Toward the end of “Acts”—the third and what would have been the last lecture and the last chapter of Derrida’s Mémoires, for Paul de Man, if it had not been for the necessity of adding “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War” in a revised edition of 1988—Derrida quotes passages from two letters de Man wrote to him in 1970 and 1971 before and after the publication in Poétique of de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Derrida as Reader of Rousseau.” De Man’s first letter is itself a reply to a letter that Derrida wrote to de Man in responding to the critique of his (Derrida’s) reading of Rousseau in Grammatologie. In the excerpt Derrida quotes, de Man refuses to be put off by what he calls Derrida’s “kindness” (gentillesse) and emphasizes the areas of disagreement or at least divergence: “The other day was neither the time nor the place to speak again of Rousseau [pour reparler de Rousseau] and I do not know if you have any reason to return to the question. Your supposed ‘agreement’ [accord] [This is a word I must have written in my letter] can only be kindness, for if you object to what I say about metaphor, you must, as it should be, object to everything.” And a bit later in the excerpt, de Man adds: “I do not yet know why you keep refusing Rousseau the value of radicality which you attribute to Mallarmé and no doubt to Nietzsche; I believe that it is for hermeneutic rather than historical reasons, but I am probably wrong” (M 129, 127). After the essay appeared in Poétique, Derrida must have thanked de Man once again, he says, and he gets in reply another letter from Zürich (dated the 4th of January 1971). In the extract Derrida quotes, de Man qualifies a bit his disagreement with
Derrida, but he also attempts to correct whatever Derrida had said in his letter about de Man’s critique. We don’t have access to Derrida’s letter—it’s not in the de Man archive at UCI—but it clearly did more than just offer renewed thanks for de Man’s critique! I quote—Derrida’s quoting de Man—at a bit more length:

There is no disagreement between us about the basis of your thinking but a certain divergence in our way of nuancing and situating Rousseau. This divergence is important to me for the notions that I had come to about the question of writing before having the benefit of your thinking came to me above all from Rousseau (and from Hölderlin) . . . . The desire to exempt Rousseau (as you say) at all costs from blindness is therefore, for me, a gesture of fidelity to my own itinerary. Rousseau has led me to a certain understanding which, due allowance being made, seems to me near to that with which you have had the force to begin. As the Essai sur l’origine des langues is one of the texts upon which I have been relying for such a long time, I must have put a certain stubbornness into my defense of the relative insight which I have benefitted from. This having been said, I did not wish to exempt Rousseau from blindness but only wished to show that, on the specific question of the rhetoricity of his writing, he was not blinded. This is what gives to his text the particular status that we would both agree, I believe, to call “literary.” That this insight is accompanied by a perhaps more redoubtable blindness—and which could be, for example, madness—I didn’t feel obliged to say in this text, but I would talk about it in regard to the Dialogues and especially in regard to Émile, which seems to me one of the most demented texts there is. (M 130, 127–28)

In the second excerpt from this letter, de Man makes some additional remarks on the areas of their agreement and then finishes up by saying: “I incessantly return to this in what I am in the process of trying to do with Rousseau and Nietzsche and perhaps we can speak of this again later [et nous pourrons peut-être en reparler plus tard]” (M 131, 128).

What interests me here is not the disagreement or the divergence between Derrida and de Man on the question of Rousseau’s being blinded or not. Sorting it out would in any case be a very difficult undertaking—indeed, perhaps an endless and definitely a nightmarish task—and it would no doubt have to take into consideration de Man’s and Derrida’s differing conceptions of a text’s and a reading’s blindness or “blind spot.” For the de Man of Blindness and Insight, a critic’s blindness is something that can be “observed” by a reader “in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right” (Bl 106). Whereas for the Derrida of Grammatologie, the “blind spot” [tache aveugle] is something to be produced by the reading, it is the very “task of reading” [une tâche
“The reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the schemas of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantifiable distribution of shadow and light, of weakness and force, but a signifying structure that the critical reading should produce” (G 158, 227). In any event, it’s not this divergence that interests me here—perhaps I will have an opportunity to talk about it again another time—but rather what Derrida says about it—or, better, what he does with it. For after quoting these passages from de Man’s letter, Derrida in fact does not say anything about the disagreement or the divergence—as though to confirm that he has quoted from the letter only that which, as he put it in introducing these excerpts, “does not concern me” (ce qui, en somme, ne me concerne pas) (M 129, 126). Instead, Derrida takes up de Man’s final remark—“perhaps we can speak again [reparler] of this later,” which, we may recall, echoes the verb in the opening sentence of the first excerpt (“The other day was neither the time nor the place to speak again [reparler] of Rousseau”)—and tells us that the two of them never did speak about it again (“je crois que nous n’en avons jamais reparlé”), at least in the mode of conversation, direct discussion, or even of correspondence: “Such silences, he writes, belong to the vertiginous abyss of the unsaid in which is kept, I don’t say is grounded, the memory of a friendship, as the renewed fidelity of a promise” (M 131, 129). Nevertheless, Derrida continues, in a certain way “that of which Paul de Man says ‘perhaps we can speak of this again later’ and of which I have just said we never spoke again [nous n’en avons jamais reparlé], in truth, is what we have never ceased writing about ever since, as if to prepare ourselves to speak of it again one day [à en reparler un jour], in our very old age” (M 151, 129). In short, they never spoke about it again and yet they did nothing but write about it again and again ever since. I italicize this never again/nothing but again and again structure for a reason—one obvious enough to readers of Derrida and de Man (Derridadaists and de Maniacs): namely, it is an echo or a repetition of the predicament Rousseau gets himself into in the very last words of Book Two of his Confessions. After recounting the shameful story of the purloined ribbon and his calumnious lie, Rousseau writes: “That is all I have to say on the subject. May I never have to speak of it again (Qu’il me soit permis de n’en reparler jamais)” (C 89, 87). Of course, as we have learned from de Man’s “Excuses” (the last chapter of Allegories of Reading), Rousseau has to speak about it again, and not only in the fourth Rêverie. In a certain sense, he does nothing but
speak about it again and again throughout the Confessions (and the other autobiographical writings) insofar as the need to confess this “crime” is, according to his own testimony, at the very root of his autobiographical project. If since 1970 de Man and Derrida write about nothing else but “it”—i.e., Rousseau and their disagreement or divergence about reading his text—it is fitting that the last chapter or the last act or the last word of this text—a text, let’s remember, in which the unsaid gets written—should be one “about” Rousseau, and about none other than the Rousseau of the last words of Book Two of the Confessions. I suspend the word “about” here (in “‘about’ Rousseau”) in quotation marks because the sense in which this last exchange between de Man and Derrida can in fact be said to be “about Rousseau” remains a question. It is as much (and no doubt as little) “about” de Man, “about” Derrida, and “about” their relationship as it is “about” Rousseau.

