CHAPTER 4

Derrida Queries de Man
A Note on the Materiality of the Letter versus the Violence of the Letter

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In his book *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America*, Marc Redfield closes with a reading of two works of art by Mark Tansey.[1] The first, *Derrida Queries de Man* (1990), is an homage to an illustration in *The Strand Magazine* by Sidney Paget (1893) to the Sherlock Holmes short story "The Final Problem" in which Holmes and Moriarty wrestle above the Reichenbach Falls. The second, *Constructing the Grand Canyon* (1990), is a landscape in the American sublime style in which de Man and Derrida sit at the perspectival center of the painting directing the construction and deconstruction of the national landmark. In this essay, while saluting Redfield's detailed reading of the two artworks, I do not intend to repeat the work so meticulously detailed in his 2016 study. I would like to use it as a point of departure for some consideration of the group of artworks by Tansey from around 1990 that Redfield calls "theory-paintings," and then for a wider consideration of questions about the relationship between de Man and Derrida from the perspective of scholarship and art practice in the academy of 2017.

Let me first recount an anecdote about "reading" the Tansey painting *Derrida Queries de Man*. The artwork itself is large at more than three square meters, monochrome in a blue-green hue, with a landscape made from blurred silkscreen lines of printed text, some of which is identifiable as pages 146–47 of de Man's *Blindness and Insight*.[2] On a precipice two figures wrestle, or dance, or embrace, in the style of the Paget illustration, as mist and spray rises and falls from the cascade of water that runs through the center of the image, separating two sides of a gorge. The two figures are of

[1] Marc Redfield, *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[2] See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

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significance here; as Redfield describes the scene in his text, "Paul de Man faces away from us, toward Jacques Derrida and the abyss."[3]

This is Redfield's starting point for everything that follows: there is little doubt in his mind that de Man is the figure with his back to the viewer, and Derrida is the one facing us. However, when my friend Kevin Newmark, who was unfamiliar with the Tansey paintings but familiar with the persons of both Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, looked at *Derrida Queries de Man*, he asked: "Which one did you say de Man was?" For Newmark, it was not at all certain which of the two figures was de Man and which was Derrida, and he had known both de Man and Derrida well during their lifetimes. Indeed, the more one looks at the scene, the more difficult it becomes to be certain which figure is which. The one with his back to the viewer has black hair with a side parting. The figure facing us has grey hair, gathered higher on the head and slightly receding; it could be taken as suggestive of Derrida's meticulously maintained bouffant, but it might equally denote the later de Man of his final years at Yale. There is genuine confusion here, intentional or not, significant or not. Once observed it insists and persists in a way that cannot simply be resolved by a designation of one figure by a proper name and the other by the alternative. It would seem that the tile of the work, *Derrida Queries de Man*, does not just name a scene in which two suited figures wrestle and/or embrace, risking a precipitous fall into an abyss, but describes the setup of a scene of unreadability in which figures cannot be easily distinguished but nevertheless demand our attention.

Redfield himself suggests that the scene is not a stable allegorical structure but one replete with warning signs and "posted danger signals." However, while we could do worse than to heed Redfield's concerns, it would be equally problematic to refuse the significance of the pages that Tansey uses here altogether. In the modernist tradition of *objet trouvé*, the found object can be presented and reframed, and made to signify other than itself, but also and in doing so, perform itself as art. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is both a work of art and a urinal. It is importantly a urinal; this is what gives it meaning as an art object. The lines from de Man's text that Tansey presents as his landscape are both the material for a layering in a representation of a craggy outcrop and the words of pages 146–47 of *Blindness and Insight*.

This is the *aporia* that the work of art presents, like the abyss of the Reichenbach gorge it depicts, and we risk life and limb if we do not tread

[3] Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 160.

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carefully on this slippery surface. Another name for the painting might have been *Impasse* had Tansey not given us the direction of *Derrida Queries de Man*, which he inscribes in the lower right-hand corner, the words running up the other side of the gorge, with the grain of the rock, as legible as the title of de Man's book that runs in the opposite direction on the other side of the abyss, where the ground gives way beneath the feet of the two figures. *Blindness and Insight*, as a title, names a particular *aporia* important to the work of de Man; it is a conceptual but productive impasse that brings de Man into contact with Derrida, and in this book it is de Man who queries Derrida, not the other way around.

