

L'affaire De Man

by Milton J. Rosenberg

"Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the workyard made."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man

by David Lehman
New York: Poseidon Press;
318 pp., \$21.95

There is mention in the English annals of the 14th century of syphilis as "the malady of France." Inevitably, blame was bilaterally distributed and the French of the same period called the disease "*la maladie d'Angleterre*."

A new malady of France, in the form of a disease of culture, reached across the Channel some twenty years ago but could not take hold in England. Instead it found a breeding ground in the humanities departments of American universities. Deconstruction has, since then, become epidemic in the intellectual world of the United States, and it persists long after it has been put aside in France by still fresher forms of conceptual derangement.

Rather like the theory of relativity, deconstruction has both a "special" and a "general" form. The special theory of deconstruction was intended as a method for the interpretive reading of "texts." Jacques Derrida, the founding provocateur of deconstruction, has taught a generation of academic acolytes to consider texts to mean everything from Sophocles and Flaubert to rock lyrics and cereal box inscriptions. All, according to Derrida, have no intrinsic meaning and they differ neither in artistic merit nor in moral worth. These qualities reside merely in the eye and mind of the reader, and finally the proper function of criticism is not to elucidate, evaluate, or appreciate, but to deconstruct—that is, to destroy. Thereby one destroys not only the authority of the



work in question but also the delusional sense that we command our language (in fact it "speaks us") or that such mistaken standards as reason, truth, or beauty have any possible claim upon us.

In its general form deconstruction, when placed in intellectual history, comes to look very much like a *reconstruction* of nihilism, that older philosophy which regards the concept of meaning as meaningless and the idea of truth as an utter lie. Thus the broader deconstructionists—who now fill and often dominate the humanities departments of our universities—raid far beyond mere literature as they flail away at the graphic arts, at science, at law, and at philosophy itself. And in these forays, as they pull apart yet other "texts," they continue to proclaim that objectivity, reason, and meaningful moral purpose are all and always vain

illusions. Well—almost all and almost always: for in their voraciousness the leading deconstructionists have, in recent years, attempted to gobble up Marxism and feminism. The purpose has not been to deconstruct *their* texts but rather to demonstrate a great new insight: that the significant literary and intellectual works of Western civilization, whether in literature, law, or philosophy and ranging from classical antiquity to the middle of this century, are all in fact merely doing the work of repressive capitalism by keeping women, workers, homosexuals, and non-Westerners entrapped in a sense of unworthiness.

As they have frolicked in their newly opened neo-Marxist playground, American deconstructionists have enjoyed the added delights of attacking the traditions of the institutions that house and pay them. Assaulting the "canon" of significant authors, shifting the work of English departments away from Shakespeare, Dickens, or James and toward Spillane, Madonna, and 2 Live Crew, burdening half-literate undergraduates with the opacities of Derrida, De Man, and their American imitators, they have, in the humanities departments of our universities, made a desolation and called it "victory."

While scholarly argument about deconstruction has, in recent years, begun to emerge in the academic journals and intellectual reviews, it has hardly been reported to the broad public. David Lehman's new book is a welcome contribution. In vivid reportage it brings to the general reader the bad news from Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Duke, Berkeley, and kindred scholarly enclaves. Lehman, who has apparently spent his time as an indentured academic in the English department at Ithaca College, has been a close observer of this scene. His stance is amusement at the follies of his peers, but just behind his puckish persona one senses deeper reserves of disgust and rage.

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Anyone who has toiled in the rotting vineyard of contemporary literary studies but has stood apart from the avid deconstructors, post-structuralists, new Marxists, vindictive feminists, and homosexual polemicists is rich with horror stories. The ones Lehman has to tell are as instructive and devastating as any: they feature once eager young scholars driven out of the academy by the maddening obfuscations of their tenured seniors; authors central to the shaping of the Western literary and philosophical traditions removed from the curriculum and replaced by vociferous enemies of our common culture; and the rise of a species of critical prose so willfully dense and neologistic as to be essentially incomprehensible.