But one cannot really say that Derrida’s “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)” (1998)—which is largely “about” de Man’s “Excuses” essay—is in fact “the last word” in their ceaseless writing about nothing else but “it.” At the end of his long (one hundred plus page) text, Derrida writes: “I am so sad that Paul de Man is not here himself to answer me and to object. But I can hear him already—and sooner or later his text will answer for him” (TR 160, 147). Before we try to imagine what it is that Derrida hears here—it is perhaps too soon and too late—let us first remark the peculiarity of Derrida’s text. Originally written for a conference at UC Davis in 1998 organized by Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, and me, it is a most peculiar text, as befits, perhaps, a most peculiar friendship (but then aren’t all friendships peculiar, I hear Derrida counter). It is peculiar, first of all, because it does not quite carry out the assignment given to the speakers: in short, to read de Man’s Aesthetic Ideology, think about “materiality,” and write something, anything, à propos of it. In his text Derrida thematizes this assignment and has great fun playing with and interrogating the phrase à propos from the conference’s description—a line that read “à propos of Paul de Man’s Aesthetic Ideology”—while spending nearly all of his one hundred plus pages on or around de Man’s “Excuses,” a text precisely not in Aesthetic Ideology. Only the last ten pages of “Typewriter Ribbon” are explicitly about “materiality,” and Derrida claims (seven pages from the end) that his “only ambition would thus be, on the basis of this text from Allegories of Reading [i.e., “Excuses”], to sketch out a kind of deduction, in the quasi-philosophical sense, of the concept of materiality (without matter). It is not present here
under that name but I believe one can recognize all its traits. In the
texts gathered under the title *Aesthetic Ideology*, the concept will be
thematized under that name” (*TR* 153, 137). But even if Derrida’s
choosing to write about a topic in his own way, from another angle,
is not so unusual for him, what strikes me as still more peculiar about
“Typewriter Ribbon”—because so unlike him—is a certain carping,
needle, nit-picking, almost petty quality to the many apparently small
reservations he expresses about, and the many minor complications
he notes in, de Man’s reading of Rousseau. Derrida’s other texts on
de Man’s work are nothing if not generous, and this would include
not only the three original lectures in *Mémoires* but also the additional
text on the wartime journalism (“Like the Sound of the Sea Deep
Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War”). Indeed, Derrida refrains from
criticizing even early texts like “Heidegger’s Exegeses of Hölderlin”
(1955)—an essay whose account of Heidegger could have, must have,
provoked at least some protest or some reservation in his mind. Not
so for “Excuses.” In the case of this text Derrida seems to spot every
omission, every hint of a false move, every bit of hurried short-hand.
A great many of these take the form of Derrida’s remarking of what
de Man does *not* say, what he does *not* talk about, and perhaps should
have. De Man does not quote or say anything about the paragraph
immediately preceding the story of the ribbon—which is a paragraph
about inheritance, about who gets what after the breaking up of Mme
de Vercellis’s household. In quoting Rousseau’s description of the
“little pink and silver ribbon,” de Man leaves out the words “already
old”—“un petit ruban couleur de rose et argent déjà vieux” (*C* 86,
84)—as though to insist on the exchange value of the ribbon while
effacing any hint of its use value. Some of Derrida’s reservations or
hesitations about what de Man says or doesn’t say are more produc-
tive than others. For instance, Derrida takes to task de Man’s dismissal
of any possibility of an “oedipal situation” in Rousseau’s desire for
possession of the ribbon and hence desire for possession of Marion
and zeroes in on de Man’s symptomatic footnote: “The embarrassing
story of Rousseau’s rejection by Mme de Vercellis, who is dying of a
cancer of the breast, immediately precedes the story of Marion, but
nothing in the text suggests a concatenation that would allow one to
substitute Marion for Mme de Vercellis in a scene of rejection” (*AR*
285). Derrida quotes this footnote, underscores the phrase “nothing
in the text,” and comments:

No doubt de Man is right, and more than once. No doubt he is right to
beware a grossly Oedipal scheme, and I am not about to plunge headfirst
into such a scheme in my turn (although there are more refined Oedipal schemes). De Man may also be right to say that “nothing in the text suggests a concatenation that would allow one to substitute Marion for Mme de Vercellis in a scene of rejection.”

But what does “nothing” mean here? And “nothing in the text”? How can one be sure of “nothing” suggested in a text? Of a “nothing in a text”? And if really “nothing” suggested this Oedipal substitution, how does one explain that de Man thought of it? And that he devotes a footnote to it? A propos, is not every footnote a little Oedipal? In pure à propos logic, is not a footnote a symptomatic swelling, the swollen foot of a text hindered in its step-by-step advance? How does one explain that de Man devotes an embarrassed footnote to all this in which he excludes that the “embarrassing story,” as he puts it, suggests an Oedipal substitution of Marion for Mme de Vercellis, that is to say, first of all of Mme de Vercellis for Maman? For Mme de Vercellis immediately succeeds Maman in the narrative, the same year, the year he turns sixteen. She succeeds Mme de Warens, whose acquaintance Rousseau had made several months earlier—and who had also recently converted to Catholicism, like the Calvinist Jean-Jacques. (TR 91, 56–57)

What can I add to this? No doubt Derrida is right, and no doubt he is right to say that de Man is also right—at least by denegation, as in the case of the patient quoted by Freud: “You ask who the person in the dream can have been. It was not my mother.” Freud: “so it was his mother.” And, as it turns out, both de Man and Derrida are more right than either of them seems to know. For neither Derrida nor de Man seems to notice that the little pink and silver colored ribbon which alone tempted Rousseau has a predecessor in Book Two. When he arrives in Turin “Mme Sabran [one member of the couple that escorts him there] found means to strip me of everything down to a little silver ribbon [un petit ruban glacé d’argent] which Mme de Warens had given me for my small sword. This I regretted more than all the rest. They would even have kept my sword if I had been less obstinate” (C 65, 60). Rousseau’s theft of “a little pink and silver ribbon” [un petit ruban couleur de rose et argent] is clearly an attempt at some kind of restitution of the “little silver ribbon” [un petit ruban glacé d’argent] that Maman had given him for his little sword (and that meant so much to him). And in this nightmarish scenario, the substitution of one ribbon for another also triggers, as though mechanically, the inevitable substitution of Marion for Maman in Rousseau’s lying about Marion’s having given him the ribbon.

But however productive Derrida’s additions, emendations, and supplementations of de Man may be at times—and they are certainly
productive of *more text* at all times!—it is fair to say that they are all in one sense or another already included in de Man’s reading, at the very least as plausible extensions or corollaries of his argument. This is especially true of what seems to be Derrida’s central critical comment: namely, that de Man tries to maintain an untenable distinction between the *avowal* of the confessional text and the *excuse* of the apologetic text (and hence also between the cognitive and the performative dimensions of Rousseau’s text). De Man’s distinction is “useful,” Derrida writes at the beginning of his critique, but it needs to be further differentiated. If there is indeed an allegation of truth to be revealed, to be made known, thus a gesture of the theoretical type, a cognitive or, as de Man says, epistemological dimension, a declaration of Rousseau’s regarding the theft of the ribbon is not a confession or admission except on a strict condition and to a determined extent. It must in no case allow itself to be determined by this cognitive dimension, reduced to it, or even analyzed into two dissociable elements (one de Man calls the cognitive and the other, the apologetic). *To make* known does not come down to knowing and, above all, to make known a fault does not come down to making known anything whatsoever; it is already to accuse oneself and to enter into a performative process of excuse and forgiveness. A declaration that would bring forward some knowledge, a piece of information, a thing to be known would in no case be a confession, even if the thing to be known, even if the cognitive referent were otherwise defined as a fault: I can inform someone that I have killed, stolen, or lied without that being at all an admission or a confession. Confession is not of the order of knowledge or making known. (*TR* 108, 79)