We ought to attend to what these pages actually say in *Blindness and Insight*. After all they would seem to be the ground upon which our figures are set upright, as well as the abyss into which they are imminently about to fall. Figure and ground here should be taken to mean not just the penned characters against a suggested ravine, but the organizing principle of perception in art in which objects are distinguished from their background, as the composition of gestalt and affect. Equally, for those with ears to read de Man today, figure here refers to figuration and disfiguration as the dynamic of meaning that de Man begins to lay out in the chapters of *Blindness and Insight* but more fully in *Allegories of Reading* and later work.

Tansey's work of art operates at a high level of self-referentiality. It is produced by an artist familiar with the de Man-inspired readings of the 1980s, which in the words of Barbara Johnson, "enabled readers to become sensitive to a number of recurrent literary topoi in a new way. Texts have been seen as commentaries on their own production or reception through their pervasive thematizations of textuality – the myriad letters, books, tombstones, wills, inscriptions, road signs, maps, birth-marks, tracks, footprints, textiles, tapestries, veils, sheets, brown stockings and self-abolishing laces that serve in one way or another as figures for the text to be deciphered or unraveled or embroidered upon."[4] Tansey's work of art takes that tradition of reading further by translating print into screen-print in a visual tableau, using the actual critical text itself as the material for its own surface. This artwork adds to its own "pervasive thematization of textuality" (the figures of de Man and Derrida in the landscape, the reference to Sherlock Holmes) to incorporate, perhaps one might say here "to inscribe," a literal textuality into the body of the artwork.

[4] Barbara Johnson, "Rigorous Unreliability," in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 18.

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Where de Man spoke of the materiality of the letter, Tansey makes the letter the material of his art. This is a practice familiar to us from Braque and Picasso, who also incorporated material objects into the surfaces of their paintings in order to thematize the constructed nature of art and the artificial flatness of the surface of a painting (*papier-collé, collage*). Like his Surrealist and Cubist forebears, Tansey closes the gap between representation and the represented by incorporating the object of art into the artwork itself. Here Tansey is not merely illustrating an idea from Theory, in the way that Sidney Paget "illustrates" a passage from Conan Doyle's short story, rather he is erasing the gap between illustration and art, between reference and referentiality, between commentary and creating and between Theory and Practice.

The work of art presents a ravine with two sides of rock; the one to the right and in the background of the landscape is a sheer face, lightened by the water that sprays up from the water below, and the second has an outcrop where the two men implausibly grapple, with only the suggestion of the most precarious of paths along which the figures have met. This is in contrast to the Paget original, where although progress along the path seems impossible, it is evident how Holmes and Moriarty got there and ultimately how one of them might get back down again, even if Conan Doyle would have us believe in this story that the two men meet their end in the thunderous water below. In the Tansey painting, the path to the point where de Man and Derrida are positioned looks decidedly insecure. Who could walk such a path, one that is made up of mostly illegible text, leading to a point of no return? On the sides of the cliff in the foreground, the text of *Blindness and Insight* runs sheer into the abyss; its readability made possible through the light afforded by the spray of the water that divides the ravine in an *Aufklärung* that is also a falling.

These are, following Paget, the Reichenbach Falls, as depicted by Turner before Paget, located high in the Alps in the center of Europe, inseparable now from their literary significance and history. Or perhaps these falls are in the gorges of Ithaca ("a place built by and on gorges"[5]) above Cornell University, where de Man taught before he moved to Yale and where sections of *Blindness and Insight* will have been written. While at Cornell de Man also held an appointment at the University of Zurich, a mere two-hour drive from the Reichenbach Falls, where in Tansey's imagination Derrida always already seems to have been waiting for him.

[5] "'We have flipped over the candle': Interview with Ellen S. Burt," in Joanna Callaghan and Martin McQuillan, eds., *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida. The Screenplay and Commentary* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 149.

