

# The Paul de Man Affair: The Presence of the Past

Gregory Jones-Katz<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The surprising discovery in 1987 that deceased deconstructionist Paul de Man authored pro-Nazi articles during his youth in his native Belgium ignited an intellectual firestorm. This paper examines one aspect of that historical event: the debate between empiricists and deconstructionists over de Man's World War II writings. I believe that the controversy resulted from two distinctly different understandings of history, which produced incommensurable interpretations of de Man's wartime writings. These two meta-historical positions were: (1) Derrida's view of history as the deconstruction of presence and (2) empiricists' view of history as the assignation of factual meaning to the past. My paper explicates the differences between these two views of history and how empiricists' and Derrida's understandings of history determined their interpretations of de Man's texts. I also seek to demonstrate that both Derrida's and empiricists' views of history insufficiently deal with the influence of the past's presence. I thus introduce a third meta-historical view of history: (3) history as the presence of the past. I contend that the past's presence was the actual reason for Derrida's and empiricists' differences. It was de Man's notoriously anti-Semitic "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle (The Jews in Present-day Literature)," that illustrates Derrida's inability to speak to the past's presence. I emphasize the key points of Derrida's analysis where, despite his view of history as deconstruction, presence produces enduring emotions. On the other hand, due to their understanding of history, empiricists were unaware that the past's presence was the actual source of their denunciations of Derrida and the propulsion behind their view of history.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Jones-Katz (gregoryjoneskatz@gmail.com) received his B.A. in European History from Wheaton College and his M.A. in European Intellectual History from the University of Maine. He teaches at Eastern Maine Community College and Husson University. His interests include metahistory and the history of postmodern thought. He is currently at work on his next article, which addresses the relationship between Paul de Man's wartime experience and his postwar practice. Gregory lives with his family in Bangor, Maine.

Origin is the goal.—Karl Krauss, *Worte in Versen I*

The 1980s was the age of post-modern theory in the American Academy and deconstruction was the paradigmatic theory of that time.<sup>2</sup> Deconstruction achieved extraordinary prestige and institutional power in the French and comparative literature departments of Yale University in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Though Jacques Derrida was considered deconstruction's originator, his friend and colleague Paul de Man became known as its most prominent teacher and purest practitioner.<sup>4</sup> For de Man, the meaning of a written text is reducible to its rhetoric. Rhetoric, he argued, permits two irreconcilable, reciprocally self-destructive points of view in a text. This places an intractable impediment in the way of any reading. He also rejected "intentionalism"<sup>5</sup> and dismissed historians' ability to establish a stable extra-textual reference point. For him, these positions ensured the irreconcilability between text, history, and present awareness.<sup>6</sup> Justifiably, de Man garnered the reputation as a theorist for whom rhetorical reading exclusively determines a text's meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Accompanying de Man's growing authority was the perception that deconstruction was a set of reading procedures intent on annihilating the notion of

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<sup>2</sup> François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 107-128.

<sup>3</sup> The "Yale School" of deconstruction was the colloquial name for an influential group of literary critics, theorists, and philosophers of literature influenced by Derrida. This group was often considered to have included Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom.

<sup>4</sup> It remains an open question whether de Man's version of deconstruction "tamed" Derrida's approach or refined it. See Wlad Godzich, "The Domestication of Derrida," in *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*, ed. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 39; Jeffrey T. Nealon, "The Discipline of Deconstruction," *PMLA* 107, no. 5 (1992): 1266-79; Michael Sprinker, "Deconstruction in America," *MLN* 101, no. 5 (1986): 1226-1242.

<sup>5</sup> The "intentionalist fallacy" refers to the mistake of using the author's pre-textual intentions or extra-textual context as the sole evidence for establishment of a text's meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Paul de Man, "Reading and History," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 54-72.

<sup>7</sup> For several of de Man's notorious statements about language and history, see de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 35, 165, 197, and 232.

determinate meaning and objective truth.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, at the time of his death in 1983, de Man was respected by a generation of literary scholars and eulogized by some of the most famous academics in America.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, in 1985, the journal *Yale French Studies* dedicated an entire issue to his pedagogical influence.<sup>10</sup>

De Man's legacy would become unforeseeably complex. On December 1, 1987, the *New York Times* reported the discovery of collaborationist, pro-Nazi writings dating from de Man's early literary career in Belgium.<sup>11</sup> Researcher Ortwin de Graef revealed that de Man wrote 169 articles, mostly reviews of books, concerts, and conferences, for the popular Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*. In his articles, de Man endorsed the German occupation of Belgium and expressed pro-Nazi opinions. In particular, de Man's article "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle (The Jews in Present-day Literature)," flagrantly anti-Semitic, devastated his friends and colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

Following the recent controversy over philosopher Martin Heidegger's affiliation with the Nazi regime, de Graef's discovery of de Man's past ignited an intellectual tinderbox.<sup>13</sup> Many questioned de Man's thirty-five years of silence and the relationship between his wartime experience and postwar practice. Others suggested that the relativism of deconstruction originated from de Man's collaboration.<sup>14</sup> While de

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1980s, deconstruction, in general, and de Man's work, in particular, was frequently attacked by left-wing and right-wing critics alike for its "anti-historical" bias. See Cusset, *French Theory*, pp. 166-192.

<sup>9</sup> "Yale Still Feeling Loss of Revered Professor," *The New York Times*, December 31, 1983 (New York edition).