Derrida adds that he is “all the more troubled” by these passages “inasmuch as de Man seems to hold firmly to a distinction that he will later, in fact right after, have to suspend” (*TR* 110, 80) when he [de Man] says that “the interest of Rousseau’s text is that it explicitly functions performatively as well as cognitively, and thus gives indications about the structure of performative rhetoric; this is already established in this text when the confession fails to close off a discourse which feels compelled to modulate from the confessional into the apologetic mode” (*AR* 282). Derrida will have none of this. He asks if the confessional mode is not “already, always, an apologetic mode” (*TR* 110, 81) and reiterates his objection: “In truth, I believe there are not here two dissociable modes and two different times, in such a way that one could modulate from one to the other. I don’t believe even that what de Man names ‘the interest of Rousseau’s text,’ therefore its originality, consists in having to ‘modulate’ from the confessional mode to
the apologetic mode. Every confessional text is already apologetic. Every avowal begins by offering apologies or by excusing itself" (TR 110, 81). Although he proposes to leave this difficulty in place—“it is going to haunt everything that we will say from here on” (TR 110, 81)—Derrida continues by making his case still more forcefully:

This distinction organizes, it seems to me, his whole demonstration. I find it an impossible, in truth undecidable, distinction. This undecidability, moreover, is what would make for all the interest, the obscurity, the nondecomposable specificity of what is called a confession, an avowal, an excuse, or an asked-for forgiveness. But if one went still further in this direction by leaving behind the context and the element of the de Manian interpretation, it would be because we are touching here on the equivocation of an originary or pre-originary synthesis without which there would be neither trace nor inscription, neither experience of the body nor materiality. It would be a question of the equivocation between, on the one hand, the truth to be known, revealed, or asserted, the truth that, according to de Man, concerns the order of the pure and simple confessional and, on the other, the truth of the pure performative of the excuse, to which de Man gives the name of the apologetic. Two orders that are analogous, in sum, to the constative and the performative. By reason of this equivocation itself, which invades language and action at their source, we are always already in the process of excusing ourselves, or even asking forgiveness, precisely in this ambiguous and perjuring mode. (TR 110–11, 81–82)

I quote Derrida at some length here not only because it is better than paraphrasing him but also because doing so gives a better indication of what Derrida sees as the stakes of the argument and its theoretical (and practical) payoff. The tone, the rhetoric of the “always already,” and the talk of “an originary or preoriginary synthesis without which there would be neither trace nor inscription, neither experience of the body nor materiality” makes it clear enough that, for Derrida, these stakes are high.

Now the fact is that the stakes are equally high for de Man—who himself has been known to talk about undecidability and the undecidable distinction between performative and cognitive—and the trouble is that his reading of Rousseau at this moment is nothing so much as a demonstration of the truth of Derrida’s assertions. De Man may not say it on quite the same level of generality—except perhaps in the very modest phrase “and thus gives indications about the structure of performative rhetoric”—but he does say the same thing. Derrida’s noting that de Man in fact suspends the distinction “right after” setting it up already admits this, and to a certain extent the “disagreement”
stems only from Derrida’s somewhat perverse refusal to allow de Man to set up his argument. But how exactly de Man’s reading works out the relations between confessional text and apologetic text, avowal and excuse, and therefore cognitive and performative is a difficult movement that takes place in a series of steps. Rather than having the confessional text modulate into the apologetic text—and from the Confessions to the Rêveries, as Derrida seems to think—already the very first step of de Man’s reading of the story of the stolen ribbon in the Confessions suspends the distinction: “The first thing established by this edifying narrative is that the Confessions is not primarily a confessional text” (AR 279). In the narration of his story, “Rousseau cannot limit himself to the mere statement of what really ‘happened’” and already begins to excuse himself. But if he who accuses himself excuses himself, then this “ruins the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive” (AR 280). And it is the self-destructive nature of the confession in the mode of excuse—an utterance that, as de Man puts it, functions performatively as well as cognitively—that does not allow Rousseau to close off his confessional/apologetic discourse and compels him to go back to the story of the stolen ribbon in the fourth Rêverie (despite his plea at the end of Book II: “May I be allowed never to speak of it again”). But the real interest and the real difficulty of de Man’s reading begins here: that is, in how the avowal and the excuse, a cognitive and a performative use of language, are coupled together in Rousseau’s text. Shame [honte] is the key term here. It’s not some gratuitous viciousness that makes Rousseau accuse Marion of doing what he had done but rather the inner feeling of shame. Rousseau fears shame “more than death, more than the crime, more than anything in the world. . . . unconquerable shame was stronger than anything else, shame alone caused my impudence and the more guilty I became, the more the terror of admitting my guilt made me fearless” (De Man’s translation in AR 283). But then what is one ashamed of, asks de Man, and answers: “Since the entire scene stands under the aegis of theft, it has to do with possession, and desire must therefore be understood as functioning, at least at times, as a desire to possess, in all the connotations of the term. Once it is removed from its legitimate owner, the ribbon, being in itself devoid of meaning and function, can circulate symbolically as a pure signifier and become the articulating hinge in a chain of exchanges and possessions. As the ribbon changes hands it traces a circuit leading to the exposure of a hidden, censored desire” (AR 283). Although de Man already insists on the status of the ribbon as a pure signifier “in itself
devoid of meaning and function,” it is first of all a desire to possess the ribbon which was, after all, the only object that tempted him (and for reasons we can surmise). But since it was Rousseau’s intention to give the ribbon to Marion, the desire is also a desire for Marion, to “‘possess’” her, as de Man says. But, again, if the ribbon can stand for “Rousseau’s desire for Marion or, what amounts to the same thing, for Marion herself” (AR 283), then it also stands for the free circulation of desire between Rousseau and Marion, “for the reciprocity which, as we know from Julie, is for Rousseau the very condition of love; it stands for the substitutability of Rousseau for Marion and vice versa” (AR 283). In other words, the ribbon substitutes for a desire “which is itself a desire for substitution,” that is, for a “specular symmetry which gives to the symbolic object a detectable, univocal proper meaning” (AR 284). Such specular figures are metaphors, says de Man, “and it should be noted that on this still elementary level of understanding, the introduction of the figural dimension in the text occurs first by ways of metaphor” (AR 284). In short, this is a tropological system, a system of metaphor, and it is a system that works to produce meaning and sense, to bring the chain of substitutions back to that “univocal proper meaning.” De Man summarizes this step of the reading: “Substitution is indeed bizarre (it is odd to take a ribbon for a person) but since it reveals motives, causes, and desires, the oddity is quickly reduced back to sense. . . . The delivery of meaning is delayed but by no means impossible” (AR 284).