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These falls are strictly of the imagination, of the image and the *imago*, the term Freud uses for a unconscious idealized image of someone, especially a parent, that influences conscious behavior, and that he, Sachs and Rank used to name their journal in Vienna in 1912, whose later successor was established by Freud and Sachs as *American Imago* in 1939, now published by Johns Hopkins, another of de Man's haunts. *American Imago* might well have been another title of Tansey's artwork. However, it is called *Derrida Queries de Man* and dates from 1990. Therefore, it might be said not to reference or to illustrate a point of Theory found in *Blindness and Insight* or related texts, such as "The Rhetoric Blindness," the central essay in the collection in which de Man takes to task Derrida's reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*.[6] Rather, this is another scene set in a different landscape, the Theory world of 1990, after the so-called de Man affair, the revelation, publication and commentary on de Man's wartime journalism. These waters that cascade through the mind and the middle of Tansey's art are of another order: they are Yale Falls. *Yale Falls* could be another title for this work.

In 1990 Yale had fallen, and the name of deconstruction had, if you pardon the phrase, fallen off a cliff. If Derrida ever queried de Man, it was in the posthumous scene of elegy, in which classically the lost loved one is reunited with the poet in the landscape they knew well when together. In this sense, the landscape here is that of the abyss and the impasse, hewn from the very words and letters of de Man's texts. In Tansey's painting the two men meet again in the pages of *Blindness and Insight* in a scene that could be one of embrace and forgiveness or one of accusation and repercussion.

The image references Conan Doyle, but in this sense it might equally suggest Dante; this is the landscape of the afterlife of Theory, following the path through the Falls that appear in the third round of circle VII in the Inferno, marking the realm of the Sodomites (Eve Sedgwick will have had something to say about the homosocial, murderous pursuit of query and quarry in Holmes and Moriarty, and in Tansey's image of the wrestling de Man and Derrida).[7] It would not be too much later that Derrida would in fact query de Man in two texts collected in *Without Alibi*, "*Le parjure*" and "Typewriter Ribbon," where for the first time he attempts to put some distance between his own work and that of de Man.[8]

[6] See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
[7] See Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
[8] See Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

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The first of these essays, "*Le parjure*, Perhaps," engages with a remarkable novel by Henri Thomas that fictionalizes the charge of perjury brought against Paul de Man in the 1950s. Derrida provides an autobiographical disclosure concerning the novel by Thomas's "*Le parjure*" with its fictional representation of de Man's bigamous marriage in America. Stéphane Chalier, Thomas's narrator, who is the acolyte and witness and who accompanies the novel's antihero across the United States, offers us the notable refrain, "after all it was not me." One cannot help but feel that Derrida's presentation of these words in one context are intended to resonate across to other histories he had with de Man, stories in which the Belgian scholar may have forgotten to mention certain facts.

In "Typewriter Ribbon," Derrida returns to the question of Rousseau, where all of this began. Here, Derrida is reading de Man reading Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*, just as de Man's *Blindness and Insight* presented de Man reading Derrida reading Rousseau, another Swiss who found a home in the Alps. Derrida is more robust with de Man in "Typewriter Ribbon," an account of the "Excuses" chapter of *Allegories*, than he is anywhere else across their iterative relationship.

These two essays look like another scene of *Derrida Queries de Man*, of interrogative elegy, old friends reunited in the landscape of Rousseau, in which Derrida has a final say, letting us know one last time that "after all it was not me who forgot to mention certain facts." To address the question whether we should read these essays as Derrida returning fire or as another passage in the complex dance/embrace/wrestle that Tansey captures would require a space greater than the one afforded to me here.[9] They postdate the Tansey painting but provide a frame for a work of art, the choreographed encounter identified by the name *Derrida Queries de Man*, which might speak to a certain performativity as well as a particular methodology or means of progressing through a textual landscape.

In other words, it would name a certain deconstruction, both a moment of deconstruction, a singular and significant, long-awaited reading, and a staging of deconstruction, a performance of its performativity, in an encounter between Derrida and de Man, orthodox and reform, legitimate and bastard, legal and renegade. The allusion to Holmes and Moriarty suggests a conflict between uncanny doubles, nemesis and rival, between an evil genius and a lawman who often crosses the line, acting in a criminal fashion to uphold the law. Kevin Newmark's comments reminded us

[9] I have treated these essays and this problematic in greater detail in *Deconstruction after Derrida* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