<sup>10</sup> "The Lesson of Paul de Man," ed. Peter Brooks, Shoshana Felman, and J. Hillis Miller, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985).

<sup>11</sup> "Yale Scholar Wrote for Pro-Nazi Newspaper," *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1987, (New York edition). See Richard Bernstein, "The de Man Affair; Critics Attempt to Interpret a Colleague's Disturbing Past," *The New York Times*, July, 7, 1988 (New York edition).

<sup>12</sup> De Man also wrote for the nationalist publication *Het Vlaamsche Land*. For facsimiles of these articles, see Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943 by Paul de Man* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Jon Wiener, "Deconstructing de Man," *The Nation*, January 9, 1988, 22; "Debating de Man," *The Nation*, February 13, 1989; David Lehman, "Deconstructing de Man's Life," *Newsweek*, Feb. 15, 1988; *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 13, 1988; Frank Shirmacher, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Feb 10, 24, 1988; Jeffrey Hart, "The Furor Over Paul de Man," *National Review*, Dec 9, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> One critic declared that "deconstruction is anti-historical...it encourages skepticism about almost anything in the realm of human experience. That's one of the things I hold against it." Jeffrey Mehlman claimed that there are "grounds for viewing the whole of deconstruction as a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration in France during World War II." An anonymous professor stated that deconstruction was "the thousand year Reich that lasted 12 years." Quoted in David Lehman, "Deconstructing de Man's Life." The article's author also

Man's supporters attempted to come to terms with his past, in the winter of 1987, the journal *Critical Inquiry* offered Jacques Derrida the opportunity to address de Man's wartime writings. Derrida submitted "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," published in spring, 1988.<sup>15</sup> Derrida argued that what at first appears to be de Man's endorsement of Nazi ideology in fact masks subversive critiques of the cultural consequences of the German occupation. Derrida's interpretations set in motion an entire machinery of accusations and counter-accusations. For many critics, de Man's wartime texts amounted to nothing less than Nazi propaganda, and Derrida's willful ignorance of their promotion of the German occupation demonstrated deconstruction's ethical relativity and anti-historical bias.

This paper seeks to contribute to American Intellectual History and the history of post-modernism, of which too little has been written. I believe that the controversy of the "de Man Affair" resulted from two distinctly different understandings of history, which produced incommensurable interpretations of de Man's wartime writings. These two meta-historical positions were: (1) Derrida's view of history as the deconstruction of presence and (2) empiricists' view of history as the assignation of factual meaning to the past. My paper explicates the difference between these two positions and demonstrates that both Derrida's and empiricists' views of history insufficiently deal with the influence of the past's presence. I thus introduce a third meta-historical (3) view of history: history as the presence of the past. I aim to show that the past's presence was the source of Derrida's and empiricists' differences. Although Derrida's view of history contributes to the understanding of the historicity of meaning, deconstruction can only partially acknowledge and then attenuate the past's presence. On the other hand, empiricists denounced Derrida's interpretations and applied their view of history, unaware of the influence of the past's presence. Derrida and empiricists remained blind to each other's understandings of history. My hope is that this paper will contribute to a new understanding of the nature of history and will point to a way beyond empiricists' theoretical naivety about the construction of meaning and expose the limits of understanding history as deconstruction.

## **History as the Presence of the Past**

This section examines my view of history as the presence of the past. Here, presence is the lack of conscious reflection; presence happens prior to the assignation of meaning and occurs without signs. In Saussurian linguistics, for instance, each sign is divided

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wrote an acerbic book on the affair: *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of the Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 14(2) [1988]: 590-652.

into a “signifier” whose telos is a “signified.” Each signified is an source, or origin in the world.<sup>16</sup> Presence can be said to occur when there is no word (thought) about a signified (world). This absence of meaning indicates the contact between a human being and the things of the world. This immediate influence on conscious thought viscerally moves the body and evokes emotions. Presence experientially connects one to reality. Because presence is outside thought, however, its influence is indirect, uncontrollable and only articulated after its occurrence.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the greater presence’s impact on the body and conscious thought, the more sustained the desire to produce meaning.

Unlike historical reporting that constructs a static account of the past, whereby “[h]istory [is] the...construction whose site is...homogenous, empty time,” my view of history as the presence of the past recognizes the effects of presence before, during, and after the assignation of meaning. To view history as the past's presence is to seize “the past [as it] flits by,”<sup>18</sup> allowing “time [to be] filled full by now-time,” and investigate what continues to happen exterior to or on the borders of conscious thought.<sup>19</sup> Rather than exclusively reflecting on the meaning of the past, acknowledging presence is to experience its *being there*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> My ideas on presence and the past are influenced by F.R. Ankersmit, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and Eelco Runia. See F.R. Ankersmit, “‘Presence’ and Myth,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006); Gumbrecht, “Presence Achieved in Language (With Special Attention Given to the Presence of the Past),” *History and Theory* 45 (2006); *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Eelco Runia, “Presence,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006); “Spots of Time,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006). Although my phrase “presence of the past” may resemble Michel Foucault’s “History of the Present,” what we each mean by these terms is substantially different. Whereas Foucault focuses on how our “historical awareness of our present circumstance[s]” affects what and how we know, I am concerned with how the past as a presence unexpectedly influences the present.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 462-463.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 390-395.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* (1935-6), trans. W.B. Barton, Jr and Vera Deutsch (South Bend, Indiana: Regenery/Gateway, 1967), p. 43.

