

**Antigone’s “Choice for the Destiny of Niobe”:  
Hölderlin’s “Remarks on Antigone” in the Writings of Paul de Man**

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**Resumo:** As *Observações sobre Antígona*, i. e., o comentário que Hölderlin escreveu acompanhando suas traduções de **Édipo** e **Antígona** de Sófocles, estão entre os textos mais difíceis, densos e labirínticos da filosofia moderna. Descreverei, nesse ensaio, como as *Observações sobre Antígona* funcionam nos primeiros ensaios de Paul de Man de 1956 e 1959: em *Processo e Poesia*, ou melhor, para dar seu título original em *Monde Nouveau, Le Devenir, la Poésie*, e *Hölderlin et la Tradition Romantique*. A palestra foi dada por de Man em Brandeis, em fevereiro de 1959; a versão completa, recentemente redescoberta, foi publicada pela primeira vez em outubro 2012, na revista *Diacritics*. Uma leitura complexa de passagens chave de *Observações sobre Antigone* de Hölderlin é a base para de Man delinear a situação histórica e a estrutura ontológica da poesia moderna; são textos nos quais de Man se posiciona a respeito a autores muito importantes em sua obra mais tardia – Baudelaire, Mallarmé e, sobretudo, Rousseau. Eles elucidam como de Man lê Hölderlin, mostrando como as *Observações*, a Carta a Böhlendorff, e o poema “Der Rhein” têm a capacidade de nutrir nosso entendimento contemporâneo da literatura e história europeia.

**Palavras-Chave:** Observações Sobre Antígona; Hölderlin; De Man; Poesia Moderna.

**Abstract:** The *Remarks on Antigone*, the second part of the commentary he wrote accompanying his translations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, are among Hölderlin’s most difficult, dense, rebarbative texts. I shall describe in this essay how the *Remarks on Antigone* function in those revealing early essays by Paul de Man of 1956 and 1959: in *Process and Poetry*, or rather, to give its original title in *Monde Nouveau, Le Devenir, la Poésie*, and “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” the lecture de Man delivered at Brandeis in February 1959 the recently rediscovered complete version of which was published for the first time last October in *diacritics*. A complex and largely implicit reading of key passages of Hölderlin’s *Anmerkungen zur Antigone* is the basis for de Man’s outlining of the historical situation and the ontological structure of modern poetry. These early texts of

de Man concern authors highly important in his later work—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and above all, Rousseau. They also offer the opportunity of observing how de Man reads Hölderlin. Moreover, the texts of Hölderlin on which de Man focuses in those early readings — namely the *Anmerkungen*, the Letter to Böhlendorff, and the poem “Der Rhein”— have the capacity to nourish our own contemporary understanding of European literature and history.

**Key-words:** *Remarks on Antigone*; Hölderlin; De Man; Modern Poetry.

The *Anmerkungen zur Antigone*, or “Remarks on Antigone,” the second part of the commentary he wrote accompanying his translations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, are among Hölderlin’s most difficult, dense, rebarbative texts. Hölderlin’s translations themselves, of Pindar and Sophocles, in the last fifty years came to be recognized, as Paul de Man described them in a lecture in 1959 at Brandeis University, as “a high moment in the dialogue between the Greek and the modern Western world” (HRT 112). It was the *Antigone*, and the “Remarks on Antigone,” to which de Man turned in two essays of the 1950’s in order to interpret and evaluate Romanticism, the critical tradition, and the chances of modern poetry. Despite the distance between de Man’s writing before and after what has been called his “rhetorical turn,” the value judgments, concepts, and certain motifs of those early essays endured. The shade of Antigone haunts one’s reading of his work of the ‘70’s and ‘80’s on Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Shelley. I shall describe in this essay how the “Remarks on Antigone” function in those revealing early essays of 1956 and 1959: in “Process and Poetry,” or rather, to give its original title in *Monde Nouveau*, “Le Devenir, la Poésie,” and “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” the lecture de Man delivered at Brandeis in February 1959 the recently rediscovered complete version of which was published for the first time last October in *diacritics*. A complex and largely implicit reading of key passages of Hölderlin’s *Anmerkungen zur Antigone* is the basis, in the lecture and in the essay, for de Man’s outlining of the historical situation and the ontological structure of modern poetry. These early texts of de Man concern authors highly important in his later work—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and above all, Rousseau. They also offer the opportunity of observing

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how de Man reads Hölderlin; they add to what we know of de Man's approach from his 1964 and 1970 pieces in the *New York Review of Books* [believe it or not] taking issue with Heidegger's interpretations. Moreover, the texts of Hölderlin on which de Man focuses in those early readings—namely the *Anmerkungen*, the Letter to Böhlendorff, and the late "river poem" "Der Rhein"—have the capacity to nourish our own contemporary understanding of European literature and history.