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earlier that it was not clear which would be Derrida and which would be de Man, two sides of the same coin erased in the pockets of old philosophers. However, if Tansey accurately captures a sense that de Man and Derrida are bound together on the edge of precipice, these two later essays by Derrida, to my mind, speak of a wish on Derrida's part that if Yale falls, then de Man is not taking Derrida down with him. After all, in the Sherlock Holmes stories, the detective rises again from the Reichenbach waters, having faked his death and offering his co-terminal fate with his Other as a ruse for his readers. After Yale falls, Derrida rises again. In many senses we might recognize Derrida querying de Man as "The Final Problem" for the author of "*Le parjure.*"

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A second Tansey painting from this same period, "*Under Erasure*," offers a related visual scenario and might be thought of as a companion piece to *Derrida Queries de Man*. Here we have a close-up of a waterfall cascading off of a rock face comprised of pages 112–13 of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*; the water flows down the middle of the pages in a space that Derrida identifies in *Dissemination* with the hymen.[10] The flow of liquid obscures the edges of the text and the resulting spray renders the pages ever more illegible as we descend into the depths below. *Under Erasure* then also refers to the literal practice of Tansey's screen-printing technique. The image is cropped before cliffs and torrent reach the bottom. Perhaps, this is the waterfall that stands behind the two figures in *Derrida Queries de Man*, the *Grammatology* irrigating the pages of *Blindness and Insight* further down the ravine. However, the spray behind the two figures in the Derrida–de Man painting would seem to be of a different order of force than the stream in this painting. Rather, the one we have here is reminiscent of the Lake District, so familiar to de Man's *ur-spring* Wordsworth, where the flow is dependent upon the seasons and is seldom as significant as the waterfalls in the Alps or the sort of Niagara that Tansey places behind the figures of America's Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida in his other artwork. In either case, the cascade erases, over time, the words inscribed on the mountain-side doing a literal violence to the letter. The question of erasure, deletion and forgetting is entirely germane to Tansey's work of art.

While Marc Redfield warns us against reading too much into *Derrida Queries de Man*, i.e. to read literally the text that forms the material surface of the work of art, he himself resists his own advice and comments on the

[10] See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1983).

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pages from *Blindness and Insight*, suggesting that foregrounding of a page "that cites Nietzsche on memory and forgetting may be adduced as, among other things, a discreet tracking device, orientated toward the media storm that marks the culminating point of the phantasmatics of theory in America."[11] He is not wrong in his assessment of these pages. However, in his attempt not to read literally, he may be reading far too literally. Tansey may be channeling Derrida, channeling the acolyte in Henri Thomas's novel when he tells Chevalier that he was not the one who forgot to mention certain facts. There is undoubtedly a part of that in the painting, or at least we can now read it in this way because Tansey, like most of us in 1990, was unlikely to have been familiar with the novel. There is also a certain forgetting that will need to take place for deconstruction to reach the heights it once commanded after it has fallen off the cliff edge of the de Man affair. However, it is the "other things" that Redfield alludes to here that interest us in this present commentary.

These paragraphs from de Man's book may have been chosen at random by the artist and the merged and blurred lines may come from other parts of the book, or another book entirely; it is importantly undecidable. However, it is just as likely that they were chosen deliberately by an artist who is familiar with de Man's Theory and who works knowingly within the conceits of art history. Either way the intention is unimportant, rather what is of significance is that which the artwork presents in its affect and gives us as a singular insistence to read. Therefore, it is entirely relevant for a certain reading that these pages come from this particular section of *Blindness and Insight*, and while they might not be sending us a message they are certainly leaving a trace.

It is significant that Braque uses a metro ticket to form the surface of his artwork; it is not merely a commentary on the practice of art and the art institution (although it is also this), but it is the incorporation of the metro ticket that makes the art object art. It is from here that it derives its significance. Equally, it is the fact that Tansey embeds a text by de Man in his artwork that makes it art. The meaning and performativity of the artwork cannot be separated from these pages as a citation and as a sighting and a siting, raising Tansey's work beyond mere illustration into reframing and iteration. It is the very thing that makes Tansey's work from this period something like what Redfield calls "theory-painting."

To attempt to set aside the significance of de Man's text here seems willfully, if not obscure, then perhaps "literalist" on Redfield's part. It is

[11] Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 173.

