense of the immense and difficult responsibility that is theirs—which Waters also recalls. It is even in the name of this respect and this responsibility that the violent simplifications, the deformations (“distortions”), and everything that is sacrificed to the “deadline” must be evaluated. And that one does not have the right to say anything one pleases. It is because of my respect for what journalism should be, no less than what the university should be, that I am shocked by these two articles in *The Nation*.

Mémoires). I pointed this out several times in “Paul de Man’s War” (at least on pp. 627, 649, and no doubt elsewhere as well).

4. Who ever said it sufficed to praise Kafka in order to be “on the right side of history”? Certainly not me, and the analysis I did of the reference to Kafka was, I hope, less stupid than that. Since those who have read me know that this analysis was rather nuanced, complicated, and meticulous (excessively so if I believe the apparent reproach made elsewhere), I will do no more than refer back to it.

5. I was the first to say, and to repeat with great insistence (see at least pp. 600, 635–37, 640, and in a more or less explicit fashion throughout), in particular for the reasons of principle I have just recalled (1 and 2), that it was necessary to read “de Man’s articles in the context of the related writings of the period” and to have a “knowledge of the events to which they were responding.” But I did not content myself with *saying* that this *was necessary* (although that is already a big step and one which I like to think was not without consequences); *I did so*, right away, as best I could, in the limits of a sixty-page article that, on the subject of the writings and the events of this period, contains more historical information, more references (“textual” and “practical” references, to take up this very primitive but convenient distinction) than in the harangues of *all* my censors put together. I leave it to them to count the references, if they can. Whoever read “Paul de Man’s War” cannot say without bad faith that I traced a “linguistic circle” around a “Sacred Text,” a ridiculous formula that has had a place for the last quarter century in the largely degraded dictionary of all the antideconstructionist stereotypes. (For the quickest summary—I am thinking of the time of those who *ne pveulent pas lire*—allow me to refer once again to “Signature Event Context,” which is only twenty pages long.)

Third example. Here the scene is a little different, first of all more disarming, no doubt, but also more crude. The author seems to accept the rule of “rereading de Man” but only if it is in order to recognize de Man’s “errors.” And the recognition of the right to error seems to him in effect “reasonable,” but only if one consents to extend it first of all to the journalist-professors who have written whatever they wanted about de Man (pp. 802–3). I found this gesture rather sympathetic and, especially, amusing. Here at least is someone, I said to myself, who is profiting from the occasion (better late than never) in order to ask to be forgiven the “reading mistakes” he accumulated and, what is still more serious, indirectly propagated in the world press. Here is the final paragraph of a text that, right away, beginning with its title (“The Responsibilities of Friendship”), took a wrong turn by suggesting that everything I had written in this context, like the responsibilities I took or defined, were controlled by my friendship for de Man. That adds a “reading mistake” to an already impressive list (I will return to this). Let us reread this conclusion:

Derrida suggests “rules” for “rereading de Man,” the first of which is “respect for the right to error.” That’s a reasonable suggestion, but for Derrida it applies only to de Man, not to his critics. The conclusion one is left with is that what de Man did—collaborate with the Nazi occupiers of Belgium—should be understood and forgiven, but what de Man’s critics have done—commit “reading mistakes”—should be condemned as unforgivable. Outside the circle of de Man’s most committed defenders, few readers will find this argument persuasive. [Pp. 802–3]

I do not know if I am part of the “circle” in question, but I do not find this argument “persuasive” for this initial reason: I have not come across it anywhere and thus never formulated it myself. I find it touching that a professor-journalist asks forgiveness for his “reading mistakes” as soon as, so he believes, other “errors” have been pardoned. But all of this is incongruous and beside the question, not to say out of the question. First of all, contrary to the assertion of the same professor-journalist, who decidedly still refuses to read, I never put myself in the situation of pardoning or of asking others to pardon de Man for anything whatsoever. I explain this at length in the vicinity of a passage that speaks of “the unpardonable violence and confusion of these sentences” (p. 623; the reference is to the article “Jews in Present-day Literature”). I even underlined the word “unpardonable,” and I could cite many other passages that go in the same direction (pp. 621–31 and *passim*). Is this clear enough? Did I not insist enough on the reasons for which I did not feel I had the right to pardon this or that writing, this or that act, no more than I had the right to condemn the *whole* discourse, the *whole* life, the *whole* work of de Man? And on the reasons for which such a totalization seemed to me unjust, summary, confused, and politically dangerous (see in particular p. 631, but also in numerous other places)?

I not only signed and underlined the word “unpardonable” (is it pardonable to lie by acting as if one had not read that? Is it pardonable not to have read it? Is it pardonable to accuse me of not having written it?), I also explained why I did not feel I had the right to pardon. Not because I have set myself up in the position of judge, but because this would be to talk in the place of victims. I will ask the one who accuses others, even as he demands pardon for his numerous errors, to reread the whole page (and a little beyond) in my article that begins thus: “Through the indelible wound, one must still analyze and seek to understand. Any concession would betray, besides a complacent indulgence and a lack of rigor, an infinitely culpable thoughtlessness with regard to past, present, or future victims of discourses that at least resembled this one” (p. 631). To finish on this point, I do not know whether the enormities published in *The Nation* (9 January 1988) were only “reading mistakes.” For many reasons, I never sought to compare them with anything what-

soever of Paul de Man's, really. I do not know if they are "unforgivable." I do not have the power to decide this in the face of the whole world. If I may be permitted a confidence, I would say this: While I continue to pay the greatest attention to the *possibility* and the *significance* of such violent journalistic acts, I had already begun to forget the fact and the literality of *these particular ones*. Their author would have done better not to recall them. Apparently, he prefers to expose himself to criticism rather than let himself be forgotten. [. . .]

On forgetting and forgiving, a huge question. To be added to the file of the "biodegradable." [. . .]

Why is the *figure of the biodegradable* so provocative? Both useful, from a heuristic point of view, but essentially limited in its relevance? In the most general and novel sense of this term, a *text* must be "(bio)degradable" in order to nourish the "living" culture, memory, tradition. To the extent to which it has some sense, makes sense, then its "content" irrigates the milieu of this tradition and its "formal" identity is dissolved. And by formal identity, one may understand here all the "signifiers," including the title and the name of one or more presumed signatories. And yet, to enrich the "organic" soil of the said culture, it must also resist it, contest it, question and criticize it enough (dare I say deconstruct it?) and thus it must not be assimilable ([bio]degradable, if you like). Or at least, it must be assimilated as inassimilable, kept in reserve, unforgettable because irreceivable, capable of inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning, incomprehensibly elliptical, secret. What is it in a "great" work, let's say of Plato, Shakespeare, Hugo, Mallarmé, James, Joyce, Kafka, Heidegger, Benjamin, Blanchot, Celan, that resists erosion? What is it that, far from being exhausted in amnesia, increases its reserve to the very extent to which one draws from it, as if expenditure augmented the capital? This very thing [*cela même*], this singular event that, enriching the meaning and accumulating memory, is nevertheless not to be reduced to a totality or that always exceeds interpretation. What resists immediate degradation is this very thing, the text or in the text, which is no longer on the order of meaning and which joins the universal wealth of the "message" to unintelligible singularity, finally unreadable (if reading means to understand and to learn to know), of a trace or a signature. The irreplaceable singularity, the event of signature, is not to be summed up in a patronymic name, because it is the work itself. The "proper name" in question—which has no meaning and is not a concept—is not to be reduced to the appellation of civil status. What is more, it is proper to nothing and to no one, reappropriable by nothing and by no one, not even by the presumed bearer. It is this singular impropriety that permits it to resist degradation—never forever, but for a long time. Enigmatic kinship between waste, for example nuclear waste, and the "masterpiece."

Yet, one cannot say that the best way to escape cultural "(bio)degradability" is to be irreceivable, inassimilable, to exceed meaning. For then

one would have to say that absurdities, logical errors, bad readings, the worst ineptitudes, symptoms of confusion or of belatedness are, by that very fact, assured of survival. Even if there are those who hope this is true, we know that, most often, nothing of the sort is the case. That which has no meaning, purely and simply, is almost immediately “(bio)degradable.” That which has little meaning does not last long. What is “bad” does not resist (this is at least what one would like to believe, the story I tell myself when I wake up tired, but in a good mood.) So, in order to “remain” a little while, the meaning has to link up *in a certain way* with that which exceeds it. Sign itself in a certain way. [. . .]

Here one would have to make a long detour (but I won’t have time today) through music, the memory of the musical work, to explain what I mean here by proper name. Not that music does not have meaning, but I am interested here in what it is in music that surpasses discursive meaning, exceeds a certain kind of translatable intelligibility into “good sense” sentences. Music has nothing in common with what some call music when, understanding nothing of certain discourses that they *ne peuvent pas* [can/will not] read, they believe or want to make others believe that these latter have no meaning. Anyone who does not understand can always complain or accuse: All I am given to hear or understand is unintelligible sounds, I am not convinced, I am being subjected to the musical apparatus of seduction. [. . .]

What I tried to say about “responsibility” in “Paul de Man’s War” is difficult, I realize. What I am trying to think about responsibility in general is obscure, even perilous; other texts could attest to this and I do not hide it. But the thing itself is obscure, and my discourse is always highly argued, even if it cannot be a question of reproducing this argumentation here, for lack of time and space. All the more so since this argument claims to move beyond the usual stereotypes of the concept of responsibility. That is why, I grant you, this argument does not follow in my text (and I wanted it this way) that “clear-cut line” (p. 785) demanded by someone who seems to like to read the way one drives on the interstate, perhaps even while driving on the interstate.