Lehman is not only a teacher of literature in whose courses one would be happy to have one's son or daughter enrolled, but is a poet of considerable accomplishment and commendation. To the descriptive task of limning the brave new world of some of his nihilistic and intellectually disordered fellows he brings the poet's saving graces of wit and multi-shaded wordplay, and also the consoling hope that the waves of cultural destructiveness that have flooded over university shores will inevitably ebb. Indeed, the reaction against the new nihilism has been rising: Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* struck it a glancing blow; Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* drew the battle line intelligently and persuasively; and Lehman has now advanced the struggle in a distinctive way. He has given back to his colleagues a witty, informed, and detailed indictment of

the new barbarism that could tilt some confused minds back toward reason and the reasonable uses of tradition. At the same time he has provided the general reader, who has heard the distant rumbles of these new academic wars, with a coherent account of who has been doing what and with which and to whom. All of this he has done in the first half of his fervent but paradoxically good-humored volume. The second half shifts to the central *scandale* of the whole affair: the case of Paul de Man.

De Man was to Derrida as St. Paul was to his greater mentor. From Yale University—and in his peregrinations to the English departments of the Western world—he proselytized deconstruction while transforming it into something even more veiled yet more severe and more destructive of moral intelligence than was the case with Derrida. He became, in the general estimation of the ever-growing deconstructionist movement, the perfect exemplar of their doctrine.

Born and raised in Belgium, he came to this country only after World War II and completed his graduate education at Harvard. It was generally understood that during the war he had been “in the resistance” or perhaps had been a refugee. Beyond such vague hints he never spoke of his past. Indeed, after his fateful encounter with Derrida, and his transformation into the leading American deconstructionist, he often argued that no “text” (including the text of a human life) can or should be understood historically. Nevertheless, his own history, as it was revealed after his death in 1983, shook and appalled his many deconstructionist colleagues and disciples. In effect, the truth about the man De Man, once it was revealed, propelled deconstruction into a basic crisis in which the faith was to be tested.

What was discovered was that during the war he had been a Nazi collaborator. As a literary and cultural critic for both the major collaborationist French-language and Flemish newspapers of occupied Belgium he had commented with consistent enthusiasm on the new Nazi order. Furthermore, he had welcomed the expunging of Jewish influence from the cultural life of Europe, and had endorsed the plan to ship all Jews off to

some distant African location. In general, he had, in his wartime journalism, been a major voice in the attempt to sell Nazism as a revivifying resource for the new Europe that he expected would emerge, racially cleansed and culturally purified by the inevitable German victory.

In addition to the uncovering of his collaborationist journalism it came to light that De Man was a bigamist: he had abandoned his European wife and children without a divorce and had started a new American family. He had also been a shady, probably larcenous, businessman until 1948, when he managed to slip into the United States.

Deconstruction does not stand or fall on the private moral failure of one of its major proponents—no more than the aesthetic quality of Wagner's operas can be judged by reference to the monstrous aspects of his personality and life story. But the De Man case does illuminate deconstruction (and the related, newer forms of critical theory that it has spawned) in two ways. It, like the nihilism from which it arose, is a doctrine particularly useful in freeing the guilty from their guilt. By destroying continuity and meaning in *any* narrative, including real human lives as they have been lived, it freed not only De Man but his enthusiasts from that moral responsibility that is the anchoring condition of civilized existence.

The larger illumination shed by the De Man case comes not from his story but from the pitiful efforts of his apologists. Reviewing the rush of essays that flowed from the deconstructionists after the revelations, Lehman shows that in their exculpations of De Man, his followers were in almost all instances lame, evasive, morally incompetent, and, in some instances, demonstrably dishonest as well.

By their works shall ye know them. The real scandal of the De Man case is that his doctrine was used by his disciples to avoid the claims of truth and moral judgment. But that, of course, is what the movement has always been about. One ends the book grateful to Lehman for his efforts and for his skilled and valuable achievement, but wondering whether the new nihilism will continue to prosper, or whether the voice of reason may again come to prevail in the academy. ◊

LIBERAL ARTS

LET THE REVOLUTION BEGIN

The Federal Election Commission reported last March that Midwesterners are the Americans most reluctant to contribute one dollar of their taxes to the presidential election campaign fund by checking the appropriate box on IRS tax forms. In 1989 only 18.2 percent opted for the checkoff in the Midwest, compared to 28.5 percent in the Northeast. The percentage of Americans nationwide earmarking a dollar for campaign funding dropped from 28.7 percent in 1980 to 19.9 percent in 1989.