## History as Deconstruction

Derrida understands history as the deconstruction of presence.<sup>21</sup> He argues that presence is an illusion created by the bias of Western metaphysics which uncritically privileges present over absent meaning. Derrida's phrase "there is nothing outside the text" denotes his belief that there is no meaning outside conscious thought, itself always already constructing meaning that is deferred and different.<sup>22</sup> For Derrida, meaning is never fully present, but is the product of each word's deferred difference from other words. Deconstruction is the reflection on the chimera of presence. According to Derrida, there is no unitary source or origin of meaning. Deconstruction is the tireless description of how non-presence or absence problematizes any appeal to a completely conscious experience. This is history as deconstruction.<sup>23</sup>

Derrida's view of history, however, insufficiently addresses presence. Derrida cannot speak to the presence exterior to or on the borders of conscious thought because deconstruction's threshold does not extend beyond meaning. Although Derrida can identify and subsequently "make sense" of presence, he is unable to satisfactorily address the direct experience of a source or origin in the world. History as deconstruction cannot speak to the impact presence has on conscious thought. Instead, by ascribing meaning and emphasizing the absent in conscious experience, history as deconstruction attenuates the past's presence.

### The Proximity of the Past: Derrida's First Reading of Paul de Man's Wartime Writings

I now turn to a study of Derrida's deconstruction of de Man's wartime writings. Derrida always maintained that "there is nothing outside the text." However, his initial response to reading de Man's articles suggests that is not the case. Prior to deconstructing de Man's texts, there was a moment when Derrida recognized the

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<sup>21</sup> For Derrida's definition of presence, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> In original French, Derrida's statement reads: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte." This has variously been translated as "There is no 'outside-the-text'" or "There is no outside text." In other words, "there is no meaning outside conscious or present thought, itself always already constructing meaning that is deferred and different." See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> For Derrida's view of history and some of his reflections on what he believes are the "metaphysical" connotations of the word "history," see Derrida, "Positions," *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 36, 57, 15-16, 104, n.31; "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 8.

articles' origin "outside the text." His proximity to this past had a profound impact on his conscious thought. It is clear from his first reading that the presence of the past aroused his sentiments and influenced his body. He writes:

[T]he *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 or of the milieu that, in Belgium, had accepted the defeat and, if not state and governmental collaboration as in France, then at least the perspective of a European unity under German hegemony. A rigorous description of the conditions in which is inscribed what I am *massively* calling here the *massive* effect would suppose taking into account the extraordinary tangle of the political, religious, and linguistic history of Belgium...<sup>24</sup>

Derrida's use of the spatial metaphors "massive," "massively" "dominant," and "preponderant" addresses how de Man's wartime writings overwhelmingly and, as he writes, "immediate[ly]" point to a unitary origin: the terrain of the German occupation of Belgium. The proximity of this past caused Derrida to link present understanding to personal memories. "[B]y my situation and by training," Derrida writes, "I...learned from childhood to detect [Nazism] easily." Derrida explains that his closeness to Nazism does not exclusively reside in his past. He writes, "A strange coincidence: it so happens, on top of it all, that these themes are the subject of seminars I have been giving for four years as well as of my last book, on Heidegger and Nazism."<sup>25</sup> The past's coming to presence provokes Derrida to recognize that de Man's texts "manifest...an alliance with what has always been for me the very worst." Derrida is able to perceive de Man's intentions because they touch his past and present. In fact, Derrida discloses that this past's closeness produces corporeal repercussions. He writes of the "painful surprise" and the "consternation [after reading de Man's texts]" which "did not come all at once [and]...left [him]...with an uneasy feeling and an aftertaste." "My feelings," Derrida writes, "were...that of a wound, a stupor, and a sadness that I want neither to dissimulate nor exhibit...[and which] have not altogether gone away since, even if they are joined now by others." Derrida's emotions resulted from his abrupt recognition of the origin of de Man's wartime writings and their continued resonance. His response is to the landscape of an occupied Europe and de Man's intentional use of Nazi ideology.<sup>26</sup> The source of his sentiments is in the past and "outside the text."

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida, "Like the Sound," p. 607.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, "Like the Sound," pp. 601, 600.

<sup>26</sup> Gumbrecht argues that literature can produce presence through epiphany. See Gumbrecht, "Presence Achieved in Language," p. 322.

## **Distancing the Past's Presence: Derrida's Second Reading of Paul de Man's Wartime Writings**

For Derrida, to not deconstruct the unitary origin of de Man's writings is to halt history.<sup>27</sup> To not construct meaning of this presence "a-historically" privileges what is so suddenly and shockingly present in de Man's texts. Therefore, because he views history as deconstruction, Derrida is compelled to describe the non-presence or absence within conscious experience. For instance, Derrida believes that there is no fixed boundary between the extra-textual and the intra-textual.<sup>28</sup> He demands that "[t]he diachronic over-determination of context" requires one "proceed carefully in the analysis of these texts." One ought, Derrida argues, to take "into account the mobility of a situation that...must have made things [for de Man] evolve quickly from one day to the next." Derrida claims that, because de Man's interpretation of his social context was interminably deferred and historically evolving, he was unable to flawlessly inscribe Nazism into his journalism. Regardless of what initially appears to be de Man's intention, de Man, Derrida writes, "had to draw on a fund of coded and stereotyped arguments" which contained "structural impossibilit[ies] that prevented [his]...argument[s]...coherence."<sup>29</sup> Thus, despite the suggestion that de Man completely understood his context and perfectly inscribed Nazi ideology into his articles, Derrida writes:

[D]e Man's discourse is constantly split, disjointed, engaged in incessant conflicts. Whether in a calculated or a forced fashion, and no doubt beyond this distinction between calculation and passivity, all the propositions carry within themselves a counter-proposition: sometimes virtual, sometimes very explicit, always readable, this counterproposition signals what I will call...a *double edge* and a *double bind*, the singular artifact of a blade and a knot.<sup>30</sup>

For Derrida, the "a-historical" privileging of what is immediately present in de Man's texts occludes contradictory meanings. For him, in order to produce meaning of

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida writes, "It is precisely in...[the] place [of the experience and experiment of the undecidable]...that all decisions...must be taken, and that responsibilities *are taken*." According to Derrida, a responsible interpretation of de Man's texts requires the production of meaning through deconstruction. See Derrida, "Like the Sound," p. 639.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Bennett, "Texts in History," in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Benington and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, "Like the Sound," pp. 599-600.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, "Like the Sound," p. 607.

presence, one must construct meanings previously thought absent. The writing of these concealed meanings is only possible by transforming presence into an object for dissection.<sup>31</sup> Derrida thus proposes that de Man's texts contain veiled protests against the consequences of German occupation for European cultural life. Nevertheless, because Derrida views deconstruction as his undeniable participation in history, his second reading insufficiently recognizes the unitary origin which he clearly experienced in his first reading and to which he responds. As we will see, this presence "outside the text" instigates empiricists' angry retorts and lingers on the borders of Derrida's conscious thought, even after his deconstruction.

### **Derrida's Deconstruction of de Man's "Les Juifs"**

Derrida applies the aforementioned model to several examples, which correspond to the major themes of de Man's wartime articles.<sup>32</sup> The longest and most tortured of Derrida's deconstructions centers on de Man's "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle."<sup>33</sup> Cited by many as indisputable evidence of de Man's Nazi sympathies, "Les Juifs" accompanied a section in *Le Soir* devoted to the "cultural aspects" of the "Jewish question." "Les Juifs" critiques "vulgar anti-Semitism," a "vulgar" ideology that perceives the whole of inter-war European literature as "degenerate." The article describes the features of what "are degenerate and decadent, because *enjuivés* ('enjewished') cultural phenomena, speaks of what characterizes "an 'enjuivé' novel," and recounts the "important role [Jews have]...played...[in]...the phony and disordered existence of Europe since 1920." In addition to offering a portrait of the "Jewish spirit" as "cold, detached" and "cerebral," "Les Juifs" argues that the Jews themselves are guilty of having disseminated the myth that there has been a "Jewish takeover...to which the modern novel and modern poetry are nothing but a kind of monstrous outgrowth of the world war." Nevertheless, the article asserts, "our civilization" remains healthy and uncontaminated by resisting "the Semitic infiltration of all aspects of European life." According to de Man, the "sanctum" of twentieth-century modern literature remains autonomous and is healthy in relation to the impure world of politics and history. Thus, "Les Juifs" concludes, sending the Jews to a colony "isolated from

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<sup>31</sup> Derrida characterizes the historical contest between present and absent meaning in de Man's wartime writings as a "war [that is] both infinite and without boundaries [and]...consists...of multiple fronts and frontiers. A finite strategy can never formalize them totally, still less master them." See Derrida, "Like the Sound," p. 603.

<sup>32</sup> These topics include "the destiny of the West, Europe and its outside, the nation, democracy and the individual." See Derrida, "Like the Sound," p. 607.

<sup>33</sup> De Man, "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle," *Le Soir* 55, no 4, 4 March 1941. See Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan, eds., *Wartime Journalism*.

Europe” as a “solution to the Jewish problem” would lack any “deplorable consequences for literature.”<sup>34</sup>

Derrida initially recognized the Nazism in “Les Juifs” and the support this article lent to the German occupation. Derrida writes, “*On the one hand...* Whatever may be the complications of this text, whatever may be going on in the mind of [de Man]..., [the] *dominant* context in which they were read in 1941 [produced] the *dominant* effect [whose]...conclusions went in the sense and the direction of the worst.”<sup>35</sup> As in his preliminary model, Derrida’s use of the word “dominant” signals his proximity to this menacing source “outside the text.” It also demonstrates Derrida’s acknowledgment of Nazi ideology, whose rhetoric, he writes, ranges from a “racique” to praise for the “‘vitality’ of...European literature...[and a] critique of Judaism...”<sup>36</sup> Derrida understands the legitimization “Les Juifs” lent to the Nazis’ propaganda. “The text” and the horrifying past’s presence “outside the text” strike and result in a series of emotions. Derrida writes:

Nothing in what I am about to say, analyzing the article as closely as possible, will heal over the wound I right away felt when, my breath taken away, I perceived in it what the newspapers have most frequently singled out as recognized anti-Semitism, an anti-Semitism more serious than ever in such a situation, an anti-Semitism that would have come close to urging exclusions, even the most sinister deportations...[I]s not what we have here the most unquestionable manifestation of an anti-Semitism as violent as it is stereotyped?<sup>37</sup>