Can one speak of responsibility or assume a responsibility without difficulty and without anguish? I don’t believe so. To speak of it calmly and as if there were some obvious, commonsense facts available on this subject, *as if one knew* what were and ought to be the “ethical categories,” is irresponsibility itself—moral, political, philosophical, intellectual irresponsibility in general. Here is someone who, certain that he knows what responsibility and “ethical categories” are, ironizes about my “tour de force” (“To write about responsibility with so little reference to ethical categories is something of a tour de force” [p. 785]). With or without the irony, the same author had just been amazed to see “responsibility”

associated with “responding,” with the categories of “rhetoric” and “psychoanalysis.” I suppose that for him, when one treats of responsibility or of “ethical categories,” it is not necessary to speak of either “response,” or language, or rhetoric, or transference, or the unconscious (I would really like to see him demonstrate this). These would be digressions toward the inessential, avoidances. What can you respond to that?

And what is one doing when, understanding neither the sense nor the form of a discourse on responsibility (because one deems it to be “impenetrably elliptic” (p. 785; I will come back to this marvelous treatment of ellipsis), one compares it to a music that has no meaning, to some “variations on a theme”? I think I have already said that when one doesn’t understand something, one can always resort to decreeing: This is not a discourse, these are only meaningless sonorities. I will not be so cruel as to illustrate this practice with examples that always amount to taking a discourse or a language (for example, a foreign language) for meaningless music. This is, in sum, the definition that certain people would give of alphabetism. Out of respect for nonalphabetic writings, I would say instead illiteracy in the broad sense. And in the case that concerns us, the diagnosis that may be summed up as “it is unintelligent or unintelligible like music” seeming still too generous, the diagnostician preferred to insinuate, wound, add a clever little wink: like Wagnerian music (“a Wagnerian leitmotiv”). By which I believe I understand, without being certain of this, pre-Nazi, as is only proper. “In fact these ‘variations’ are more musical than analytic: ‘responsibility’ comes close to being a Wagnerian leitmotiv” (p. 785).

One can imagine the musical culture that dictates such sinister “bon-mots.” It presents a hardly more cheering aspect than that which one perceives behind the “I-do-not-understand-therefore-it’s-irrational-non-analytic-magical-illogical-perverse-seductive-diabolical” that has always signed the triumph of the old obscurantism. Some may think that the latter has disappeared, at least in the university; well, it hasn’t. It resists, it survives, it lingers on, and, if you want to know my prognosis, it is almost indestructible.

Saturday, 21 January, 5 A.M.

Music can also, in certain situations, resist effacement to the extent to which, by its very form, it does not let itself be so easily dissolved in the common element of discursive sense. From this point of view, at any rate, music would be less “(bio)degradable” than discourse and even than the art of discourse.

[When I rewrite these fragments in view of publication, I hope that the reader will pardon me for having constantly mixed up reflexions on the biodegradable with certain reading impressions with which I neither

wanted to close myself up nor closet the reader for too long. Thus, for essential and fundamental reasons (because these questions are indis-sociable, as I hope to have demonstrated), but also in order not to die of boredom.]

There are also verbal harassments that, without producing what was so unforgettably called a “clear-cut line of argument,” procure for you no musical experience. In this category, I class a sort of rhetorical trance that consists in repeating often enough, in the most mechanical, automatic way possible, one or two words so as to produce after a while, in the other or in oneself, a kind of hallucination: If this word is proffered so often, there must indeed be a corresponding thing, the thing one is talking about. I sense this intoxication or this compulsion when the words “fascism,” “fascist,” and “Nazi” are hammered at with such frequency and such an imperturbable authority (pp. 804–11) that the hypnotized reader would end up consenting: Yes, since they say it so often, and moreover since there are two of them saying it at the same time, with such force and assurance; and I would even go further: since they believe it so firmly, both of them, and so unanimously, one has to believe them, the words must correspond to something, yes, there was indeed a “fascist ideology” (p. 804) of de Man, yes, there were indeed “de Man’s fascist sympathies”; I will even go further: “a fascist de Man,” yes, his “practices” were indeed those of a “fascist intellectual” (p. 805), and yes, in fact, there was indeed a “fascist intellectual’s practice” (p. 805) in de Man, and even a “fascist project” (p. 811) by de Man, yes, there was indeed on his part a “commitment to fascism” (p. 806); and I will even say further (as Dupont or Dupond would say),¹⁹ an “ideological commitment to fascism” (p. 807), and even an “intellectual engagement with fascism” (p. 806); yes, in fact, we can now conclude that there indeed were “fascist tendencies” in de Man (p. 807). Worn down to the point of hypnosis, even knocked out, the reader may very well no longer wonder if, perchance, the two are not repeating these words so often, like a litany, in order to believe something they can’t quite manage to believe, still less to demonstrate. And when they pronounce, in the form of an incantatory verdict, the words “the most obvious,” it is in order to thrust forward the least obvious, to wit: “on the one hand, de Man was a Nazi collaborator; on

19. Besides Tintin and Captain Haddock, the detectives Dupont and Dupond are inevitable and indiscernable characters in this series of comic books. In the English version they are called Thompson and Thomson. They resemble twins who are constantly lost, running to catch up, beside the question, always on the wrong trail. They are especially noted for the way in which each one repeats literally the discourse of the other, introducing the echo of this pure repetition by a phrase that ups the ante, such as “I will even say further,” or “I would even add,” expressions whose frequency may be noticed in the passage we are here translating. For example, in *Red Rackham’s Treasure*, Dupont, unless it is Dupond, says: “A real gang of thugs!” and Dupond, unless it is Dupont, adds: “I would even say further: A real gang of thugs!”—TRANS.

the other hand, he was a Belgian fascist" (p. 808). This is indeed what the two authors would like to inculcate in us rather than prove.

Because all of this is false. So as to demonstrate it in an economical fashion and so as not to oblige anyone to reread "Paul de Man's War" from A to Z, without even citing the many attestations and analyses that are now available, I will recall only one point (that I had, moreover, already underscored [p. 604] when quoting from the article in *Le Soir* of 3 December 1987; how much longer will it be necessary to repeat this?). These young men, who are giving everybody history lessons, seem as yet unaware that, after the war, there were judges in Belgium far more vigilant than they: better informed, more severe, and more seriously motivated. There was as well a still more ruthless law that was enforced without flinching in the cases of those suspected of the least collaboration. *No charges were filed against de Man.* There was not even the beginning of a trial. "*Paul de Man was not the object of proceedings before the War Council for his attitude or his activity during the war [Paul De Man n'a pas fait l'objet de poursuites devant le Conseil de guerre pour son attitude ou son activité pendant la guerre].*"²⁰

Here then are two young Americans, probably born after the war, who would like to reinstate the Purge, to purge, purge, purge. Decontextualizing with a fury the whole dossier, they demand a new investigation; they are ready to begin a second prosecution and to call a new meeting of the War Council, indeed to reinstitute it themselves because the other one was undoubtedly too indulgent. And now, almost a half century later, they insist on a guilty verdict without appeal regarding that which the Belgian tribunals, who were on the spot and were, we should not forget, the most implacable in Europe, did not judge to be guilty and, truth to tell, did not even accuse! Since they obviously do not have the means to institute this New War Council, they reproach *me* for not having done it. They still have not understood that that goes counter to my principles as well as my tastes. On the other hand, if in view of establishing this NWC, they have to begin by acquiring the assistance of a new Academic Bureau of Investigation and of some professional detectives, why don't they get in contact with the other "critical respondents"? One of them offers an apology of the "detective" whose "task is to discover the truth" (p. 794), while another knows a colleague who is a connoisseur of intellectual prey [*gibier*] and "whose specialty is the hunting of presumed French fascist intellectuals" (p. 765; I really wonder who that could be). Will they be clever enough to disqualify the War Council, I mean the true one, the first, the real, the tough one, over there, in Belgium after the

20. Representative of the Auditor General, letter to the Director of the Center for Research and Historical Study of the Second World War, 23 June 1988. This letter is cited *in extenso* in Thomas Keenan's remarkable compilation, "Documents: Public Criticisms," in *Responses*, p. 475.—TRANS.

war, with all the documents and all the witnesses it examined? I still have a few doubts about that, but good luck anyway for this other bidding war. As for me, I am not going to lose any more time on such a comedy of justice nor waste any more paper, even if it is recyclable, in describing the spectacle created by this juvenile hysteria, nor the political judgment it calls up in me.

