

## Lecture 2: Notorious Cases

### 1) The Problem of Responsibility

- a) Paul de Man
- b) Salman Rushdie

### 2) The Problem of Authenticity

- a) Ossian/James Macpherson
- b) Benjamin Wilkomirski/Bruno Grosjean

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### 1) The Problem of Responsibility

#### a) Paul de Man (1919-1983)

##### English editions:

*Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971, 2nd rev. ed. 1983)

*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979)

*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984)

*The Resistance to Theory* (1986)

*Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943* (1988)

*Critical Writings, 1953-1978* (1989)

- a leading proponent of deconstruction/poststructuralism in literary theory

Late in 1987, a short article run by the *New York Times* under the title 'Yale Scholar's Articles Found in Nazi Paper' set in motion a process of re-evaluation not only of Paul de Man's career as a theorist but of the deconstructive movement in whose name he worked, and of the ethics of detaching the text from the writer. At a time when critical theory thought to have dispensed with the idea of authorship, the posthumous revelation of de Man's wartime writings brought the author back to centre stage. For critical theorists themselves, all of whom owe a debt of influence to de Man and some the debt of friendship, the entire affair has unfolded like a nightmare. And the nightmare in this case, as so often, is history, a history in which, between 1940 and 1942, a young intellectual published 170 articles in the collaborationist Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, a certain number of which articles express anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi sentiments.

(Burke 1998, 1)

I am not given to retrospective self-examination and mercifully forget what I have written with the same alacrity I forget bad movies – although as with bad movies, certain scenes or phrases return at times to embarrass and haunt me like a guilty conscience. When one imagines to have felt the exhilaration of renewal one is certainly the last to know whether such a change actually took place or whether one is just restating, in a slightly different mode, earlier and unresolved obsessions... Thus seeing a distant segment of one's past resurrected gives one a slightly uncanny feeling of repetition.

Paul de Man, Introduction to 2nd ed. of *B&I*, 1983: xii.

[T]he bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions.

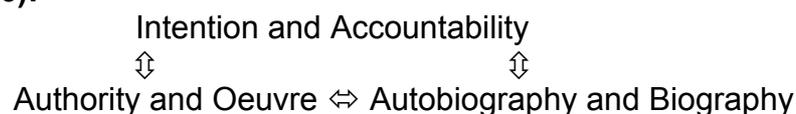
Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity", in: *B&I*, 2nd. ed., p. 165.

### Reactions:

- deconstruction as an aberration whose elision of the historical, the subjective and the ethical makes it defenceless against totalitarian temptations
- the wartime writings as an aberration in de Man's thought which his further career strove to retract and rectify
- de Man's stature as a conceptual theoretician and philosopher of language is unaffected by earlier writings or the signs of duplicity in his biography which emerged in the aftermath of the affair

(cf. Burke 1998, 3)

### Six Cardinal Intersections of Author and Text emerge from the debate (cf. Burke 1998, 4-6):



## **b) Salman Rushdie (1947- )**

### **Novels:**

*Grimus* (1975)  
*Midnight's Children* (1981)  
*Shame* (1983)  
*The Satanic Verses* (1988)  
*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990)  
*The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)  
*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999)  
*Fury* (2001)  
*Shalimar the Clown* (2005)  
*The Enchantress of Florence* (2008)  
*Luka and the Fire of Life* (2011)

### **Essays:**

*Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991)  
*Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002* (2002)

**Autobiography:** *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012)

### **Shame (1983)**

- historiographic metafiction about Pakistani history
- new narrative technique: 'postmodern' authorial narration

*Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?*

I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...] The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...] I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained. [...] (28/29)

But suppose this were a realistic novel! [...] By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally [...] The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale [...] [N]obody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief! (69/70)

### ***The Satanic Verses* (1988)**

- an extension of the narrative mode developed in *Shame* to a 'global' sujet
- combination of a contemporary main plot (the plight of migrants in late-20th century England) with a historically and geographically far-reaching inquiry into the nature of religious beliefs
- a plea for hybridity, for 'taking a stand while lacking a centre'

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and – potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes? (10)

[I]t was then, at the precise moment of [Gibreel's] greatest wrath, that the boundaries of the earth broke, he heard a noise like the bursting of a dam, and as the spirits of the world of dreams flooded through the breach into the universe of the quotidian, Gibreel Farishta saw God.

For Blake's Isaiah, God had simply been an immanence, an incorporeal indignation; but Gibreel's vision of the Supreme Being was not abstract in the least. He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt and pepper beard cropped close to the line of jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. 'Who are you?' he asked with interest. (318)

### **Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith" (1990) [IH 393-414]**

At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature [...] It felt impossible, amid such hubbub, to insist on the fictionality of fiction [...] Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical. Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history.

(393/409)

### **Salman Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred?" (1990) [IH 415-429]**

Do I, perhaps, find something sacred after all? Am I prepared to set aside as holy the idea of the absolute freedom of the imagination and alongside it my own notions of the World, the Text, the Good? Does this add up to what the apologists of religion have started calling 'secular fundamentalism'? And if so, must I accept that this 'secular fundamentalism' is as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the canons of religious faith? (418)

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist, and so it can never be 'finished' or 'perfect'. [...] Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. [...] The only privilege literature deserves [...] is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out. (427)

### **Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (2012)**

*The children in the classroom in Bodega Bay, California, sing a sad non-sense song. She combed her hair but once a year, ristle-te, ristle-te, mo, mo mo. Outside the school a wind is blowing. A single blackbird flies down from the sky and settles on a climbing frame in the playground. The children's song is a roundelay. It begins but it doesn't end. It just goes round and round. With every stroke she shed a tear, ristle-te, ristle-te, hey-bombosity, knicketyknackety, retroquo-quality, willowy-wallaby, mo, mo, mo. There are four blackbirds on the climbing frame, and then a fifth arrives. Inside the school the children are singing. Now there are hundreds of blackbirds on the climbing frame and thousands more birds fill the sky, like a plague of Egypt. A song has begun, to which there is no end.*