Those texts of Hölderlin are vital for de Man's understanding of the author most lastingly at the heart of his work: Rousseau. The source of de Man's Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I would claim, is Friedrich Hölderlin—and in the first place, an interpretation reliant on Hölderlin's "Remarks" on *Antigone* and on the poem de Man calls the "keystone" of Hölderlin interpretation, the late "hymn" "Der Rhein." De Man's reading of Rousseau remains inseparable from his reading of Hölderlin's readings of Rousseau. For the figure making an appearance in interpretations of Rousseau from 1969 onward<sup>1</sup>—the year of de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and "The Rhetoric of Blindness," his *réplique* to Derrida's *De la grammatologie*—is recognizably continuous with the lucid Rousseau that emerges in de Man's two writings on "Der Rhein," "Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition" (1959)—de Man's earliest public writing on Rousseau—and "L'image de Rousseau dans la poésie de Hölderlin," 1965. In reply to Derrida, in 1970, de Man would write: "On the question of rhetoric, on the nature of figural language, Rousseau was not deluded and said what he meant to say. ... The *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* are texts whose discursive assertions account for their rhetorical mode."<sup>2</sup> De Man's essay's telling title "The Rhetoric of Blindness" alludes not only to his book *Blindness and Insight*'s theme "the interplay between critical and literary language in terms of blindness and insight" (BI, 137) but also to de Man's point of difference with Derrida: is or is not Rousseau's writing "blind to its own statement."<sup>3</sup> De Man ascribes to Rousseau's *Essai* the knowledge that Derrida makes explicit in the course of reading Rousseau's *Essai* as affirming the opposite. In "The Rhetoric of Blindness" and in 1979 in *Allegories of Reading*, de

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<sup>1</sup> And already in Barbara Guetti's dissertation of 1968...

<sup>2</sup> *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971, 1983), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> See Joshua Wilner, "Primal Encounters around Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*," International Conference on Romanticism, 2011.

Man finds in Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and *Essay on the Origin of Languages* the power to provoke the "crisis" circumstances under which a work being said to be blind has been blinding—blinding the *critic* to the illumination that the critic employs to demystify the text from which, in truth, his illumination issues.

"Der Rhein" begins with the poet's position in proximity to the Rhine; it evokes the course of the river—which flows first eastward "toward Asia" before turning away and back toward its source-- and modulates, in stanza 8, into four stanzas in which Rousseau comes to the fore, by way of allusions to the course of writing that begins with the *Discourse on Inequality* and culminates in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, unmistakably being alluded to in stanza 10 with the reference to the "Bielersee," the lac de Bienne. In stanza 9, Rousseau is the one of whom the poet asks--in intricate syntax, in an enigmatic gesture of address--"how shall I name that stranger?"

---that one who

[...]wie, Rousseau, dir,

Unüberwindlich die Seele

Die starkausdauernde ward,

Und sicherer Sinn

Und süsse Gaabe zu hören,

Zu reden so, dass er aus heiliger Fülle

Wie der Weingott, thörig göttlich

Und gesezlos sie die Sprache der Reinsten giebt

Verständlich den Guten, aber mit Recht

Die Achtungslosen mit Blindheit schlägt

[...], wie nenn ich den Fremden?

"What shall I call that stranger," "Endowed with steadfast meaning/ And a sweet gift of hearing,/ Of speaking" – sweet gift of hearing and of speaking language that is "comprehensible to the good,/But rightly strikes with blindness" those not paying heed, "die Achtungslosen"?

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De Man, in his lecture on “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” called “that stranger” by an allusive, highly charged name I shall try to explain today: (quote) “A Rousseau as Western as Antigone is Greek in her choice for the destiny of Niobe.”

The antithesis “Western” versus “Greek” in that sentence derives from the terms in which Hölderlin characterized the situation of literature in his own time—a comparison and contrast between the Greeks and the moderns, the “Hesperians.” Hölderlin’s Hellenism is unlike any other. It abandons not only the long-standing premise that the moderns’ relation to classical antiquity should be admiring imitation, but also the endemic binary opposition between naïve and modern elaborated in Schiller’s *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Hölderlin introduces instead the idea of a “reversal,” a reversal of direction “westward,” away from Greece: “what he calls the ‘vaterländische Umkehr’ or ‘patriotic reversal.’” Hölderlin’s commentary of 1803 on his *Antigone* translation is the chief text presenting this difficult, fraught, contested concept. The Rhine is a figure for the “vaterländische Umkehr,” in that it “first flows eastward and then turns back upon itself to flow towards the West.”