No; nevertheless, just a word about the spectacle in order to indicate clearly that, once again, the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940–42, but “the Deconstruction” of 1989. The two coauthors of this masquerade are not content to dismiss the Belgian purge of 1945 as too indulgent. They are not dreaming only of hunting and purging; they are not dreaming only of erecting a New War Council. They project the ridiculous scene of a struggle for “prestige” and a game of “double or nothing” in which “Deconstruction,” no more no less, would risk its whole fortune on a single throw. We leave the scene of the New War Council. Now we are in an academic casino. Standing behind the gaming table, holding the card of deconstruction (there is only one card, obviously, “Paul de Man’s War”), I alone represent “Deconstruction” all gathered into one for this last throw, this last chance. Oh yes, I almost forgot: it must be the last chance, at the last moment, at dawn. And if I lose, the croupiers will declare “Deconstruction” in ruins, bankrupt. Exit “Deconstruction.” I am going to quote a hallucinating paragraph that first made me think of a mini-imitation-potlatch improvised during a morning panel at the MLA (the title of the session: “The Prestige of Deconstruction on the Line”). Then I said to myself that there is no potlatch without risk, gift, and counter-gift, destruction of goods *on both sides*. I look in vain for the other side. No, two umpire-croupiers presenting themselves as the representatives of society, two notary publics, in sum, or two court bailiffs, would like to decide in all equanimity whether the “coup” is won or lost; they would even be content just to register the results as impartial observers. Here is this Monte Carlo of political theory from the 1930s: “With these claims Derrida puts the prestige of deconstruction on the line: its political significance, its power to explain political and cultural conjunctures, and its capacity for self-understanding. If these remain staked on the procedures and outcomes of his account of ‘Paul de Man’s War,’ the wager will be lost” (p. 805).

If there are any readers who still find this staging credible, I refer them not to the gaming table, but to the tables of confor(redun)dance and discordance. They will be able to observe that there is nothing around this just-quoted paragraph, before or after it, which I have not already said (in another mode, or so I like to believe) or to which I have not already responded. As for the “prestige of deconstruction” (!!! within this same atmosphere and this same mundanity, one might think of an advertisement for tax-free luxury perfumes), supposing that I understand

what is being given such a clownish title, the two croupier-notaries cannot imagine to what extent I don't give a damn, nor everything that I am able—and even make it my duty, an ethical and political duty—to prefer to their “prestige.” No, really, someone has to wake up these sleepyheads: Despite their naïve desire that it be true, despite the mad hope that all of “deconstruction” be on the line in an article that they dream of making into a bad card, things, yes, *things*—real, resistant, historical, political things, in other words, referents—will not be reduced to this pathetic, ridiculous “agenda.” I recall once again that “Paul de Man’s War” presents itself also as a sort of first reflection on my part. Beginning modestly by “Unable to respond to the questions, to all the questions” (which once again distinguishes me from the six “critical respondents” who have an answer for everything in advance), I had merely proposed a narrative, some hypotheses, a call to responsibility (and first of all to reflect on responsibility), an invitation to work and to discussion, and not a card to be played, a “coup,” certainly not a dogmatic apparatus, or a sum of settled conclusions. Even if, *concesso non dato*, my article was vulnerable to this or that criticism (a hypothesis I can easily accept but whose demonstration I am awaiting with interest), one would never be reasonably within one’s rights to conclude that “Deconstruction” is in ruins or ruined, in the sense that could allow one to say, while rubbing one’s hands together: that’s it, it’s over, whew! “the wager is lost.” This ruin is all the more improbable in that deconstruction is neither a system nor an edification, nor, like five of the “critical responses,” an edifying discourse. It is a very differentiated movement that passes by way of so many other texts; it has many other places, many other resources than mine and than those that are put to work in an article written for *Critical Inquiry* in great haste and at its request. One more thing: the secret without secret of resistance, for deconstruction, is perhaps a certain connivance with ruin. But I am not going to begin here another discourse on ruin (perhaps on the basis of but also beyond what Benjamin says about it, for example). That is too difficult. Let’s stay with the “(bio)degradable.”
[. . .]

(Draft of a letter)

Dear Jonathan Culler,

I thank you for the courtesy with which you discussed my article and formulated firmly your disagreement. You addressed yourself to me, in any case to the one who wrote “Paul de Man’s War,” a difficult text to write for thousands of reasons that I hope are respectable, and a text that you began by troubling yourself to read. Taking into account the complexity of things, you avoided summary globalizations. You never confused objection with insult. That goes without saying, you will reply. To be sure, but I insist on thanking you all the same because such rules are neglected by the six other “critical respondents” to whom I am asked to

respond (I will try to do it, but it is difficult to address myself directly—and I think I ought not do so—to persons who are only seeking to inflict wounds and to hurl abuse, who, when they are not dreaming about a New War Council, confuse discussion with a manhunt [a man who is, more than ever, oh yes, “wanted”], a scalp dance, or with upping the ante in a casino. The six other “critical respondents” no more address me than they have read me). For the example that you set, allow me to thank you in the name of those who still have a sense of the gravity of all these stakes, whether it is a question of what happened a half-century ago or of the future of discussion, that is, of a certain number of other things inside and outside the university. No doubt, nothing authorizes me to speak otherwise than in my own name. But I like to imagine that others will share my gratitude. The clarifications, the information, the new historical sources with which you enrich the debate will be useful. I find them very valuable from two points of view: (1) You take into account the historical context much more rigorously than do, for example, the other “critical respondents” who often believe it suffices to parade around with the banner “historical context” leading the parade to authorize them then to say anything whatsoever about that context and to “decontextualize” with all their might [à tour de bras] or, as one says in French, “à bras raccourcis” [with brutal aggression]. I have rarely read more abstract and logocentered texts, more enclosed within the prison house of language, than these. The fact that they present themselves as historicist and concerned with the real referent has always been part of the logocentric picture. (2) I subscribe to the essential part of your analysis of the criticism of aesthetic ideology by de Man. I will not go back over the light this sheds on the debate. My agreement on this subject was predictable. Like Mémoires, my Critical Inquiry article was clearly oriented in this direction.

So I will limit myself to the point of disagreement. I have read all the articles now available in Wartime Journalism. One must in fact acknowledge their diversity and, for a large majority of them, their less directly political character. I would nevertheless be tempted to uphold, in the main, the judgment that you found to be “exceedingly severe.” I grant you that the assertion you cite can be seen as, precisely, too massive (I re-cite it in my turn since none of my detractors seems to have read it, no more than they read so many other sentences that go in the same direction: “the massive, immediate, and dominant effect of all these texts is that of a relatively coherent ideological ensemble which, most often and in a preponderant fashion, conforms to official rhetoric, that of the occupation forces”). Yes, despite the prudence of certain underlined words (“relatively,” “most often,” and so on), this assertion itself has something massive about it. But I deliberately designated the “effect” (which I distinguish here from intention) that, in certain situations, must also be analyzed in a global and macroscopic fashion. That does not prevent one, elsewhere and later, from looking at it more closely. Newspaper articles are most often read, alas, very quickly and are crudely contextualized. They let themselves be dominated, up to a certain point, by their framing. Political responsibility consists in trying to take account of this framing,

even if this is not always easy. That is what I tried to do. Yes, the measure of “up to a certain point” is very difficult to evaluate, just as it is difficult to control. There will always be a margin of the uncontrollable. Decisive things can be produced in that margin, according to more or less long, more or less conscious trajectories. But how can one deny that the simple fact of publishing so many articles, whatever they were and whatever they said, in those newspapers, at that moment, the simple fact of writing acceptable things, was to run the risk of alliance with that which I several times called “the worst” (p. 623 and *passim*)? This is what I massively called the massive. In traditional language, let’s say that it is here the structure of the thing that is first of all massive and not the judgment that relates to it. Massively, the least one can say is that the de Man of this period was not a resistant and his articles in *Le Soir* tended to go rather towards the other side. It seems to me that you yourself acknowledge this when you speak of a “global effect” (p. 778).

This massive thing was admitted from the beginning of my text, and I did not stop recalling it. But, of course, one must next take a rigorous and minute account of all the complications. And then, without even speaking of the majority of the articles, there remains the one that you judge, as I do, to be “unpardonable” (p. 779); yet another word that the six authors in search of a character did not read or pretended not to have read) and of which, without the least equivocation, you judge de Man “guilty” (p. 780). Whatever may be the complexity of this terrible article, whatever we are compelled by honesty to read there, as I tried to do, one cannot deny, as I said, that it also, in its own way, made a contribution that was at the very least equivocal to the massively anti-Semitic operation undertaken by this newspaper and to the politics that it was then supporting. You knew I would agree that to acknowledge this obviously does not authorize one to reduce all the other articles (almost 200) to this one, even less to extend the condemnation to the work of a whole life, especially if this work, as you have demonstrated well, permits one to criticize, dare I say to deconstruct, the very axiomatics of fascist or Nazi ideology.

That said, I grant you that one of the words in the sentence you quote lends itself to ambiguity. It would no doubt deserve to be corrected or clarified in a later edition. I should not have said “all” of these texts because I had not read them all at the time. I was only referring then to those that were politically the most significant. In my mind, “all” concerned all the texts that were then available to me, the most “political” among them, and I should have emphasized this clearly. Or, rather, more clearly since I did also indicate it (p. 598). Without thinking that my conclusion about the “massive” or the “dominant” is thereby effected, I concede that, having read the 200 texts, I now see the landscape as even more differentiated and politically even more complicated than I thought at the time.

Your analysis thus allows one to make some progress toward understanding and toward an honest reading of de Man’s texts. Numerous signs let one think that other work of the same type will be coming along to enrich and clarify this debate still further. That is precisely what we hoped would happen by publishing

very quickly this whole archive and by immediately taking the initiative for a large and open discussion. Once again, thank you, and so on. Sincerely [. . .]

Ellipses. There are several ways not to name. Or to silence proper names. Of these, one may be dictated by respect for people. To avoid hurting them by the harshness of a criticism, a necessary harshness (ethical and political duty: we are not in a duel; there are third parties and stakes that surpass us). The name may be silenced in order to save the name. There is a long tradition of this, isn't there? [. . .]