Derrida acknowledges that no amount of meaning can attenuate the anti-Semitism in “Les Juifs.” His use of words such as “right away,” “serious,” and “unquestionable manifestation” denotes his recognition of the connection between the present meaning of “Les Juifs” and the reality of the past. This origin, which Derrida links to the “*unpardonable* violence and confusion of these sentences,” is what “wounds” and takes his “breath away.” Derrida’s sentiments result from the bursting forth of meaning from its unitary origin. In his first reading, therefore, Derrida acknowledges the past’s presence and the conformity of de Man’s writing to its original context. His contact with and immersion in this disturbing landscape and its inextricable network of meanings generates a frisson of fear and dismay. This origin is so close, in fact, that it not only effects Derrida’s body but also compels him to judge de Man. Derrida declares

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” pp. 622-23. Quotes translated and cited by Derrida.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 623.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 622.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 622.

that nothing “could possibly attenuate the fault” de Man deserves for authorship of “Les Juifs.”<sup>38</sup>

Because Derrida understands history as deconstruction, however, he cannot sanction this presence. Less than one page after describing how the past’s presence “deep[ly] wound[s],” Derrida asks: “Will I dare to say ‘*on the other hand*’ in the face of these sentences?” “Yes,” Derrida writes, “one must have the courage to answer injustice with justice.” For Derrida, “injustice” is the presence of the German occupation, the Nazis’ anti-Semitism, and de Man’s complicity. “Justice” is the construction of meaning in opposition to these meanings. For Derrida, responding to “injustice” with “justice” is to participate in history. It is to “make sense” of what is terrifyingly present. Derrida recognizes the difficulty in assigning significance beyond this extraordinary “injustice.” He admits that the construction of meaning opposed to what is present requires “a ‘certain coldness’ [of that]...work of lucid analysis [de Man]...attributes... *in this very text*, to the Jews.” “[T]hese traits,” Derrida writes, “are rules of intellectual responsibility.”<sup>39</sup> If his first reading openly acknowledges a unitary origin of de Man’s “Les Juifs,” his second halts this eruption and, by making this presence a tangible object for analysis, reveals absent meanings. “Although one has to condemn these sentences,” Derrida writes, “...one ought not do it without examining everything that remains readable in a text one can judge to be disastrous.”<sup>40</sup>

In contrast to Derrida’s response in his first reading, Derrida’s deconstruction of the past’s presence does not come from “outside the text” but from within “Les Juifs.” Derrida writes, “[the] *whole* article is [indeed] organized as an indictment of ‘vulgar anti-Semitism,’...[that is] the primary, declared, and underscored intention.”<sup>41</sup> However, he maintains, there is a subversive argument “in the text” concealed by what is immediately thought present. On the fringes of consciousness, occluded by the “a-historical” acceptance of the past’s presence are de Man’s protests against the German occupation. Thus, what Derrida initially perceived as the consonance between “Les Juifs” and the surrounding context, he interprets in his second reading as dissidence. For Derrida, de Man’s subversive missives are not located “outside the text,” but are always already contained within.<sup>42</sup> To expose these significances is to partake in history as deconstruction.

Derrida’s deconstruction pivots on “Les Juifs”’ first two words: “vulgar anti-Semitism.” As in his first reading, he notes that de Man’s condemnation of “vulgar anti-Semitism” is the article’s thesis. In his second interpretation, however, Derrida suggests

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<sup>38</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 623.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 623. This line is particularly moving when we recall that Jacques Derrida was himself Jewish.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 623.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” pp. 623-624.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Wolin, “Deconstruction at Auschwitz: Heidegger, de Man, and the New Revisionism,” *South Central Review* 11, no. 1 (1994): 6-7.

that this phrase may be syntactically modified to “the vulgarity of anti-Semitism.”<sup>43</sup> Derrida admits that the term’s ambiguity “may leave one to understand that [‘Les Juifs’ endorses a] distinguished [or genteel] anti-Semitism in whose name the vulgar variety is putdown.” The phrase may signal an anti-Semitic aristocraticism. But, Derrida insists, de Man never endorses a “genteel anti-Semitism, [and] though one may condemn his silence,” his condemnation of “‘vulgar anti-Semitism,’ especially if one makes no mention of the other kind, is to condemn anti-Semitism itself *inasmuch as* it is vulgar, always and essentially vulgar.” In his second reading, Derrida discounts the possibility that “Les Juifs” endorses a refined anti-Semitism. Instead, Derrida argues, history as the deconstruction of presence reveals de Man’s subversive thesis which courageously “scoff[s] at or mock[s] the vulgarity of anti-Semitism.”

Having established the past’s presence as an object for analysis, Derrida draws meanings from “Les Juifs” to oppose this upsetting presence. Working with significance from “inside the text,” Derrida’s alteration of “vulgar anti-Semitism” into a general condemnation of the vulgarity of anti-Semitism allows him to claim that “Les Juifs” denounces the vulgarity of its neighboring *Le Soir* articles. Derrida writes: “[D]e Man’s article is necessarily contaminated by the forms of vulgar anti-Semitism that frame it, [but] *these coincide in a literal fashion, in their vocabulary and logic, with the very thing that de Man accuses.*” Although Derrida indirectly concedes that the past’s presence remains, he maintains that de Man’s condemnation of the vulgarity of anti-Semitism “points [“outside the text”] to the ‘myth,’...the ‘errors,’ the ‘lapidary judgments,’ and the ‘very widespread belief’” among vulgar anti-Semites that Jews are responsible for corrupting modern cultural phenomena.<sup>44</sup> Derrida layers these oppositional meanings on top of the presence of the past, obscuring his initial intuition.