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odd that Redfield does not want to leave a mark on Tansey's artwork when there are so many marks already involved in this scene. So what does de Man say in these pages? Why is it of importance to the question of theory-painting? And how is it related to the pages from *Of Grammatology* that Tansey uses in *Under Erasure*, which we must treat in an equally literal way by reading them as having some significance to the work of art? Attempting to provide satisfactory answers to these three questions guides this present inquiry to a close.

First, the paragraphs in question run over from an argument that begins on the previous page as we enter into the second movement of the essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity." In the opening salvos of the text de Man has set up a series of non-sequiturs suggesting that literature and modernity may be incompatible concepts and that history and modernity may be even more at odds. At stake here is a questioning of the value that academic work places on historicization as a justification of its own institutional formation: "only an exceptionally talented and perhaps eccentric member of the profession could undertake [the task of putting the term history seriously into question] with sufficient energy to make it effective, and even then it is likely to be accompanied by the violence that surrounds passion and rebellion."[12] De Man cites Nietzsche as a philologist turned academic maverick, as someone who questioned a culture based on the disciplines of history, challenging a historical consciousness based on periodization and an obsession with the past.

As the page turns from 145 to 146, de Man is in mid-sentence suggesting that an emphasis on modernity in academic framing of history is an effect of this consciousness that Nietzsche's "cultural criticism" would directly address: "modernity is a descriptive term that designates a certain state of mind" (p. 146). Accordingly, for de Man, the more dynamic approach that Nietzsche takes to understanding the problem of modernity is to oppose history to "Life." De Man unpacks this proposition in the paragraphs that follow, in the pages Tansey utilizes as the surface material of his artwork. We might then say that what de Man is discussing in these important pages is the meaning of "Life." That is no ordinary question for a philosopher or a philologist, and it is hard to imagine that this was lost on the sly artist Tansey.

The meaning of "Life" is quite specific here. Nietzsche conceives of the term not just in biological terms but in temporal ones "as the ability to *forget* whatever precedes a present situation."[13] The definition arises from

[12] Ibid., 145. [13] Ibid., 146.

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Nietzsche's opposition to the Romanticism of Rousseau, which de Man is keen to emphasize as in fact a Rousseauistic pattern itself. De Man glosses a quote from Nietzsche on the animal's ability to forget by saying: "this ability to forget and to live without historical awareness exists not only on an animal level. Since 'life' has an ontological as well as biological meaning the condition of animality persists as a constitutive part of man. Not only are there moments when it governs his actions, but these are also the moments when he re-establishes contact with his spontaneity and allows his truly human nature to assert itself."[14] De Man is doing little more here than following Nietzsche's line of argument as it reflects the Rousseau he ostensibly opposes. However, in so doing he foregrounds a formal problem that looms large in the later thought of de Man associated with his work published, anachronistically under the collective title *Aesthetic Ideology*, as de Man's final problem.[15] I am thinking here not of one of the essays collected in Andrzej Warminski's significant editorial endeavor but in the text "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," which dates from 1983. This text is closely related to those texts gathered in the *Aesthetic Ideology* volume as the second of the Messenger Lectures de Man delivered at Cornell, somewhere among the gorges and waterfalls.[16]

In "Aesthetic Formalization," de Man identifies what he sees as a misreading of Kant in Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*.[17] At stake is the pivot between Theory and Practice, or between Critique and "Life," the difference between thought and action and the necessary forgetting that inserts itself between the two in order for action or making to take place. This insertion happens not in order to dichotomize the choice between Theory and Practice, but it occurs over an abyss on the very edge of a precipice, constantly risking a fall, while carving out a landscape in which the sheer cliffs of Theory and Practice reflect and supplement one another.

To go too quickly, the crucial moment comes in Schiller's translation of Kant's mathematical and dynamic sublime into his preferred terms the "theoretical" and "practical" sublime. The distinction in Kant arises from a desire to understand two possible failures of representation. In Schiller,

[14] Ibid.

[15] See Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[16] See Paul de Man, "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Audio recordings of the full Messenger Lectures are available on The London Graduate School website: www.thelondongraduateschool.co.uk/blog/listen-to-paul-de-man-the-messenger-lectures-1983/.