The biodegradable: don't speak of it lightly, without "fear and trembling." How not to think of the death camps, the mass graves, the recycling of corpses, the fabrication of "soap," for example, from animal fat, everything that was endured, as I said (p. 631 and passim) by the "victims of discourses that at least resembled" the discourse of "Jews in Present-day Literature"?²¹ How not to think of ashes in general, the ashes of Auschwitz in particular? Of what I several times called "the worst" in "Paul de Man's War"? Of trace and ashes.²² All that managed to survive, survival itself, are some names, in the large black archives or on the somber wall plaques in a museum in Jerusalem. Even so they are not all there. Even names can be incinerated. Not repressed or censured, held in reserve in another place, but forever incinerated. [. . .]

The "non(bio)degradable" is always finite. But since this can be said of the worst and of the best, one must either give up this figure or overlook nothing in order to make the fine blade of discernment pass between the worst and the best. It is so risky. What is a proper name? What is meant by "survival" here, now? How to translate survival (living

21. "Through the indelible wound, we must still analyze and seek to understand. Any concession would betray, besides a complacent indulgence and a lack of rigor, an infinitely culpable thoughtlessness with regard to past, present, or future victims of discourses that at least resembled this one" (p. 631).

22. On the conjoined motifs of the singular event, the date, the proper name, and ashes [*cendres*], as well as on that which, in general, links the problems of trace, remains, and ashes, see notably Derrida, *Schibboleth, pour Paul Celan* (Paris, 1986); a partial translation by Joshua Wilner appears under the title "Schibboleth" in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven, Conn., 1986), pp. 307–47; see also Derrida, *Feu la cendre* (Paris, 1987). This latter book, in the form of a polylogue, reconstitutes everything that, in the problematics of the trace which Derrida has been elaborating since 1965, calls for and names the figure without figure of ashes, notably in *Dissemination, Glas, and The Post Card*. The reference to the "burn-everything" [*brûle-tout*] and to the Holocaust directs, of course, all these meditations ("You were saying a moment ago that there could be no phrase of 'today' for the word of ash. Yes there is, there is perhaps only one whose publication is worthy; it would say the burn-everything, in other words the Holocaust and the cremation oven, in German in all the Jewish tongues of the world" [*Feu la cendre*, p. 41]).—TRANS.

on, *Fortleben*, or *Überleben*; see Benjamin on translation, the [after]life of the spirit, and organic life, and so on).²³ [. . .]

9 P.M.

Will I have been right to respond? Would it not have been better to put my trust in honest and intelligent readers? One will never know; the calculation will be, by definition, impossible. Ought I to respond briefly? At length? In the one case, I will be accused of being too “elliptic” (p. 785) (forgetting that I myself began by excusing myself for this ellipsis on the fiftieth page of my article: “Permit me an ellipsis here since I do not have much more time or space. Transference and prosopopeia . . .” [p. 639]). In the other case, I will be accused of giving in to “verbosity” (p. 785). What choice does he leave me, the one who associates these two accusations in a constant and indissoluble fashion? He manifestly does not want to leave me any chance: I will always say too much *and* too little.

A few remarks on this subject. Apparently, someone is suffering.

1. He suffers first of all by my writing too much, always too much, “as usual,” he says. (Why does he suffer from it? Who obliges him, what obliges him to read me? Who obliges anyone to read me and even to publish me?) “Derrida’s lack of haste [so one should make haste?] expresses itself, *as usual* [my emphasis], in the form of impressive dimensions (sixty-two pages!), so that manageability requires a subdivision into sections” (p. 785).

I wonder if the author of these lines has ever read articles and books, if the distinction between parts, which seems to bother him so much, is something he has so rarely encountered or practiced in his life. And since he is apparently a professor, I wonder if he takes the responsibility to advise his students not to subdivide their texts into parts or into moments that are distinct and articulated among themselves. I said to myself that, at the first chance, I will try to read what this lesson-giver has himself published. Everything leads me to hope that his publications do not have “impressive dimensions”—I am sure at least that that is not what he suffers from, because he is in favor of brevity—and I especially hope that he has ordered things a little by distinguishing among sections, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, and so on. This man suffers so much from seeing me write and speak—and no doubt also publish—too much, that his complaint becomes inexhaustible. He repeats over and over again the same protest for pages on end and takes up as much space as possible denouncing the space that I usurp and that I will usurp here yet again (will one ever know whether he wished for or dreaded my response?).

23. See Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” [on Walter Benjamin], trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Graham (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985).—TRANS.

In effect: after the *first paragraph* that I have just quoted abundantly (“as usual”), the *second paragraph* repeats the same diagnostic, hammering away at it: “the dimensions of verbality are distinctly Derridean.” Really? So I am the only one? There would thus be “dimensions of verbality” that are proper to me? What is this exactly, how does one measure this thing? I have the vague impression that this man who suffers would like to wound me in turn or at least hurt me, but I do not know exactly where. And in case the poor reader’s intelligence and memory might be totally lacking, this man who suffers and who is decidedly not economical with his words adds, in a *third paragraph*, what he hopes is a really deadly sentence about my “extreme verbosity.” The *fourth paragraph* is still hounding my “rhetorical ratiocinations,” and so on (pp. 784, 785).

2. The snarling grimace of this suffering is not a rare or unintelligible phenomenon. I have read or heard the same complaint more than once. In substance, it goes like this: “these people [the ‘deconstructionists,’ of course, not only me] talk, write, and especially publish too much.” Not that they “work, analyze, research, and find too much” but “they chatter too much,” meaning: “they occupy too much space in our ecosystem. There should be a good housecleaning.”

3. This man who suffers does not relent because, after having ironized elegantly about the “distinctly Derridean” “dimensions of verbality,” he mocks, just as subtly, my “art”: “Derrida possesses the unique art of combining extreme ellipsis with extreme verbosity” (p. 785). I am blushing, it’s true, but I don’t know if it is with shame or with pleasure. In any case, here is someone who knows what’s what, who knows the measure of the too-much and the too-little. I suppose, then, that this man, who is not laughing and who, I am told, is interested in literature as well as interpretation, only reads, teaches, and recommends to his students works to his taste: without “ellipsis” and without verb: without “verbality” or “verbosity.” While wishing him good luck, I would be curious to know what his canonical bibliography is, the titles of the works without ellipsis or verbality that he recommends to his students, on which, I suppose, he works or teaches. I only ask for one or two titles, no more, in two lines, via the next “Letters to the Editor” section of *Critical Inquiry*.

If such a remark were not indecent or immodest on my part, after the reproaches made against me in this way, I would dare to say that, in my view, the works that best resist time are those which are simultaneously eloquent and enigmatic, generously abundant and inexhaustibly elliptical. It is on this condition that they are the least—or if you prefer, the most—“(bio)degradable.” Having already said too much about this, I will not be so impudent as to cite a few examples. But what would exegesis, hermeneutics, poetics, or just simply teaching of literature or philosophy be without this *double condition*? Not even to mention art and masterpieces. Has there ever been a single sentence in the world that escapes from this double “excess,” ellipsis and overabundance? The fas-

cinating rarification that hollows out the economy of what the old rhetoric praised under the name of *copia verborum*?

4. This man suffers not only from my elliptical verbosity; he suffers from the “centrifugal impetus” that, it seems, I never resist. I leave the reader to judge the restraint with which, for his part, he ironizes about my “repetitive, often coquettishly long-winded rhetorical disquisition, complete with puns and digressions, marked at times by a centrifugal impetus that seems hard to resist” (p. 784). What is one supposed to understand here by “puns”? I have no memory of any pun in my article. Once again I would need an example and a demonstration. Like a certain number of others, the concept of pun remains here, let us put it euphemistically, rather hospitable.²⁴ Fortunately, on the other hand, there are two examples of what is meant by “digressions” and “centrifugal impetus,” and thus I am going to be able to proceed with the required “elucidation” or “analysis.”

The *first example* of centrifugal digression on my part, it seems, is the interest shown in “‘the significance of the press in the modernity of a history like this one’” (p. 784). I will not respond at length. To judge this interest to be “centrifugal” today, in any context whatsoever and in particular in this one, is eccentricity itself. To put it in the most neutral way possible: I see here a striking manifestation of intellectual and political distraction. Thoughtless and dizzying [*étourdie et étourdissante*] decontextualization. Ought I then to have spoken about de Man’s writings in 1940–42 and of the “de Man case” in 1987 without attending to the “significance of the press”? Without even posing the problem? Now that is what I would call a digression, and even a stupid avoidance, ahistorical abstraction, and irresponsibility itself. The fact is, if I had not spoken about the press in this context, then there would have been nothing left for me to do but be silent (this is no doubt the demand that is being addressed to me and I get the message). What I regret is, on the contrary, having had to, for lack of time and space, “renounce the temptation” (this is acknowledged to be to my credit with a wry condescendence) to treat such a problem as fully as it deserves.

The *second example* is still more odd. It concerns anti-Semitism at Yale. With the same condescendence, I am given credit for having elected to “postpone” such a history, but apparently I ought not even to have mentioned it. Why? Let’s listen once again; it is a question of suffering.