Win or Lose

by William R. Hawkins

Secrets of the Vietnam War
by Lt. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson
Novato, California: Presidio Press;
214 pp., \$18.95

When Desert Storm commander General Norman Schwarzkopf thanked President Bush for letting the military fight the Gulf war on its own terms, he was expressing an idea deeply felt in the Pentagon for over twenty years: "No more Vietnams." Both Schwarzkopf and his boss, General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, experienced combat in Vietnam. Schwarzkopf did two tours, advising South Vietnamese paratroopers and commanding a U.S. infantry battalion. Powell also served two tours and won the Bronze Star for heroism. When Schwarzkopf says "the Vietnam War was a political defeat, but it was not a military defeat," he is speaking for an entire generation.

But if Desert Storm was a victory because it was not fought as the Vietnam War was fought, could the Vietnam War have been a victory if it had been fought as Desert Storm was? Retired Army Lt. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson thinks so. Davidson was chief intelligence officer for generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams, the top commanders in Vietnam. Before that he had seen combat both in World War II and in Korea. After Vietnam, he taught military history at West Point. His book *Vietnam at War* (Presidio Press, 1988) is the best one-volume history of the conflict in its entirety, from 1946 to 1975.

His new book, which was written before the Gulf crisis but published after Iraq invaded Kuwait, was intended as a memoir. It throws light on several issues, including the Tet offensive and Westmoreland's battle with CBS News. However, its final two chapters, "How We Lost the War" and "How We Could Have Won the War," are likely to be the main attrac-

tion for most readers.

According to Davidson, there were two occasions when the United States could have taken decisive action to win the war while a majority of the public still supported armed intervention. The first was February 1965, when it was confirmed that North Vietnam had sent its first full combat division into South Vietnam. The second was after the Tet offensive had been repulsed with heavy Communist losses in 1968. Both instances dramatized the fact that the conflict was not a civil war or an insurgency, but an invasion of the South by the North. The Saigon regime was able to handle the local Viet Cong; it was the regular army of North Vietnam, heavily equipped by the Soviet Union and China, that offered the fatal threat. An effective American strategy should have concentrated on defeating Hanoi by the use of America's superior power, and not accepted battle on Hanoi's terms, chasing guerrillas around the jungles in the South.

The campaign outlined by Davidson is very similar to that of Desert Storm. First, an all-out air war aimed at North Vietnamese military targets and supply lines: Hanoi's ports would be closed by mines and by blockade, and its few railroads, on which supplies were being imported from China, would be cut. The U.S. did drop a lot of ordinance on North Vietnam, but for most of the war critical targets were placed off limits to American pilots. For example, restrictions prevented attacks on enemy airfields from which MIGs were taking off or SAM sites that were under construction (this for fear of hurting Soviet advisors). The port of Haiphong was not bombed and mined until 1972, when Nixon, as Johnson had done, stopped the bombing in exchange for deceptive peace talks. Against Iraq, the U.S. waged Davidson's kind of campaign from the start without "bombing pauses" and achieved devastating results.

In the end, of course, the war would have had to have been won on the

ground. "Existing units of the United States Army and Marine Corps should have been sent to South Vietnam as soon as available," says Davidson. "Selected reserves of all forces should have been mobilized and prepared for early deployment. . . . When the buildup of the ground forces permitted, a corps-sized force would move into Laos, cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and stay there." (For a more detailed study of the importance of such a move see *The Key to Failure: Laos & the Vietnam War*, by Norman B. Hannah.) It might also have been necessary to invade North Vietnam itself, though, as in Iraq, the aim would have been to destroy the North Vietnamese Army, not occupy cities or to take responsibility for running the country. "In short, the American leaders should have accepted the undeniable reality they were at war—a real war."

It was the failure of President Johnson to take the war seriously that Davidson blames for America's ultimate defeat. "The brutal truth is that Johnson fought the Vietnam War as a secondary adjunct to his domestic political aims." Davidson is not alone in his opinion. Doris Kearns, who served on Johnson's White House staff, wrote in her book *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* that when advised in 1965 that a plan similar to Davidson's would be needed to win, "Johnson recoiled from this dramatic display of presidential action . . . letting the country know that this was a major war . . . which would demand sacrifices on their part. . . . In deciding against his advisors . . . Johnson had asserted his intention to control the decision-making process."

Davidson charges LBJ "didn't want to get the American people into a patriotic furor over the war. If he did this, the people and Congress would insist that he do something to win the war, and there would go the Great Society." LBJ wished merely to preserve South Vietnam at the minimum short-term cost so as not to divert attention from his domestic programs. That is something to remember when