Derrida’s inability to speak to the past’s presence is clearest in his analysis of the final paragraph of “Les Juifs.” This paragraph begins with the contention that modern European literature remains uncontaminated by the disorder of the 1920s and ends with the statement that “a solution of the Jewish problem that would aim at the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe” would barely affect Western literature.<sup>45</sup> In his first reading, Derrida acknowledges that this paragraph conforms to its surrounding context and that its language presents the most horrible plans of the Nazis: the Final Solution. Once more, deconstruction requires Derrida to generate meanings previously unthinkable. Again, Derrida is aware that the attribution of significance to this unquestionably anti-Semitic paragraph diminishes its influence, itself the result of the past’s proximity. He writes: “[w]ithout wanting to attenuate the

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 625. Because several of de Man’s other writings from the period as well as a piece by his influential uncle Henrik de Man condemn the “vulgarity” of contemporary life, Derrida suggests that his modification of this phrase is sound. See Derrida, “Like the Sound,” pp. 626, 627, n. 42.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” pp. 625-626.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 631.

violence of this paragraph that for me remains disastrous, let us remark....”<sup>46</sup> Regardless of his initial recognition of the article’s unitary origin, Derrida now suggests that de Man’s conclusion makes covert anti-conformist attacks on the Nazis’ “vulgar” anti-Semitism. Whether we are aware of it or not, Derrida claims, these messages “leave trace[s] in the consciousness or unconscious of the reader.” Here is the conclusion to “Les Juifs”; italicized is what Derrida reads as de Man’s anti-conformism:

Therefore, one may see that to consider present-day literature as an isolated phenomenon created by the particular mentality of the 20s is absurd. Likewise, the Jews cannot claim to have been its creators, nor even to have exercised a preponderant influence over its development. On any close examination, this influence appears even to have extraordinarily little importance since one might have expected that, *given the specific characteristic of the Jewish spirit*, the latter would have played a more brilliant role in this artistic production. *Their cerebralness, their capacity to assimilate doctrines while keeping a certain coldness in the face of them, seemed to be very precious qualities for the work of lucid analysis that the novel demands.* But in spite of that, Jewish writers have always remained in the second rank and...are not among the most important figures...What is more,...a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, deplorable consequences. The latter would lose, in all, a few personalities of mediocre value and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its great evolutive laws.<sup>47</sup>

As in his first reading, Derrida notes that de Man denounces as “absurd” the anti-Semitic proposition that modern literature is “enjewished.” But, Derrida argues, because “Les Juifs” is principally concerned with literature and because no one could publicly dispute de Man’s admiration for the Jews in the middle of his conclusion, de Man’s praise is “a classical technique of contraband” which amounts to courageous criticism of the Nazis.<sup>48</sup>

Derrida reaches the conclusion’s last two sentences about a solution to “the Jewish problem.” Yet again, prior to historically assigning meaning, Derrida addresses the past’s frightening presence. As earlier, his proximity causes a series of emotions yet does not halt what he considers the movement of history. Derrida writes: [t]hrough the indelible wound...[one] must still analyze and seek to understand....<sup>49</sup> This injury, he continues, “is the most unbearable wound” that will never “heal.” The “indelible

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<sup>46</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 631.

<sup>47</sup> De Man, “Les Juifs.” Quote translated and cited by Derrida. See Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 631.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” pp. 629-30.

<sup>49</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 632.

wound” is Derrida’s continuing contact “through the text” with de Man’s complicity with the German occupation and the Nazis’ Final Solution. It is important to note Derrida’s choice of the term “indelible wound” given his view of history. He does not, for example, use the term scar, which is a mark of the past. “Indelible wound” communicates an ever-open, never healing presence. Because the presence of the past remains, the violence of de Man’s writings endures. This is the irreducible reality that the deconstruction of presence can initially acknowledge and reflect on but is never able to sufficiently voice.

While for Derrida “Like the Sound...” ensures a place for a dissenting voice always already different and deferred, the past’s presence “outside the text” underpins and remains the origin of his production of meaning. Derrida’s use of the deconstructive strategy on these passages is more a compulsion against the past’s presence than a reasonable response to this text’s source. Although deconstruction certainly has its place, the reader intuitively understands this origin and is drawn to Derrida’s first reading. The voice of deconstruction may be a permanent voice of abstention, but it unsatisfactorily confronts the historical reality exterior to or on the borders of “the text.” Derrida’s deconstruction remains blind to the past’s presence. Despite Derrida’s attributing of meaning, which pushes the past’s presence away by diffusing what is shockingly present, the presence of the past lingers.