He does manage to remind us of the relatively recent *numerus clausus* practices in Ivy League schools. Although I am myself a Yale alumnus who might once upon a time conceivably have suffered from such procedures, I fail to understand their relationship to

24. See the excellent collection *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Culler (Oxford, 1988).

de Man's institutional affiliation, or to see how the atmosphere in the New Haven of 1930, or even 1940, can be compared, even at its worst (if indeed such a farfetched comparison was intended) with the situation in the Brussels of 1942. [P. 785]

Responses:

1. Of course, I *never* dreamed of or left the least room for such a "comparison." I deem it to be so "farfetched" that I find even its hypothesis incongruous and indecent. Yet the fact remains that anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism, a *numerus clausus* is a *numerus clausus*, wherever they occur in the world. I will never denounce them *here* without doing the same *there*, under the pretext that the conditions are not exactly the same or, worse still, that although some suffered from it *here*, I myself might only have suffered from it *there* ("might have suffered" but fortunately he seems not to have suffered from it, even though he knew that he could have suffered from it). With such an opportunistic caution, I might never have been able, personally, to condemn anti-Semitism in general, not even French anti-Semitism, only the *numerus clausus* in force during the Occupation in Algeria, and from which I, along with a few others, did effectively suffer.

If one wants to know what I meant to say with this allusion to Yale, one can reread the half-paragraph and the note I devote to it (p. 592). It is very clear. Two questions are asked. They are distinct from each other. On the one hand: What is the link between the stir created by the case of de Man, a Yale professor, and what Yale is "for example, in American culture"? On the other hand: Why are so many American intellectuals (but, fortunately, not all of them) so quick to investigate, denounce, condemn what is going on far away, to dream of New War Councils and Academic Bureaus of Investigation while their vigilance is lulled to sleep easily in good conscience when it is a question of more domestic things, things closer to home in time and space? On the more general subject of, let's call it, segregation, I could have chosen graver examples of this bad-good-conscience.

2. Someone declares "I am myself a Yale alumnus" and reproaches me for not letting all these ancient histories "(bio)degrade" by themselves. Ancient histories? So ancient as all that? The research in one of the books I cite goes up to 1970. But this "Yale alumnus" seems to have been aware of these practices of *numerus clausus*. Has he spoken about them before? Publicly? If so, please forgive me and show me the references. If he did nothing, is it only because he did not suffer from them? But what is it finally he is suffering from today? Visibly he is not happy that I permitted myself a digression, even if it was "postponed," on Yale, whether the question is that of the *numerus clausus* or of what he calls "de Man's institutional affiliation." He does not see the relation. But there isn't any, of course; I never said there was! Moreover, he himself did not suffer

from the *numerus clausus* at Yale (is he really sure of that?), neither he himself, nor for others (there are those who suffer for others; I have met such people), and the periods are quite distinct, right? De Man arrived at Yale after 1972, if I am not mistaken. No relation, therefore. The author of "Jacques Derrida's Apologia" knows the whole story quite well. He was in a position to know it since he was, as I learn from another of my critical respondents in "The Responsibilities of Friendship," heavy responsibilities, "de Man's successor at Cornell" (p. 802). But he is going to find that I am once again too "verbal" and "elliptic" at the same time. That never happens to him? He is going to think that I am too interested in rhetoric and psychoanalysis. I think he is too little interested in them. And that is not good for ethics.

This "Yale alumnus," who was also, I quote again, "de Man's successor" (at Cornell, it should be added; I hope he did not suffer too much from this but he "might . . . conceivably have suffered"), thus seems certain that he knows what responsibility is. More certain than I am in any case, I easily grant him that. He is just as sure he knows what "ethical categories" ought to be. He reproaches me for not knowing this and for mixing in psychoanalytic categories. He also regrets, because it would not be relevant and would not even have any relation to the serious things we are talking about, that I mention the *numerus clausus* and the anti-Semitism at Yale (at least before 1970). And why you ask? Well, because this "Yale alumnus," it seems, did not suffer from it, personally. He recognizes that he "might . . . conceivably have suffered from such procedures," but fortunately he did not. He does not say that he even suffered for others (and yet, without understanding a whole lot about ethical categories and responsibility, as everyone knows, I believe there are people who suffer for others. I know people like that, I've met them, very close to me. There is even one of them who sees in this experience the beginning, indeed the condition, of ethics).

For the rest of my response to this article, no doubt the most pained and painful as well as the most venomous of them all, I refer to the two tables (will he say of these tables of figures that they are elliptical or verbose?). Naturally I will not respond to the usual ineptitudes on the subject of a presumed "usual Derridean practice": "And indeed the sequel of Derrida's essay will be radically at odds with usual Derridean practice, as a straightforward piece of exposition that could almost make us believe for a moment that meanings are possibly determinable. Further, it will lean on biographical and historical contexts that one would expect to be foreign to the author and anathema to the one for whom he speaks" (p. 786), which, let it be said in passing, contradicts once more the reproach of decontextualization that is later made against me.

Here once again, if one relies on this ignorant and aberrant reading of "Deconstruction" or of my "practice," I have no way out. Whenever such a reader cannot deny my attention to context, to history, to biography,

and so on, then he reproaches me for not being faithful to what he believes to be my “practice” or my “theory” (anticontextualist, right, everyone knows that, see above!). When he believes that I am faithful to what he *believes* or wants others to believe deconstruction means to say or to do, then I am reproached for decontextualizing, making meaning indeterminate and neglecting history. I will not respond on these points; I have done so a thousand times over the last twenty-five years, and once again here just a few pages ago. Faced with those who do not want or do not know how to read, I confess I am powerless. Powerless before the obtuse petty-mindedness that consists in counting the presumed pages “for” and the presumed pages “against” de Man, as if rhetoric were an arithmetic, as if the meaning of a discourse could be measured chronometrically, as if the brevity of plain and clear utterances were not enough to recall the things that are *massively* evident when that is what they are (which I never failed to do), while the complexity of other texts requires more attention and more time. I feel just as powerless before the fury that impels someone to want to suppress even a rhetorical question mark in a sentence as simple and as clear as this one:

“How can one deny,” Derrida closes his account, “that the effect of these conclusions went in the sense and the direction of the worst? In the *dominant* context in which they were read in 1941, did not their *dominant* effect go unquestionably in the direction of the worst? Of what we now know to have been the worst?” (p. 623). It is important to note the built-in attenuations; the interrogative mode; the emphasis on the dominant (and not the whole) effect; the stress on the context of 1941 (suggesting that it may be unduly limited). [P. 788]

But what would this man want? That there not even be a rhetorical question mark? I emphasize that the interrogation does not bear on the content but, on the contrary, on the possibility of scandalously “denying” this content, to wit, an effect regarding which the same sentence says clearly and in the most affirmative way in the world that it goes “unquestionably in the direction of the worst.” What more would he like? That instead of “How can one deny” I write “One cannot deny”? That would have really reassured, satisfied, fully convinced him that de Man was not going to get out of it thanks to a question mark. Since there is no difference, I confirm for him that in my view “How can one deny?” was perfectly equivalent to “One cannot deny.” What would this man want? That instead of “dominant,” underlined twice, I say “whole” and that in the total confusion I leave no more room for the least fold, the least nuance, the least differentiation? What these people want is not only that one say “unpardonable,” which I clearly did, but that one stop there, without even completing the sentence, that one repeat this word

indefinitely like an exorcism or rather an insult, and that one condemn the dead man to death, with immediate execution (firing squad or electric chair, instantaneous re-incineration), without even sifting among the ashes, without stopping to read and to analyze the remains, without even keeping anything in memory, because to remember is already to *analyze*, thus to complicate things. [. . .]

Yes, to condemn the dead man to death: they would like him *not to be dead* yet so they could put him to death (preferably along with a few of the most intolerable among the living). To put him to death this time without remainder. Since that is difficult, they would want him to be *already dead without remainder*, so that they can put him to death without remainder. Well, the fact is he is dead (they will no longer be able to do anything in order to kill him), and there are remains, something surviving that bears his name. Difficult to decipher, translate, assimilate. Not only can they do nothing against that which survives, but they cannot keep themselves from taking the noisiest part in that survival. Plus there are other survivors, aren't there, who are interested in survival, who talk, respond, discuss, *analyze* endlessly. We'll never have done with it. It's as if something nonbiodegradable had been submerged at the bottom of the sea. It irradiates. [. . .]

Another word about *analysis*. We are abruptly going to change the scene and go back, and now we are shown into a kind of butcher shop. Each time I try to analyze and progress by minute stages and distinctions, I am accused of resorting to "the age-old salami technique, which consists in cutting off slice after slice until the sausage has totally disappeared" (p. 789). I persist in thinking, on the contrary, that a text is not exactly a sausage. In any case, I do not share such a phantasm on this subject. I wonder what would happen if this reproach were extended to all those who try to analyze anything. I do not know what texts this professor explicates in class, but I can imagine the look on the faces of his students if he said to them, in all seriousness, each time he encountered an analytic procedure: "Aha! The age-old salami technique!" I won't be so cruel or so presumptuous as to give some great examples and to describe the scene: "Aha, look at this text (I let you choose the example—there are plenty of them—of an author who has a taste for analysis); Aha, the age-old salami technique!" Let's be serious. I remark first of all that this is the same author who elsewhere reproaches me for being too *and* too little elliptical, for contextualizing *and* decontextualizing, here for analyzing *too much* and elsewhere (p. 785) of *not* being "analytic" enough. What is one to respond to such contradictory accusations? Perhaps simply this: By trying to analyze honestly and to differentiate as best as I could, without erasing the folds and complications, I never sought to skirt the global, massive, or *dominant* effects of the texts I was interrogating in this

way in their context. On the contrary, I underscored them, as I did the words “massive,” “dominant,” and so on (which is precisely what Culler reproaches me for), in order to distinguish *again* between analysis, in the good sense, and the effect of the “salami technique.” So I myself indeed discerned the two. The same professor should have acknowledged it, all the more so since I make this distinction in the sentences *he himself quoted* above (“How can one deny that the effect of these conclusions went in the sense and the direction of the worst? In the *dominant* context in which they were read in 1941, did not their *dominant* effect go unquestionably in the direction of the worst?”). There were analogous ones on nearly every page of my article.