*When the first blackbird comes down to roost on the climbing frame it seems individual, peculiar, specific. It is not necessary to deduce a general theory, a wider scheme of things, from its mere presence. Later, after the plague begins, it's easy for people to see the first blackbird as a harbinger. But when it lands on the climbing frame it's just one bird.*

*In the years to come he will dream this scene, understanding that his story is a sort of prologue: the tale of the moment when the first blackbird lands. When it begins it's just about him; it's individual, particular, specific. Nobody feels inclined to draw any conclusions from it. It will be a dozen years and more before the story grows until it fills the sky, like the Archangel Gabriel standing upon the horizon, like a pair of planes flying into tall buildings, like the plague of murderous birds in Alfred Hitchcock's great film. (4) [...]*

*Footsteps. Winter. A black wing fluttering on a climbing frame. I inform the proud Muslim people of the world, ristle-te, ristle-te, mo, mo, mo. To execute them wherever they may find them. Ristle-te, ristle-te, hey bombosity, knickety-knackety, retroquoquality. willowby-wallaby, mo, mo, mo. (16)*

## 2) The Problem of Authenticity

### a) Ossian/James Macpherson

*Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (1760)

*Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem: composed by Ossian* (1762)

*Temora, An Ancient Epic Poem: composed by Ossian* (1763)

*The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal, in two volumes: To which is subjoined a critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian. By Hugh Blair D.D.* (1765)

James Macpherson's (1736-96) supposed translations of the poetry of Ossian, a third century bard of the Scottish Highlands, are now chiefly known as the most spectacular literary forgery of the eighteenth century. Based on collections of Gaelic ballads and old manuscripts made on tours of the Highlands, Macpherson reworked the material he collected as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). The last two volumes were epic poems, a form he believed would meet the polite literary tastes of Edinburgh and London. [...] [In 1805 a committee confirmed earlier suspicions and] concluded that Macpherson had over-zealously edited his original and had inserted passages, but the findings did not seriously damage the cult status of the poems. (Mc Calman 1999, 630)

Ossian's importance to European Romanticism [...] seems beyond question [...] The resurgence of nationalism in almost any part of modern Europe seems to have been heralded by a version of Ossian [...] Macpherson's mixture of ancient heroism, a threatened language and apparently free forms, all against a background of mountains, moors, lakes, sea, mist, storms and autumnal decay, could appeal in contradictory ways. It fed revolution and reaction, international anti-Classicism and primitive national revival [...] it confirmed the superiority of Northern literature over that of the Mediterranean. It presented Catholic absolutism with a more insidious enemy than the Enlightenment, for there seemed to be no religion in Fingal's world. [...]

Macpherson seemed to be throwing down the gauntlet to every contemporary canon [...] What Macpherson had done in reconstructing "Ur" texts from scattered fragments was to become standard practice in the early twentieth century in the treatment of African oral materials. [...] [M]ore than any other eighteenth century text, Ossian changed attitudes to the nature of literary inspiration – as a mantic, almost shamanistic visionary communion with a spiritual Otherworld [...] Macpherson's rash attempt to extrapolate epic poems from his ancient fragments was to prove programmatic for the vogue which was to sweep Europe for the next century: to elucidate the origins of nations by collecting their folk songs and retrieving their foundational epics. In the process, both nationalism and historicism were born, replacing a previously undifferentiated 'world literature' with the national texts associated with the Romantic movement.

Ossian's importance does not lie in its subject matter or literary form but its flavour, its heroic-melancholy sentimentalism, its thematization of loss and historical defeat, its use of liminality and mantic ideas of inspiration.

(White 2006 in a review of Gaskill 2004)

## **The Songs of Selma**

### **Argument**

Address to the evening star. Apostrophe to Fingal and his times. Minona sings before the king the song of the unfortunate Colma; and the bards exhibit other specimens of their poetical talents, according to an annual custom established by the monarchs of the ancient Caledonians.

Star of descending: night! fair is thy light in the west! thou liftest thy unshorn head from thy cloud: thy steps are stately on thy hill. What dost thou behold in the plain? The stormy winds are laid. The murmur of the torrent comes from afar. Roaring waves climb the distant rock. The flies of evening are on their feeble wings; the hum of their course is on the field. What dost thou behold, fair light? But thou dost smile and depart. The waves come with joy around thee: they bathe thy lovely hair. Farewell, thou silent beam! Let the light of Ossian's soul arise!

And it does arise in its strength! I behold my departed friends. Their gathering is on Lora, as in the days of others years. Fingal comes like a watery column of mist; his heroes are around. And see the bards of song, grey-haired Ullin! stately Ryno! Alpin, with the tuneful voice! the soft complaint of Minona! How are ye changed, my friends, since the days of Selma's feast? when we contended, like gales of spring, as they fly along the hill, and bend by turns the feebly-whistling grass.[...]

## b) Benjamin Wilkomirski/Bruno Grosjean

- Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939-1948*. Frankfurt/M.: Jüdischer Verlag/Suhrkamp, 1995.  
*Fragments. Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948*. Translated from the German by Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Schocken Books, 1996.
- 1998: Daniel Ganzfried argues in a Swiss newsweekly that Wilkomirski is Bruno Grosjean, the illegitimate child of an unmarried mother called Yvonne Grosjean, born in Biel/Switzerland, and later adopted by the Dössekkers, a wealthy and childless couple in Zurich
- 1999: Historian Stefan Maechler is commissioned by W's literary agency to investigate the accusations (cf. Maechler 2000/2001).

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