[17] I provide an extended treatment of this essay in *Critical Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

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according to de Man, the slippage in terminology arises from a desire to prefer one flavor of sublimity to the other. There then follows from Schiller a tradition that favors the practical over Ivory Tower-bound theory. However, Schiller makes his choice because as a playwright and artist he finds the dynamic performance of terror a greater draw to an audience than the mathematical consideration of magnitude. Terror makes better art, as the grappling figures in Paget and Tansey demonstrate.

All of this must be read here in the context of Tansey's work (including his sublime landscapes of American theory) as an artist, a maker like Schiller, or perhaps a theory-painter who attempts to straddle the chasm, while Schiller chooses to plant his flag firmly on the side of the utility of philosophy for making art. There is then, importantly, a serious forgetting at work in the Schillerian gesture that takes a leap beyond the impasse of Kant's categorization of the sublime. The artist must forget the immobilizing fear or prudence of Theory and jump into the beyond, forgetting that there is an abyss beneath his feet. Neither the cliff face of Theory nor the sheer drop of the artwork provide secure footing or refuge from the terror of the abyss, but forgetting allows the leap and in the leap, the process of the jump or fall, we find the moment of art. It is here, in the terms Nietzsche offers us via the slopes of *Blindness and Insight*, that "Life" is affirmed at its fullest, at that moment when we struggle at the edge of the abyss with an impossible opponent who as our Other and double can only ever be ourselves. This is a moment of experience that was surely known to Nietzsche, de Man and Derrida and that Tansey presents in the sublimity of a six-foot long canvas that brings the Theory of the philosophers to Life, as it were.

This problematic in the essay on Kleist is indicative of the wider problematic that de Man develops in the Messenger Lectures around what we now call the materiality of the letter, namely, and to go too fast once again, the confusion between the signifier and the signified as the inscription of ideology in the material world and so as the very experience of the material world. Schiller mistakes the effect of terror in his theatre as an adequate formalization of terror, even though a far more terrifying non-understanding lies beneath in the abyss below his stage. Similarly, the "Life" that Nietzsche promotes depends upon a forgetting of what led to this moment of affirmation. And yet just as Schiller must forget to make theatre, Nietzsche must forget to feel alive; if it is an aberration, it is one necessary to the human condition.

De Man notes on page 147 of *Blindness and Insight*: "Moments of genuine humanity thus are moments at which all anteriority vanishes,

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annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting. Although such a radical rejection of history may be illusory or unfair to the achievements of the past, it nevertheless remains justified as necessary to the fulfillment of our human destiny and as the condition for action." It would be a very poor literal reader who took de Man's words as some sort of an exculpation of his own personal history. Rather, he is describing via Nietzsche a remarkable insight into practice (in all its senses), writing, art and living. If you think him blind to the splinter in his own eye, then let that be your prerogative on this occasion and completely in keeping with arguments advanced by de Man in his writing and by Mark Tansey in this artwork that inscribes this argument into his own theory-painting. I am not suggesting that Tansey is familiar with the essay on Kleist and its relation to these pages from *Blindness and Insight*. Rather, the point is that this textual constellation forms the surface of Tansey's artwork, making the materiality of the letter the very material of the visual. In his own way, Tansey must jump across the abyss between Theory and Practice to make art, and so his painting will have forgotten more than it ever knew in order to perform its status as "theory-painting."

The final third of page 147 of *Blindness and Insight* moves on from a consideration of forgetting and history to a commentary on fashion as the only mode appropriate to modernity or of a consciousness that privileges modernity. While these lines may be legible to only the most patient or obsessed of Tansey's viewers they can surely not be ignored in relation to Tansey's presentation and commentary on the Yale School and the de Man affair: falling out of fashion is the final problem of the avant-garde. These paragraphs were perhaps closer to the front of Tansey's mind when making his art object than the argument of the Messenger Lectures.

It is telling that in *Derrida Queries de Man* and *Under Erasure* Tansey mobilizes lines from the two most prominent texts from the deconstructive canon during the 1980s, which is not to question his scholarship (I suspect as an artist he might snort at the very idea) but to suggest that as someone who may be familiar with a limited range of texts by de Man and Derrida that he is an astute close reader of Theory. His piece *Close Reading*, also from 1990, presents a mountaineer of the extreme sports variety, dressed in what we might be tempted to call a Lyotard, climbing a sheer face of rock composed from lines from *Blindness and Insight*.