Yet Rousseau’s text does not stay confined within this pattern of desire (the desire of possession), says de Man in the next step of his reading, and everything in the latter part of Rousseau’s story—the part that “bears the main performative burden of the excuse” not just for the crime of theft but for the worse crime of slander—points to another structure of desire: “One is more ashamed of the exposure of the desire to expose oneself than of the desire to possess; like Freud’s dreams of nakedness, shame is primarily exhibitionistic. What Rousseau really wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure he actually gets” (AR 285). This desire is truly shameful, “for it suggests that Marion was destroyed, not for the sake of Rousseau’s saving face, nor for the sake of his desire for her, but merely in order to provide him with a stage on which to parade his disgrace or what amounts to the same thing, to furnish him with a good ending for Book II of his Confessions” (AR 286). The structure of this desire of exposure, then, is self-perpetuating, “for each new stage in the unveiling suggests a deeper shame, a greater impossibility
to reveal, and a greater satisfaction in outwitting this impossibility” (AR 286). And it is this structure of desire as exposure that in turn explains why shame functions “as the most effective excuse, much more effectively than greed, or lust, or love” (AR 286). De Man tells us why and how in a difficult passage: “Promise is proleptic, but excuse is belated and always occurs after the crime; since the crime is exposure [i.e., self-exposure], the excuse consists in recapitulating the exposure in the guise of concealment. The excuse is a ruse which permits exposure in the name of hiding, not unlike Being, in the later Heidegger, reveals itself by hiding. Or, put differently, shame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation and thus to make pleasure and guilt interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression. It follows that repression is in fact an excuse, one speech act among others” (AR 286). Much, too much, is going on in this passage. I paraphrase and quote at length from this moment of de Man’s reading because it is here that, finally, we can begin to understand how it is that the performative excuse gets reinscribed in a tropological system of figural displacement that would seem to have to do only with language as cognition and not with language as act. De Man lays bare the exact mechanism, the “ruse,” of how this takes place: it happens when shame—an interior disposition, feeling, or affect—is “used as excuse,” i.e., performatively, that the pain of the guilt for the crime of exposure (and its revelation), and the pleasure of the satisfaction of the desire for exposure (and its repression) become interchangeable. The implications of de Man’s “analysis of shame as excuse” (AR 286) are far-reaching. Among other things, one should note the strongly de-psychologizing (or de-psychonanalysizing) thrust of this analysis—despite the Lacanian echoes of de Man’s diction—as repression becomes in fact an excuse, one speech act among others. (This is perhaps the reason why Derrida can say—somewhat frustratedly perhaps—that de Man’s analysis is both “too Lacanian” and “not Lacanian enough”!) Although it is not as marked, de Man’s de-ontologizing move in this analysis should also be noted. If the ruse of shame used as excuse reveals itself by hiding “not unlike Being, in the later Heidegger,” then saying so, rather than elevating the ontological status of this ruse, instead makes Being, in the later Heidegger, look rather shame-faced. But the ultimate upshot of de Man’s analysis—and the conclusion of the first half of his reading—comes in his formulation of how “desire as exposure” and “desire as possession” converge “towards a unified signification” in which “the shame experienced at the desire to possess dovetails with the deeper
shame felt at self-exposure” (AR 286–87). The mode of cognition as hiding/revealing is shown to be fundamentally akin to the mode of cognition as possession (and thus truth as a property of entities), and their linking turns the relatively “elementary” tropological system of figural displacement with which de Man begins into a redoubtable system that can make sense of most anything:

The figural rhetoric of the passage, whose underlying metaphor, encompassing both possession and exposure, is that of unveiling, combines with a generalized pattern of tropological substitution to reach a convincing meaning. What seemed at first like irrational behavior bordering on insanity has, by the end of the passage, become comprehensible enough to be incorporated within a general economy of human affectivity, in a theory of desire, repression, and self-analyzing discourse in which excuse and knowledge converge. Desire, now expanded far enough to include the hiding/revealing movement of the unconscious as well as possession, functions as the cause of the entire scene (“. . . it is bizarre but true that my friendship for her was the cause of my accusations” [86]), and once this desire has been made to appear in all its complexity, the action is understood and, consequently, excused—for it was primarily its incongruity that was unforgivable. Knowledge, morality, possession, exposure, affectivity (shame as the synthesis of pleasure and pain), and the performative excuse are all ultimately part of one system that is epistemologically as well as ethically grounded and therefore available as meaning, in the mode of understanding. (AR 287)

The final sentence of this passage identifies this system and the reason for its apparent strength. As a system that is epistemologically as well as ethically grounded, this system is quite recognizably the critical system of Kant’s three Critiques according to which the bridge between epistemology and ethics, first and second Critiques, would also be accomplished by the faculty of the feeling of pleasure and pain, that is, the third Critique and its transcendental grounding of reflexive aesthetic judgments. This is the system that Rousseau constructs by using shame as excuse and thereby synthesizing pleasure and pain. In other words, affectivity (shame in this case) plays the role of the third Critique in Rousseau’s critical system. No wonder there is so much at stake here for Rousseau, for de Man, and for Derrida. For Kant, it is not just a question of demonstrating an analogy between the faculties of knowledge and desire, first and second Critiques, but rather the necessity that practical reason and the domain of freedom ought to have an influence on theoretical reason and the domain of nature: “the concept of freedom ought [soll] to actualize in the world of sense
the purpose enjoined by its laws. Hence it must be possible to think nature as being such that the lawfulness in its form will harmonize with at least the possibility of [achieving] the purposes that we are to achieve in nature according to the laws of freedom” (CJ 15, 83–84). To demonstrate that what ought to happen and what must be possible are indeed the case is the task of the third Critique.

Of course, in the second half of de Man’s reading, this system gets disrupted, disarticulated, by the anacoluthonic lie, Rousseau’s random utterance of the name “Marion” as the “first object” on which to excuse himself: “Je m’excusai sur le premier objet qui s’offrit” (C 86, 88). This sentence is phrased in such a way, says de Man, “as to allow for a complete disjunction between Rousseau’s desire and interests and the selection of this particular name” (AR 288). This means in turn that here “we are entering an entirely different system in which such terms as desire, shame, guilt, exposure, and repression no longer has any place” (AR 289). De Man emphasizes how the sound “Marion” uttered by Rousseau “stands entirely out of the system of truth, virtue and understanding (or of deceit, evil, and error) that gives meaning to the passage, and to the Confessions as a whole. The sentence: ‘je m’excusai sur le premier objet qui s’offrit’ is therefore an anacoluthon, a foreign element that disrupts the meaning, the readability of the apologetic discourse, and reopens what the excuse seemed to have closed off” (AR 289–90). And it is in the fourth Rêverie—a confession of confession, as it were, in which Rousseau confronts his own text—that the disruptive effects of this “random lie” and “what existed as a localized disruption in the Confessions” (AR 290) are disseminated over the entire text. This part of de Man’s reading is, I think, more familiar and, in any case, easier to understand, so I won’t go on about it. The disruption and the undoing of understanding is perhaps always easier to understand than the understanding of understanding! It should be clear, however, that the “foreign element”—the random or anacoluthonic lie that takes on the name “fiction” in the fourth Rêverie, and that is as free of referential constraint and as machinal as grammar—in disrupting the system of meaning and readability is that which prevents the tropological system (of desire as possession and desire as exposure) from closing itself off. This is what de Man calls a deconstruction of metaphor or of the figural dimension: “The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar. This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss
of something that once was present and that it once possessed but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text” (AR 298). This radical estrangement leads directly to de Man’s conclusions about the now restated and radicalized disjunction of the performative from the cognitive, and the dissemination of the isolated textual event in the Confessions throughout the entire text as “the anacoluthon is extended over all the points of the figural line or allegory” (AR 300). On all of this—i.e., the disruption and the undoing of the system of understanding in the second half of de Man’s essay—Derrida is more than just correct, for he is able to extend the reach of de Man’s reading of Rousseau to the questions and issues addressed in Aesthetic Ideology: for instance, by translating the localized “textual event” in the Confessions into what de Man calls “event,” “material event,” and “history as event, occurrence, what actually happens” in his last essays. (There is also, for example, Derrida’s apparent agreement with de Man about the status of the performative, at least the performative “in the strict and Austinian sense of the term,” in its relation to the actual event, to what happens: “It is often said, quite rightly, that a performative utterance produces the event of which it speaks. But one should also know that wherever there is some performative, that is, in the strict and Austinian sense of the term, the mastery in the first person present of an ‘I can,’ ‘I may’ guaranteed and legitimated by conventions, well, then, all pure event-ness is neutralized, muffled, suspended. What happens, by definition, what comes about in an unforeseeable and singular manner, couldn’t care less about the performative” [TR 146, 128]. It is why one would need a term like “arche-performative”—which Derrida in fact uses in “Typewriter Ribbon”—to distinguish the performativity of “random excuses” like the anacoluthonic lie from the performative excuse that is still part of the system of understanding.10) Derrida has in any case less trouble with the “deconstructive” part of de Man’s reading—even though he does note that de Man’s use of the word “deconstruction” is not exactly his own—than with the setting up of the “system” that gets deconstructed by Rousseau’s random lie. As even a less than completely attentive reading (or hearing) of Derrida’s text will have to acknowledge, the cognitive dimension—what Derrida (or de Man) gets right or wrong—is not what actually happens in Derrida’s text, in de Man’s text, or in between them. But what does happen?