If I had to choose the most enlightening phrase for elucidating the text titled “Jacques Derrida’s Apologia,” it would perhaps be this one, a veritable lighthouse in the silence of the night: “de Man’s tone as the expression of a powerful urge for cultural authority, which makes the young man already speak like the oracular gray eminence he would succeed in becoming forty years later” (p. 787). What does “succeed” mean here? To what is allusion being made here? “De Man’s successor” (at Cornell) seems to know what he is talking about, but doesn’t breathe a word of it. Too bad. How many silences, how much suffering! Could he name anyone who does not seek to attain for himself some “cultural authority”? It is true that some succeed in doing so. But just as every eminence is not gray, not all grayness [*grisaille*; colorlessness, dullness] is eminent. [. . .]

Someone—the same one—finds the “discretion” between de Man and myself “rather odd” (p. 793). Not me. He does not say why he finds “this discretion rather odd,” so I can’t answer him, at least not with anything new. I explained myself on this subject. Likewise, when he writes two pages later in all tranquillity: “The fact that others, with different backgrounds, may have made statements similar to de Man’s is totally beside the point” (p. 795), he does not give the least reason. So I cannot answer. Why would it be “beside the point”? As for me, I tried at least to explain why it was not. [. . .]

I noted last Saturday, I think, that one can only extend the use of this figure, the “(bio)degradable,” by taking into account the logic of the unconscious. But that is not enough. It is also necessary to go beyond economy and topical relations, censorship and repression, condensation (ellipsis) and displacement. These keep what they cause to disappear. They simply cause it to change places. Now, there is also the possibility of a radical destruction without displacement, of a forgetting without remainder. I have called this ashes [*cendres*]. No trace as such without this possibility, which also lies in wait for the (bio)degradable and the non(bio)degradable, at least in their figure. But in what is called the

literal or strict sense, is there some absolute non(bio)degradable? For example, the nuclear waste that is deeply immersed so as to neutralize its physical effects, if not the accumulated anguish that will always resonate deep within our unconscious? If there were a limit here between the (bio)degradable and the non(bio)degradable, as between the literal and the figurative meaning, this is where it would lie. But I am not sure it does in all strictness. Take up everything again: *physis*, earth, world, man, life, survival, spirit, OK, OK. . . . [. . .]

One of the very many things my six judges did not read (not even “de Man’s successor,” who is amazed to hear talk of the “psychoanalytic” category or of “transference” [p. 785] with regard to response and responsibility) is the way a logic or a time of the unconscious in this whole history is taken into account: (1) in the “personal” history of de Man, which is never totally and rigorously separated from that of his work and writings; (2) in the history of the relation his readers, students, friends, and enemies have maintained with him and with his work, including the relation to his silences, which one sees more than ever now in the compulsive outbursts of certain of his former disciples who today are publicly repudiating a debt that was publicly declared but no doubt always intolerable to them; (3) in the history (memory, disappearance, reappearance, survival, and so on) of the whole archive—oral and written, journalistic and epistolary. In all of this, the problematic of biodegradability is at stake, and this example of it remains fascinating whatever else one may think of it. As regards all these events, I venture to recall that I warned against the “language of consciousness” which I had to adopt at points. Then I referred, and very carefully, to “some experience of the unconscious,” while adding and underscoring the following: “If the word ‘unconscious’ has any meaning, then it stems from this necessity. With or without a *recognition of the unconscious*, . . . ,” and so on (p. 593). A double necessity advised caution: to take seriously the unconscious in all these “histories” but not to rely dogmatically on the ordinary axioms of psychoanalysis, neither from the ethico-political point of view nor as regards their determinism, economism, topologism (according to which nothing is lost, everything is held in reserve under the watch of repression simply by changing places). It is as if everything were at once integrally (bio)degradable (by conserving itself in other forms in an organic compost that would draw nourishment from everything, including transformed, unrecognizable, and recycled wastes) and non(bio)degradable, that is, indestructible, leaving no resource other than metamorphosis or displacement.

I will go so far as to claim that, from the title to the last word of my article, everything was set in motion by this question: What remains? What is “*survivre*” (living on, surviving, *Fortleben*, *Überleben*)? How did

these newspaper articles and everything they record resist time? From what distance and by means of what detours? Why are they reappearing and how do we hear and understand what perhaps we have never stopped hearing, from afar, telephonically, through so many layers of apparent amnesia—this transoceanic rumor and rumbling “deep within a shell”? By quoting de Man quoting what is, in sum, Montherlant’s wager (““To the writers who have given too much to current affairs for the last few months, I predict, for that part of their work, the most complete oblivion. When I open the newspapers and journals of today, I hear the indifference of the future rolling over them, just as one hears the sound of the sea when one holds certain seashells up to the ear””), I called attention to the paradoxical and cruel survival of an error or a lost wager (p. 612). What interested me most consistently in this article was the transmission at a distance, the teleprogrammatrix, the delays, detours, halts, the play of mediation, of the media, and of the immediacy in the storing and routing of a still readable or audible archive (whence my “telephonic” title and the recurrence, which was real moreover, of telephone calls: that transatlantic cabling [*cablure*] that was both literal and figurative and that my judges paid no attention to or understood not at all).²⁵

What interested me above all was the *structure of this event* in the enormous mass of that which it conditions or in which it participates: first an error of appraisal (Montherlant’s then de Man’s quoting Montherlant on the subject of the disappearance of the newspapers and the indifferent amnesia that awaits them). This error sees itself cruelly belied by history, which takes charge of its own survival, the archived survival of this very error, of this utterance and of this quotation that I again quoted and have just requoted once more here. In a newspaper, someone quotes an error while making in his turn an error on the subject of the nonsurvival of newspapers and assures *in that very way, in determined conditions*, the survival of the newspaper article, of the quotation, and of the requotation of these very errors. As such! It is as if I were assuring

25. See, for example, p. 774. I am crazy about sentences that begin with “Which is to say, of course.” You can bet, five to one, that a lie or a stupidity will quickly follow therefrom, in any case a countertruth, or at least, in the best-case scenario, something that is not self-evident (“of course”). Otherwise, why say “in other words” or “which is to say, of course”? When one teaches, which is to say, of course, when one’s job is reading, can one, without laughing or wincing, begin a sentence with “Which is to say, of course”? Here is the example. Reread the paragraph in which this occurs: “‘Lambrichs repeats: “Exercice du silence.”’ Which is to say, of course (and Derrida’s essay ends on this note), that it is time for us to exercise silence, to put an end to the pernicious journalistic ‘war’ on Paul de Man.” Of course not. But I cannot explain it, of course; one would have to reread everything, begin everything again. See below: “Close, subtle reading” required. Thus, exercise of silence.

the survival of a text by mistakenly saying of it: "I bet this will not survive." I said (temporary) "survival," thinking of proper names, of the literality of the formula, which is in itself just about insignificant, of the singularity of textual events, but I could have said the contrary ("[bio]degradability") while referring to the meaning and to everything that lets itself be anonymously assimilated into the tradition of a more or less common memory, into what is confusedly called "culture." [. . .]

When one speaks of the destruction of an archive, do not limit oneself to the meaning, to the theme, or to consciousness. To be sure, take into account an economy of the unconscious, even if only to exceed it once again. But it is also necessary to take into consideration the "supports," the subjectiles²⁶ of the signifier—the paper, for example, but this example is more and more insufficient. There is this diskette, and so on. Differences here among newspapers, journals, books, perhaps, the modes of storage, of reproduction and of circulation, the "ecosystems" (libraries, bookstores, photocopies, computers, and so on). I am also thinking of everything that is happening today to libraries. Official institutions are calculating the choices to be made in the destruction of nonstorable copies or the salvaging of works whose paper is deteriorating: displacement, restructuring of the archive, and so on. What would have happened if people had been able—yesterday or ten years ago—to consult on a screen the whole "de Man" archive in a minute, from one library to another? In short, telematically? Difference between the war articles and certain of his last seminars whose "voice" we still have, the audio archive that students pass among themselves from one university to another, even in Europe, and certain of which are already *published on the basis of* this recording. I risk annoying any number of people, for example "de Man's successor," if I say once more that I must "postpone" two short treatises that are indispensable here. Possible titles: (1) On the support and the insupportable (keep the ellipsis and the pun in French); (2) On the impossible distinction between public and private, in general and in particular, in a modern problematic of the archive. [. . .]

Repetition, wear [*usure*], and biodegradability: In certain cases, quotation, the rhythmic return of the same wears down the mark; it is boring, provokes disgust, pushes toward oblivion. In other cases, it is the contrary. Intellectual modes are born and die from this repetition. What is the

26. See Derrida, "Forcener le subjectile," in Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *Antonin Artaud: Dessins et portraits* (Paris, 1986), pp. 55–108.—TRANS.

rule? The determination of the rule is part of the process; it does not dominate that process. [. . .]