This is not a climber dressed against the elements to ascend the Swiss Alps but a Californian, like Tansey, trying to find a foothold in the sheer face of Theory. By 1990, after its fall from grace at Yale, deconstruction had

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made a new home and was rising again at the University of California, Irvine, where J. Hillis Miller had taken a chair and Derrida with him. There is much to say about this artwork and the related painting that Redfield addresses, *Constructing the Grand Canyon*, but by way of closing and in order to balance the scales with de Man, lest they topple and fall, on this occasion allow me to turn to the pages in *Of Grammatology* that Tansey inscribes in *Under Erasure*.

To go too quickly once more and to be positively sprinting now in the space that remains, these pages come from the first chapter of Part II of *Of Grammatology* in Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss en route to another scene with Rousseau, perhaps waiting to meet him at the Creux-du-Van on the way to Motiers in the Swiss Alps to initiate another query in a quarry. Lévi-Strauss in this respect, like Nietzsche in the de Man, fails to escape the gravitational pull of the Rousseauistic enterprise he seeks to exceed. If we were to credit Tansey with the same readerly insight as we afforded him with respect to de Man, we would say that again he has chosen a significant moment in the text of Derrida that is worthy of consideration.

Here, Derrida recalls the way in which the anthropologist inculcates himself in the "aboriginal" scene in order to leverage a scientific commentary that in fact reproduces the very discourse of violence it seeks to observe. This violence comes with the rights of naming in which the privilege reserved for adults in the community does violence to the children under observation, and is then outflanked by the extrinsic violence of the anthropological observation, "the intimacy of proper names can be opened to forced entry. And that is possible only at the moment when the space is shaped and reoriented by the glance of the foreigner."[18] These pages are often read as a condemnation of the anthropologist; however, they are better understood as a description of the violence and ex-appropriation involved in all naming. Once we are in language there is only the unavoidable violence of the otherness we present to ourselves, "the eye of the other calls out the proper names, spells them out, and removes the prohibition that covered them."[19] In this sense the violence of the letter in Derrida is very similar to the materiality of the letter in de Man; naming is both a necessary gesture of reason and another mystification, just as forgetting is a necessary break from impasse and another reinscription of *aporia*.

[18] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 113. [19] Ibid.

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In both de Man and Derrida we have an understanding that an opening is just another step to possible foreclosure, like two cliff edges tempting the solitary walker to jump. The significance of these pages for Tansey might lie in the act of erasure, the forgetting of the violence of the letter, worn away by the constant fall. In naming his own artworks Tansey enters into his own anthropological moment that attempts to arrest the flow from the source of de Man and Derrida into the stream of writing that heads toward the rapids and spray of Tansey's chiaroscuro of figures and ground. Throughout this text I have offered alternative names for some of Tansey's art, to note that they might as well signify otherwise as allegories of painting. One could play this game for any length of time, but it has a point. One should be careful to attribute proper names to figures in writing or in painting when the impossibility of figuration is the very frame of the work in question. Or at least one should be aware of the violence one will be doing to history when, for example, identifying the configuration of Theory in America with the proper names of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. This would, in many respects, be the whole point of Redfield's remarkable and important book.

I will conclude with three observations. First, that while Derrida and de Man, orthodox and reform, have their salient differences as they wrestle over the proper name of deconstruction (e.g. Derrida has little interest in Romanticism or Modernity as categories), from the position of a reader in 2017, unfamiliar with the history of Yale and its distant affairs, if there is to be a recovery of and reconnection with deconstruction, then it will come around to a return to the question of the Other as an interruption of a too hasty formalization of the material.[20] Second, it is interesting to note the work that an artist like Tansey puts de Man and Derrida too in his art. Tansey, unlike Redfield, may well have read only two books by the men, but he has read them really well, and opens them up in surprising and inventive ways. While there is something in Redfield's account that for all its scholarship begins to look like a foreclosure that is also, despite intentions, a historicization. Third, the lesson that de Man and Derrida might have to teach an artist today is that: (a) first there is history but then there is deconstruction, but then, (b) get over it, because (c) there is art. It is just a pity that so few in the academy make it beyond part (a) of that that lesson.

[20] See Simon Morgan Wortham's recent engagements with materialism in work such as *Modern Thought in Pain: Philosophy, Politics, Psychoanalysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

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