## **Empiricist History: History as the Past in a “Time-Less” Present**

The following examines empiricist critics’ view of history in “the de Man Affair.” Unlike Derrida, for empiricists, history is a static, anterior reality and thus prior to reflection, language, or experience of the reader. As well-known empiricist Leopold von Ranke writes, the historian’s task is “not the duty to judge the past, nor to instruct one’s contemporaries with an eye to the future, but rather merely to show how it actually was [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].” Empiricists like Ranke argue that history is determinable through exhaustive archival research and philological criticism of authoritative texts. By drawing from and contributing to an ever-increasing body of knowledge, the historian is able to dispassionately interpret forces of agency (the intentionality of actors) and structure (pre-existing institutional factors) exterior to the printed work.<sup>50</sup> This is possible, empiricists argue, because the historian can uphold the subject-object duality between historian (subject) and past (object) by consciously standing apart from present

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<sup>50</sup> Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 4, 79, 101.

time.<sup>51</sup> This allows for construction of a relatively “time-less” report into which the text may be put back into.<sup>52</sup>

## Empiricists’ Interpretation of de Man’s Wartime Writings

In the “Affair,” empiricists attempted to reconstruct the historical context in which de Man wrote his wartime writings. They pointed to the following: by late May, 1940, Belgium was under German control and *Le Soir* was transformed into the Nazi’s primary propaganda vehicle.<sup>53</sup> After its reemergence in late October, the paper was referred to in local parlance as *Le Soir volé* [The Stolen Evening].” Although de Man was never formally charged with collaboration,<sup>54</sup> “only a visitor from another planet” could have not recognized “that the paper’s publication was subject to the censorship of the German military administration.”<sup>55</sup> For empiricists, history verifies that the majority of Belgians perceived the gravity of collaboration. Unlike many of his fellow Belgians, however, de Man neither went underground nor into exile. He chose collaboration.

After establishing this social context, empiricist employed their view of history to determine the intention behind and the reception of de Man’s articles. Generally speaking, for empiricists, de Man’s texts amount to nothing less than Nazi propaganda.<sup>56</sup> “There is no doubt,” one critic brusquely declared, “that de Man was a gung-ho collaborator.”<sup>57</sup> Although several critics admitted that de Man’s articles, as Derrida contends, were far from the work of a die-hard National Socialist,<sup>58</sup> with their visions and hopes of a revitalized post-war European de Man’s *Le Soir* writings’ rightist

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<sup>51</sup> M. H. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 426.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462.

<sup>53</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Response to Jacques Derrida,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989): 767-771, 769 n. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Wiener, “The Responsibilities of Friendship: Jacques Derrida on Paul de Man’s Collaboration,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989): 798 n. 1. See Jonathan Culler, letter to Wiener, 12 Aug. 1988.

<sup>55</sup> John Brenkman, Jules David Law, “Resetting the Agenda,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989): 806-807.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Marie Apostolidès, “On Paul de Man’s War,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989): 766; W. Wolfgang Holdheim, “Jacques Derrida’s Apologia,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989): 787.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman, “Perspectives: on de Man and *Le Soir*,” in Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, introduction to *Responses: On Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 334-335.

<sup>58</sup> Holdheim, “Jacques Derrida’s Apologia,” p. 787.

rhetoric were a perfect fit for the Nazis' designs.<sup>59</sup> De Man may not have been an unwavering Nazi, but he was extremely valuable for their purposes.

Derrida's deconstruction of "Les Juifs" garnered the most scrutiny. Unlike Derrida's compulsion to deconstruct presence, empiricists placed de Man's text back in its original environment. They argued that, although de Man's criticism of vulgar anti-Semitism does not precisely mirror the anti-Semitism of either an older religious or biological racism, his denunciation of vulgar anti-Semitism stands for a type of traditional European cultural anti-Semitism.<sup>60</sup> De Man's intellectual fascism, though different from that of the Nazis but no less fascist, reveals his willingness to live with anti-Semitism so long as it would leave literature alone. Furthermore, critics argued, de Man's recommendation of "the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe" corresponds to the Nazi's "Madagascar solution" of the 1930s, whereby the Nazis envisioned a resettlement of Jews on the African island as a solution to "the Jewish problem." This plan was eventually replaced by the "Final Solution." Thus, critics argued, de Man was familiar with this "solution," and when he wrote about a "solution to the Jewish problem" in 1941, he was not "denouncing" anti-Semitism but endorsing it.<sup>61</sup> De Man's anti-Semitism thus remains within the spectrum of other forms of anti-Semitism and contributed to the general climate of anti-Semitic "solutions" to the "Jewish problem."<sup>62</sup>

## The Empiricist Response to the Presence of the Past

From Derrida's perspective, his interpretations in "Like the Sound..." constituted his participation in history. For many critics, however, Derrida demonstrated what happens when linguistic ingenuity is used not in the service of truth, but to allow someone to transform a violent and anti-Semitic text into an essay in defense of European literature. Derrida confirmed the ethical "relativism" of deconstruction and proved its "anti-historical" bias.<sup>63</sup> In reference to Derrida's rephrasing of "vulgar anti-Semitism" into

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<sup>59</sup> Wolin, "Deconstruction," pp. 10-12.

<sup>60</sup> Wolin, "Deconstruction," p. 9. See Holdheim, "Jacques Derrida's Apologia," p. 780.

<sup>61</sup> Wiener, "The Responsibilities of Friendship," p. 802.

<sup>62</sup> Brenkman and Law, 808. See also Reed War Dasenbrock, "Paul de Man: The Modernist as Fascist," in *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture*, ed. Richard Golsan (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), p. 238; Alice Y. Kaplan, "Paul de Man, *Le Soir*, and the Francophone Collaboration," in *Responses*, pp. 274-75.