A great deal happens, but it happens around the edges and on the margins of these texts. For instance, Derrida quotes de Man’s crucial paragraph on the excuse as ruse, on shame used as excuse, but it is
only to underline de Man’s uses of the word “forgiven” in it. (“Or, put differently, shame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation, and thus to make pleasure and guilt interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression” [AR 286].) According to Derrida, this is one of only two times that de Man resorts to the lexicon of “forgiveness” [pardon]. The other occurrence of the word is still more innocuous, and it is why Derrida can write: “So, unless I am mistaken, de Man almost never speaks of forgiveness, except in passing, as if it were no big deal, on two occasions” (TR 106, 75). As a matter of fact, de Man borrows from the lexicon of forgiveness still one more time in “Excuses.” It is in the passage I quoted that summarizes the “one system that is epistemologically as well as ethically grounded” (AR 287). Once desire has been understood in all its complexity—“now expanded far enough to include the hiding/revealing movement of the unconscious as well as possession” (AR 287)—Rousseau’s action is understood, writes de Man, “and, consequently, excused—for it was primarily its incongruity that was unforgivable” (AR 287). This occurrence of “unforgivable” may also be just in passing, no big deal, but it is odd that Derrida should have passed over it. And odd not just because he seems to have gone over de Man’s text very closely—as though he were looking for something (and as though he were annoyed at not being able to find it!)—but also because, as we know from Derrida’s “seminar on pardon, perjury, and capital punishment” (TR 75, 37), the only thing that can be, that demands to be, forgiven is indeed the “unforgivable.” We should also remember that once the system of understanding is disrupted, undone, “deconstructed” by the anacoluthonic lie, the “incongruity,” as de Man calls it, of Rousseau’s action becomes radical and irreducible—and hence absolutely “unforgivable.” I bring this up here—or rather it’s what comes up, what had to come up—because it is in fact what Derrida’s “Typewriter Ribbon” is all “about,” as one says, or rather it’s what his text does, or would do: namely, to perform an act of impossible forgiveness for the unforgivable. Derrida says so, in his own way, from the beginning of his text and throughout. For instance, in the captatio benevolentiae at the outset when he excuses himself and asks for the listeners’ (or the readers’) forgiveness “for the compromise that I had to resolve to make in preparation of this lecture” (TR 74–75, 37). The compromise is that in order to save time and energy, he had to “reorient in the direction of this colloquium [“à propos of Paul de Man’s Aesthetic Ideology,” recall] certain sessions of an ongoing seminar on pardon, perjury, and capital punishment” (TR 75, 37). Hence
some traces of this seminar will remain in the lecture, and, in fact, “In a certain way, I will be speaking solely about pardon, forgiveness, excuse, betrayal, and perjury—of death and death penalty” (TR 75, 38). That Derrida takes de Man’s “Excuses”—an essay whose full title in Allegories of Reading gets printed as “Excuses (Confessions)”—as the text that de Man wrote in the place of a confession of, and hence an apology for, at least certain articles, paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and words in his wartime journalism is explicit in “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War”:

I even imagine him in the process of analyzing with an implacable irony the simulacrum of “confession” to which certain people would like to invite him after the fact, after his death, and the auto-justification and auto-accusation quivering with pleasure which form the abyssal program of such a self-exhibition. He has said the essential on this subject and I invite those who wonder about his silence to read, among other texts, “Excuses (Confessions)” in Allegories of Reading. The first sentence announces what “political and autobiographical texts have in common” and the conclusion explains again the relations between irony and allegory so as to render an account (without ever being able to account for it sufficiently) of this: “Just as the text can never stop apologizing for the suppression of guilt that it performs, there is never enough knowledge available to account for the delusion of knowing”. In the interval, between the first and last sentences, at the heart of this text which is also the last word of Allegories of Reading, everything is said. (M 228, 209)