People will wonder: Since he doesn't believe in the pertinence of this figure, the "biodegradable," when it is applied to discourses, to discursive texts, to culture in general, why, then, does he devote so much space to it? Why is he writing so publicly and at such length on this subject, and so on? Response: Well, for no reason, just to see, to reflect and see what remains of it, perhaps to take the measure of the "(bio)degradability" of this text here, precisely, beyond its meaning, to test its conditions of translation, publication, and conservation. To see what passes and what happens beyond its content, its theme, or the interest of the debate in which it must take part, no doubt a very minor interest. Since this text here (private and public) does not come down to the content of its meaning, I abandon it more or less like an empty form, a mere container, one of those plastic packages that float (for how long?) on one of our beautiful rivers (why do I say "our"?). A minuscule simulacrum of nucleo-literary waste. And then I am also thinking somewhat about diverting certain readers who, concerned about the essential gravity of these questions, might be a little tired of the vain polemics that are turning around it. [. . .]

Brief exchange Thursday night with I. and D. They had just read the "critical responses":

I.—What relentless fury! [*Quel acharnement!* from a verb that formerly had the sense to give the pack the scent of the prey's flesh, *chair*]. Yet one wonders where is the flesh. They don't go into detail, the six of them. Real executioners! I don't know what they do love, but you, well, you're not held in any fondness in their thoughts.

D.—Don't be so sure. As for me, I think deep down they love you. I mean, they don't want to let you go. This is a good opportunity; they want to *stay with you* [*rester avec toi*]. As long as possible. At all costs.

I.—What does that mean, "to stay" [*rester*] and "at all costs"? Who fixes the prices and the deadlines? [After a burst of laughter and while patting me on the shoulder:] At any rate, if they love you, they don't seem to suspect it, they don't have the foggiest idea that they do. . . .

Me—On the contrary, I think two of them suspect it (all it would take is a bit of analysis or attention to rhetoric). Guess which ones. [I then spent a certain amount of time pointing out to them the signs of this. It was necessary to reread, from A to Z.] What is less clear for me, more complicated, is the case of Jonathan Culler.

Saturday, 28 January, 8 A.M.

For the last two minutes, I have been observing attentively the little word “most” in a declaration such as “Derrida ignores most of this history” (p. 771). The point is to produce an effect; guess which one. What does “most” mean? I have not read certain books that, since my article appeared, the author of this verdict has had the conscientiousness to read. I noted the references, thank you. There are still many books, particularly dealing with this history, that neither one nor the other of us has read, and that is regrettable. I have read some others. But that is not the question. In the reference thus made to sources unknown to me, *I found not a single fact, even a factual detail*²⁷ that completes or contradicts in a *pertinent* fashion the description of the historical context that I proposed (I point this out, as well as a certain number of other things, in the two “tables”). So I knew “most of this history.” I took account of it. I was even *the first*, in this academic debate around de Man, to put it forward—and in a more precise and more abundant fashion than anyone since. I would have liked it if someone had at least had the honesty to acknowledge this. I was the first to demand with some insistence that this work of the historian be pursued.

To write next in the same paragraph, with just as much bad faith, “Derrida pays little attention to this disclaimer,” is to make a use of “little”

27. *Mea culpa*. Here I must confess an error, the only one, even though, as you will see, it is not a detail. I formally acknowledge to my “critical respondent” who, tending more toward “hard information” than toward “close, subtle reading,” reproaches me for not having specified the first name of Mr. Goriely (“whose first name is not provided”; pp. 768, 767, 774). In effect, I should not have silenced this first name. I will mention it in the next edition: Georges. Thus, since there might be another Goriely, and since this homonym might also be Jewish, a “former Belgian resistant,” a “university professor,” quoted by *Le Soir*, and since, one never knows, he might not agree with his double, I mean Georges, about de Man (Paul), all confusion would be avoided and this “hard information” would run no risk of being compromised. We would leave the “textual” in order finally to enter into the “practical” (p. 775). There is undoubtedly much I still have to learn from these historians and their exemplary demands. So, *mea culpa*. But for the moment I see nothing else to confess to in the way of “hard information.” And I maintain that there is more of that in my article than in the whole set of those that are set up against me. As for what is said about my lack of interest in “hard information,” this is but one more confusion. I leave here in the state of ellipsis a long discourse on history and what is “hard,” on reading what is “hard” and what resists reading, on what is “hard” to read, on the distinction between “hard” and a certain sort of unreadability (only a certain sort), and on the relations between “hard,” “soft,” and “non(bio)degradable.” On the subject of *mea culpa*, an excellent article by J. Hillis Miller (“‘Reading’ Part of a Paragraph in *Allegories of Reading*,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, pp. 155–70) reminds me of a sentence of de Man’s. It warns in advance all those who demanded that he do his *mea culpa* before dying: “We never lie as much as when we want to do full justice to ourselves, especially in self-accusation” (de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* [New Haven, Conn., 1979], pp. 269–70).

that is as abusive as the use of “most” (p. 771). What is the measure here for “most” and for “little”? The accusation is all the more arrogant in that it is a question of the attention paid to a text *that I myself cite* on the subject of the “*Soir volé*”! What would they have said if I had not quoted it? By calling the reader’s attention to the, finally, decisive role that, by means of crude and childish rhetorical strategies, one wants to assign to words as big or as petty as “most” and “little,” am I abusing what the same author calls “close, subtle, . . . reading” (specifying right away that such “reading” is “quintessentially Derridean”) (p. 767)? One will have quickly figured out that the compliment was meant to be poisoned. But I wonder on the basis of what norms of reading one can ironize in this way. Such “close, subtle reading” is not a good thing then? Should one avoid *teaching*, inculcating, or propagating this vice? Must one recognize it as the property, the originality, or the eccentricity of this or that individual (“close, subtle, indeed quintessentially Derridean reading”)? I underlined “teaching” because I am thinking first of all of the students who read this sort of thing, of the undergraduates who are perhaps more vulnerable than we are (I hope not, all the same, not *all of them*, not all of them more vulnerable than *all* of us) to the consequences of “jokes” as sinister as this one. If they were vulnerable to it, the risk is that they might say to themselves: “Oh, I get it, ‘close, subtle reading’ is not good therefore; it’s perhaps a style, a perversion, maybe even a European fashion; would that by any chance be what people call deconstruction? Yecch!” and so on. So the real question becomes: What is happening in a university (let’s leave aside the personal case of the professor who indulges in this operation and takes such a responsibility) when one of its members can permit herself or himself to be sarcastic on the subject of what she or he calls “close, subtle reading”? When she or he expects to derive a benefit from these sarcasms and be given credit for them by the community? What is the *politics* of this sarcasm? And since we are talking about history, doesn’t this accusation launched against the refinement of reading, against the taste for analysis remind you of anything? You would have a short memory.

But this warning by a professor against “close, subtle reading” sets up even more troubling acts of violence. I refer to the manner of treating witnesses’ testimony. First of all, one means to discredit living witnesses on the pretext that their names are not in some book or other recently consulted in the United States. So what? I quote: “Goriely and Dosogne (neither of whose names I have been able to find in any of the books on the Belgian Resistance I have consulted) provide de Man with little more [“little” once again; how much more, exactly?] than the ‘some of my best friends are Jews’ alibi” (pp. 774–75). Illusionism, confusion, or manipulation? I will not decide among them, but I will first remark that such “alibis” are generally alleged by non-Jews who want to clear themselves of the accusation of anti-Semitism. In the present case, this argument

might perhaps have “a little” worth, just a little, if de Man himself had said “some of my best friends are Jews.” Well, he is dead and never said such a thing. And the suspicion of an alibi becomes ridiculous when it is the friends themselves who take the initiative of the testimony. What is more, to my knowledge, only Goriely (Georges) is Jewish and presents himself as such. The testimonies that I quoted have, moreover, been confirmed, developed, enriched by many others in the same vein. They will have been published by the time this appears.

But there is something still worse and more confused. With a jubilating snicker that doesn't even try to disguise itself anymore, the author of this “response” reports (Georges) Goriely's attacks against de Man. I cite them in turn for more clarity: “Goriely informed the audience that de Man was ‘completely, almost pathologically, dishonest,’ a man to whom ‘swindling, forging, lying were, at least at the time, second nature’” (p. 774 n.8). A cause for exultation. This time renouncing any suspicion, the author puts the two parts of the testimony on the same level. Since this respondent has little patience, as was clearly stated from the first lines, for “close, subtle reading,” there is no more time wasted looking at things more closely or asking a single question. One doesn't wonder whether the very form and the logic of the judgments thus reported might not correspond better to some evening of a score or to some resentment that would have nothing to do with politics or racism. Well, it seems to me on the contrary that, all political matters once again set aside, “portraits” of this type disqualify themselves. What is more, they appear extravagant to those who knew de Man well or from a distance, for several decades, in Belgium before and during the war, and in the United States. On the other hand, I can attest that all those who have met Mr. (Georges) Goriely these last months and have spoken to me of him charged this violence to the account of personal rancor that has nothing to do with what we are discussing here. Because for what we are discussing here, here is what counts: a man, Mr. (Georges) Goriely, so brimming over with hatred as regards de Man (almost as much as those who quote him with gratitude and delight), declares loudly and clearly that the accusations of pro-Nazism and anti-Semitism against the same de Man are absurd and ridiculous. He is only *therefore all the more credible on this point*. In the testimony of such a violent and relentless “prosecutor,” the part favorable to the accused, the public concession seems more convincing than ever. Everything leads one to suppose that if he had been able to condemn de Man on yet another count, Mr. (Georges) Goriely would not have let the chance slip away. Here is someone who had no desire to let de Man off lightly. At any rate, finally, as important as it may be, the recourse to testimony, in particular to this one, was far from being the only argument determining my analysis.