<sup>63</sup> Although Derrida's interpretations received the most attention, there were others associated with the "Yale School" who also rushed to interpret de Man's wartime texts. See Geoffrey Hartman, "Blindness and Insight: Paul de Man, Fascism, and Deconstruction," *New Republic*, March 7, 1988, 26-31; Jonathan Culler, "It's Time to Set the Record Straight About

the “vulgarity of anti-Semitism,” *Critical Inquiry* respondent Jon Wiener declares that Derrida’s “preposterous effort cannot erase [the] simple fact [of] de Man’s collaboration”; Wiener asks, “If you condemn vulgar art and make no mention of the other kind, have you condemned all art?”<sup>64</sup>

Empiricists’ disagreement with Derrida resulted from the presence of the past. This unitary origin was stored in his use of the figure of metonymy. Metonymy is the “willfully inappropriate transposition of a word that belongs to context 1 to context 2.”<sup>65</sup> By signaling presence in its absence, metonymy presents something that is not there in the “sense that in the absence that *is* there, the thing that isn’t there is still present.”<sup>66</sup> Derrida’s rephrasing of “vulgar anti-Semitism” into the “vulgarity of anti-Semitism” is an example of metonymy. It was this decontextualization that provoked critics’ torrent of anger. “[A]las,” respondent Holdheim writes, “the irreducible cannot be totally eliminated, but...can be weakened to the point of inconsequentiality.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, because of their view of history, empiricists’ understanding of Derrida’s interpretation was limited. Empiricists did not and could not understand how and why Derrida’s readings of de Man’s wartime texts, particularly “Les Juifs,” aroused their frustration. Blind to both Derrida’s partial insight into the past’s presence as well as their own role in the production of meaning, empiricists mechanically applied of their view of history.

## Conclusion

No matter how many times one reads “Les Juifs,” even in facsimile, it remains a chilling experience. Communicated through its language, yet on the borders of the present, is the world of Nazism, the German occupation of Belgium, and, most horrifyingly, the Holocaust. This article touches a traumatic period still alive. “Les Juifs” points to this world.<sup>68</sup> Historian Richard Wolin notes that

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Paul de Man and His Wartime Articles for a Pro-Fascist Newspaper,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 1988, B1; Christopher Norris, “Paul de Man’s Past,” *London Review of Books*, February 4, 1988, 7-11; J. Hillis Miller, *NB, Times Literary Supplement*, June 17-23, 1988, pp. 676, 685.

<sup>64</sup> Wiener, “The Responsibilities of Friendship,” pp. 798, 802. Incredulosity towards Derrida’s readings surfaced in the public sphere as well. Mirroring Wiener’s retort, David Lehman asks in his *Newsweek* article: “But what then did his article promote? Genteel anti-Semitism?” See Lehman, “Deconstructing de Man’s Life,” p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> Runia, “Presence,” pp. 15-16; “Spots of Time,” p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Runia, “Presence,” p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> Holdheim, “Jacques Derrida’s Apologia,” p. 789.

<sup>68</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row), pp. 17-87.

the reigning *sensus communis*, has been constructed upon the ruins of the totalitarian experience. It has as it were been “indexed” in relation to the horrors of the Holocaust. We may not know how to define the true, the right, and the good per se; but we do know that an event such as Auschwitz stands as an important *negative index* as to how we might go about seeking them.<sup>69</sup>

What I refer to as the presence of the past is the source, prior to and after the assignation of meaning, of our ethical and political choices. In “the de Man Affair,” this presence compelled Derrida and empiricists to employ their views of history. Though critics constructed the meaning of de Man’s texts by applying their empiricist view of history and Derrida attributed significance through deconstruction, neither could truly speak to the unitary origin of de Man’s “Les Juifs.” Unlike empiricists, Derrida was initially aware of a presence outside the text. However, he was ultimately unable to address it due to his need to deconstruct. As Derrida explains:

[W]hat I have practiced under [the]...name [deconstruction] has always seemed to me favorable, indeed destined (it is no doubt my principal motivation) to the analysis of the conditions of totalitarianism in all its forms....And this in order to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible, because it is not enough to untie a know through analysis...or to uproot what is finally...the terrifying desire for roots and common roots....[D]econstruction is...the tireless analysis...of these adherences.<sup>70</sup>

For Derrida, deconstruction is destined to analyze its birth: totalitarianism. But, if Derrida considers totalitarianism the “a-historical” belief in presence, then as its source, deconstruction remains fated to recognize and subsequently draw distance by “making sense” of presence. Deconstruction cannot speak to any origin, let alone its own. Thus, deconstruction, in general, and Derrida’s analysis of “Les Juifs,” in particular, demonstrates the impossibility for deconstruction to acknowledge *what is there*. Although historians should pay heed to history as deconstruction because it accurately describes the historicity of meaning and the sensitivity required when constructing significance, deconstruction’s privileging of the production of meaning and bracketing of presence prohibit the ability to address the material effects of the past’s presence.

The origin “outside the text,” however, is where meaning begins. To suitably acknowledge the unitary source of de Man’s “Les Juifs” requires sensitivity to the use of words. The use of too many words draws too great a distance from this source. Al-

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<sup>69</sup> Wolin, “Deconstruction,” p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, “Like the Sound,” p. 648.

though one should never wholly abstain from assigning meaning, perhaps, now and again, when we return to this origin we should be silent. Silence connects us with the muteness of things present and the muteness that produces presence.<sup>71</sup> And, when we so choose, we can depart from this source by rupturing our silence through the careful use of words.

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<sup>71</sup> Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, p. 134.