But to do this, to take “Excuses (Confessions)” as the phantom proxy, the allegory, of de Man’s impossible confession/excuse, means that Derrida needs to take de Man’s text as itself politico-autobiographical, and he says so explicitly several times. Toward the end of “Typewriter Ribbon,” he insists that de Man’s “writings can and should be read as also politico-autobiographical texts” (TR 150, 133) and, a page later, announces the necessity of “showing the politico-performative auto-biographicity of this text” (TR 152, 135), i.e., “Excuses.” If de Man’s text is “político-autobiographical” (or “autobiographico-political,” as Derrida puts it on the last page of his text), if he is talking about nothing but himself and his political past, then it is no wonder that Derrida can say at the very end that what he, Derrida, wanted to show was that “maybe he, Paul de Man, had no need of Rousseau in order to show and to demonstrate, himself, what he thought he ought to confide in us [ce qu’il pensait devoir nous confier]” (TR 160, 146). On the surface, this is something of a joke and a tit-for-tat response to de Man’s having said in the interview with Stefano Rosso: “Whatever
happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. He doesn’t need Rousseau, he doesn’t need anybody else” (quoted in TR 160, 146). After quoting these lines, Derrida writes: “As you have seen quite well, this is of course not true. De Man was wrong. I needed Paul de Man. And Rousseau and Augustine and so many others” (TR 160, 146). But, of course, as Derrida is quite aware, to read de Man’s text in this way as politico-autobiographical means to identify and determine that which political and autobiographical texts have in common, according to the first sentence of de Man’s “Excuses”: “a referential reading-moment explicitly built in within the spectrum of their significations, no matter how deluded this moment may be in its mode as well as in its thematic content” (AR 278). And determining such a “referential reading moment” means in turn to write a politico-autobiographical text oneself. Meaning that one could as well say that Derrida’s own text is not about de Man, or Rousseau, or Augustine, or anybody else but himself. What happens indeed happens between him and his own text insofar as one of the things that “Typewriter Ribbon” also does is to repeat, in a certain sense, Rousseau’s theft. That is, Derrida steals back what had been taken from him, from his own text, in the first place. This would include de Man’s appropriation of the term “deconstruction” first of all, as well as “dissemination,” and the critical wielding of Austin’s performative. Derrida marks these appropriations, says very little about them, and then goes on to extend their theoretical scope, as though to correct de Man’s use of them for local or “technical” purposes. Although de Man may be wrong in Derrida’s eyes, he is also right about Derrida: whatever happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. Derrida doesn’t need anyone, he doesn’t need Rousseau because he is Rousseau. That is, in stealing back what was taken from him, Derrida repeats Rousseau’s theft of a small ribbon that had been taken away from him—a small ribbon, we should recall, that had been given him by Maman and that he regretted more than anything else.

It turns out, then, that both de Man and Derrida need to say that the other does not need Rousseau, and yet both need Rousseau to say what they need to, and yet cannot, say to one another. “Rousseau” would thus be the allegorical name of reference, of the referential reading moment, or of the referential function itself. But, then again, what do we know about reference and the referential function apart from texts like Rousseau’s, generated by a suspension of reference in utterances like “Marion” whose meaning and reference is nevertheless immediately determined, leaving us with something to read, a
text? One would do better to say that what we call “reference” and the “referential function” is an allegorical name for Rousseau—or de Man, or Derrida, or even Leiris in his essay “De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie.” To end—I don’t say conclude—let me quote the first sentence of “Excuses (Confessions)” again, but this time in its entirety: “Political and autobiographical texts have in common that they share a referential reading-moment explicitly built in within the spectrum of their significations, no matter how deluded this moment may be in its mode as well as in its thematic content: the deadly ‘horn of the bull’ referred to by Michel Leiris in a text that is indeed as political as it is autobiographical” (AR 278). De Man has a footnote to this sentence that identifies Leiris’s text and its publication in 1946. He adds one sentence: “The essay dates from 1945, immediately after the war” (AR 278).12

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NOTES


3 All references marked as M followed by page numbers are to the English and the French editions of: Jacques Derrida, Memoires for Paul de Man revised edition (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) and Mémoires pour Paul de Man (Paris: Galilée, 1988). The interjection in square brackets is Derrida’s own.


7 All references marked as AR followed by a page number are to Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979). “Excuses (Confessions)” was first published under the title “The Purloined Ribbon,” in Glyph 1, ed. Samuel Weber and Henry Sussman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977).


10 On the “super-performative,” see the postscript to my “‘As the poets do it’: On the Material Sublime,” in Material Events, 22–28.

11 See de Man’s comment on his use of the word “deconstruction” in the “Preface” to Allegories of Reading: “Most of this book was written before ‘deconstruction’ became a bone of contention, and the term is used here in a technical rather than a polemical sense—which does not imply that it therefore becomes neutral or ideologically innocent. But I saw no reason to delete it. No other word states so economically the impossibility to evaluate positively or negatively the inescapable evaluation it implies. . . . I consciously came across ‘deconstruction’ for the first time in the writings of Jacques Derrida, which means that it is associated with a power of inventive rigor to which I lay no claim but which I certainly do not wish to erase” (AR x).

12 Michel Leiris, L’Âge d’homme, précédé de De la littérature considérée comme une tauro-machie (Paris: Gallimard, 1946). By the “horn of the bull” Leiris means the actual risk of death run by the toreador. He poses (and answers) the question: is there an equivalent of the “horn of the bull” for a writer writing a work?