By spewing such venomous insults, did Mr. (Georges) Goriely ever suspect that they were going to turn up intact (still “nonbiodegraded”)

in the mouths of all those who would like to savor them in their turn, chew them over again, or spit them out like so much chewing gum? Of all those who are ready to pass the precious poison from mouth to mouth without wondering whether the motivations and ruminations of this man don't justify some caution? And in fact, I find the same substance again, cited, countersigned, I should say spread out in the conclusion of another one of the six authors. Manifestly, for these people, it is imperative to cite it as often as possible so that its archive does not get lost. But don't count on it; the laws of conservation and wear are more paradoxical than one thinks. Once again, therefore, I cite this quotation in my turn, persuaded on the contrary that the frequent and careful rereading of these words will better allow one to evaluate their credibility, supposing things were not clear at first reading:

Defending de Man's character, Derrida quotes Georges Goriely, a "former Belgian resistant" who "knew de Man well," as saying that de Man was not "ideologically . . . antisemitic." Goriely, who today is professor emeritus of sociology at the Free University of Brussels, subsequently described de Man as "completely, almost pathologically, dishonest," declaring that "swindling, forging, lying were, at least at the time, second nature to him." [P. 802]

I note without further comment that this latter phrase is thus calmly cited and accredited by an expert, an expert specialized in the de Man affair, the now-famous author of "Deconstructing de Man" (*The Nation*, 9 January 1988).

My intention was no more (may I spell this out once more in passing?) to "defend de Man's character" than to "fulfill the responsibilities of friendship." The author of "The Responsibilities of Friendship," formerly the author of "Deconstructing de Man," believes or affects to believe that my article was essentially inspired by friendship. For him, de Man is only and before all else my friend ("his friend") (p. 801). And here he has the audacity, I can't believe my eyes, to give me a lesson in an "honorable way to fulfill the responsibilities of friendship" (p. 797). If I needed someone to teach me honor, and how to distinguish the honorable from the dishonoring, really, I would look for another teacher in the future. Second, concerning friendship and the responsibility for what I write, especially on such subjects, my idea is a little more complicated. Finally, my friendship for Paul de Man did not for a moment forbid me to judge "unpardonable" what seemed to me to be so (it is true that, as I said above, the same preacher had forgotten, as is his wont, to read or to mention this judgment, and the same could be said for so many other analogous remarks). In conditions where it was rather difficult, where it would have been so easy, on the contrary, to join the pack or to be silent, I did indeed reaffirm my friendship (that's the way I am). But that never

prevented me, I will say on the contrary, from proposing each time that it seemed just and honest, and almost on every page, conclusions that have also been found to be “exceedingly severe.” What idea do these people have of friendship? The most suspect one, in my view, the one that implies blind approbation, projection, or identification.

If one wants to authorize oneself to give advice on what is “honorable” or not, it would be better to begin by recognizing publicly one’s own errors or falsifications, especially when they are as numerous and serious as those published under the title “Deconstructing de Man” (*The Nation* 9 January 1988). I was surprised (really? was I so surprised?) to see the author of this article claim to direct criticisms at me without thinking for a moment about first responding to those that I, like so many others, formulated indignantly in note 50 of “Paul de Man’s War.” He turns aside the questions and the focus in the direction of a *New York Times* article. He accuses me of having attacked the “messenger” of “bad news” or those who “reported the news” (p. 801). No, the messenger was first of all me, long before any journalist. And those who “reported the news,” months earlier, *on my proposal*, he forgets this as well, were some colleagues *and myself*. The journalists mentioned by this journalist came after, long after; they have not “reported”; they have simplified and deformed “the news.” And they would have done nothing, known nothing, seen nothing for a long time if *we*, *on my proposal*, had not organized the meeting in Tuscaloosa and taken the decisions that are now public knowledge and that I recalled in my article.²⁸

I cannot enumerate all the signs of such a lack of probity; it would take us too long. I’ll just mention one more. How can a professional “historian” write this: “*Le Soir* in those years was thus a Nazi publication, and the official postwar tribunal—the *Conseil de Guerre*—considered those who published in its pages to be collaborators” (p. 798) while holding it against de Man even as he must specify in a note that, as Jonathan Culler appropriately reminds him, *de Man was never condemned, was not even tried by such a War Council* (see what I say about this above, p. 849)? His note says that “de Man was questioned by the Auditeur Général in 1945 but not formally charged” (p. 798 n.1), thereby insinuating once again that he could have been informally charged, which is dishonest and gratuitous. When one acts like this, how can one inscribe the word “responsibility” in a title (“The Responsibilities of Friendship”)? How can one dare to give advice about what is or is not “honorable” (p. 797)?

28. See Derrida, “Paul de Man’s War,” pp. 633–37. I will take advantage of the present opportunity to make clear that the planning for this colloquium, titled “Our Academic Contract: The Conflict of the Faculties in America,” had begun two years earlier. The three-day program in no way concerned the “de Man affair” about which, with the exception of the colloquium organizer, Richard Rand, and myself, the participants knew nothing until then. It was only at the end of the last session that the discussion took place which I recounted in “Paul de Man’s War.”

The only lesson the author of “Deconstructing de Man” draws from his past “errors,” but it is the least he can do, is to release *in advance* a colleague from any responsibility for the errors that he, the author, did not fail to make, *yet again, right here* and to which he seems willing to get accustomed more quickly than his readers: “Mark Poster provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper; the errors that are present are the responsibility of the author” (p. 797). The only concession one can make to him is that the courageous use of this indicative is a responsible, honest, and prudent signature.

I am going to stop. I have once again been too verbose and too elliptical. Someone, guess who, is perhaps going to reproach *Critical Inquiry* for publishing me too often and at too great a length. I will point out that I myself never asked for anything and would have gladly done without all this extra work whose usefulness is doubtful. I like to think that I have better things to do at the moment. If only to read, for example, much better and newer responses in the volume of that name, or *Reading de Man Reading*, or those texts of de Man recently assembled in *Critical Writings (1953–1978)*, not all of which I knew, far from it.²⁹ As to the length (completely relative) of my responses, is it not justified by the fact that six texts and seven authors were mobilized against my single article? The last time, in *Critical Inquiry*, on the subject of my text against *apartheid*, only two authors were set up against me. At the progressive rhythm of this capitalization, is the present response going to lead *Critical Inquiry* to call on thirty-six or forty-nine “critical respondents”? I give notice right now that I am tired of this scene and that I will not get back into the ring, at least not this ring, even if others still want to be seen there or have their photographs taken there. I have never in my life taken the initiative of a polemic. Three or four times, and *always in response, and always because I was invited to do so*, I have simply tried to confront some manipulations that were too serious to ignore. I have always limited myself in these cases to stakes that are not personal, but philosophical, moral, and political. [. . .]

Of those who might regret the harshness or the high-handedness of certain of my remarks, right here, I ask—isn’t it only fair?—to reread one more time the critical responses. Then they will have a better measure of the aggression—its violence and its mediocrity—that has me as its victim, in five of the six cases. It is not possible for me to respond on that level. And it is my duty not to accept it. One does not always decide by oneself on a high-handed tone.

29. See de Man, *Critical Writings (1953–1978)*, ed. Waters (Minneapolis, 1989).

Saturday, 4 February, 10 P.M.

This paper is “biodegradable.” Note the very extended use of “paper” in English, even in the university (every speech is a “paper”). The word “paper” recalls the name of “journal,” in the sense of newspaper and not of diary. [. . .] Only in English? And the French word *journal*—in a certain way the homonym of the English word, but the latter is what we call a *revue*—works equally well as a translation of *newspaper* and of *diary*. This is naturally only a pretext for asking two questions: (1) Is what resists translation more or less (bio)degradable (see above on the proper name)? (2) Isn't it striking that, according to some extraordinary destiny, Paul de Man's articles (“Wartime Journalism”) have been reproduced in facsimile, the book thereby preserving the appearance of the paper-journal? (I am reminded that those who can/will not read [*ne peuvent pas lire*] had the audacity to accuse us of publishing in the original so as to prevent them from reading it. Alas, they do not need our strategies for that. I am dreaming of other strategies: to *make* them read instead!) How to translate the valuable and economical French expression *papier-journal*? It designates the least noble species of paper—newsprint. It is thought that, since it lends itself to all uses, it is better suited than any other to biodegradation.

Here, now, the word “biodegradable” is waste matter [*un déchet*]. Already partly biodegraded. Will I have used it up enough? [. . .]

An “internal” reading will always be insufficient. And moreover impossible. Question of context, as everyone knows, there is nothing but context, and therefore: there is no outside-the-text [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (used-up formula, yet unusable out of context, a formula that, at once used up and unusable, might appear to be impossible to wear out [*inusable*]. I don't believe that in the least, but the time involved is difficult to calculate). [. . .]

For example, what can be the future destiny of a document that would now give one to read, like right here, this sole phrase: “Forget it, drop it, *all of this is biodegradable*”?