Hölderlin’s “contact with Greek poetry was much closer than Goethe’s or Schiller’s,” de Man writes. “In later Hölderlin” (if not in his youthful novel *Hyperion*), “his relationship towards Greece is not elegiac or imitative but dialectical, in the sense that the modern attraction towards the specific virtue of the Greeks is counterbalanced by a Greek attraction towards the specific virtue of the West.” (112) The difference between Greece and the West, de Man stresses, is a difference between languages—between two kinds of “poetic language.” He writes: “The Greek poetic language is aimed towards an actual, natural object and is capable of reaching it, of hitting its mark, so to speak; it reaches the object that it names—Hölderlin uses the expression ‘etwas treffen.’” It is from section 3 of the *Anmerkungen zur Antigone* and from the Letter to Böhlendorff that de Man derives those terms for interpreting the figure of the river Rhine. “If the movement toward Asia is like the neo-Hellenic nostalgia towards Greece,” de Man writes, “it is equivalent to the pantheistic ideal that longs for the immediate possession of the natural object which *the Greek language* achieves without effort.” “Etwas treffen zu

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können,” to be able to hit or reach something, Hölderlin writes, “is the chief striving (or “Haupttendenz”) in the modes of representation of our time.” De Man’s thesis in “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition” is that Hölderlin’s poetry has not been understood because it wrongly has been viewed in light of a critical tradition owing its premises to Romanticism (an incomplete understanding of Romanticism), whereas Hölderlin—and Rousseau—are something other than Romanticis. Hölderlin is unique in conceiving that the longing for our poetic language to work as the Greeks’ did *ought to be renounced*. What distinguishes Hölderlin from the romantic and the Schillerian tradition, according to de Man, is that in “Der Rhein,” for example, “the pantheistic drive [...] is the initial moment in a movement that will soon reverse itself.” (HRT 114) The Rhine turns back *away* from Greece, toward that which is the native, “national”—Hölderlin’s word is neither of these, but “nationel”—the “nationel” capacity of the Hesperians,’ the moderns,’ language. That is the capability to “*sich fassen*,” to “grasp” or to “compose” oneself: “the self-reflective power,” de Man writes, “which enables modern man to know his own consciousness.” (HRT 115)

The dense, enigmatic “Remarks on Antigone” are rendered more intelligible by another prose text of H’s, the famous Letter to Böhlendorff of December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1801. Hölderlin there writes this crucial sentence: “We learn nothing with more difficulty than freely to use that which is national [nationell].” He continues: “And I believe that it is precisely the clarity of representation that is *originally* as natural for us as the fire from heaven is for the Greeks [...] in the process of cultural formation [Bildung], the properly nationel will always be the lesser advantage..” Again: “The free use of that which is one’s own [that which is das Eigene] is the most difficult.” In his essay of 1956, De Man invokes this key assertion: as he puts it, it is “the profoundly original idea that what is inborn appears to us as what is most difficult, whereas spirit finds it easy to thrive in what is most foreign to it.” (PP 72) A culture’s “chief striving” or “main tendency”--“Haupttendenz” is the term used in the “Remarks on Antigone”—is the *opposite* of its native or “nationel” ability that one attains the free use with most difficulty. Hölderlin’s Letter to Böhlendorff asserts that “the chief *striving* in the modes of representation of *our* time is, *etwas treffen zu*

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*können*,” to be able to hit or reach something, whereas [the Greeks’ chief striving] is (quote) “*sich fassen zu können*, “to be able to grasp [or “compose”] oneself, because (Hölderlin continues) “that is where their weakness lay.” Hölderlin’s Letter goes on, “And I believe that it is precisely the clarity of representation that is originally as natural for us as the fire from heaven is for the Greeks[...] the properly nationell will always be the lesser advantage. For this reason the Greeks are less masters of the holy pathos, because it was inborn for them, while on the other hand they are superior in the gift of representation from Homer on because this extraordinary man was soulful enough to capture for his Apollonian realm the occidental Junonian sobriety and thereby truly to appropriate that which is foreign. For us it’s the reverse ... But that which is one’s own has to be learned just as well as that which is foreign. For this reason the Greeks are indispensable for us. Only we will not catch up to them precisely in that which is our own, nationell for us, because, as I said, the free use of that which is one’s own is the most difficult.”<sup>4</sup>

That is the source of de Man’s characterization, in 1959, of the Greek “poetic language” as “aimed towards an actual, natural object and ...capable of reaching it.” “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” citing Hölderlin, says, “Greece and the West are opposite and distinct in their essence; the attraction for Greece on Western man is not that of something intrinsically superior and desirable but of something essentially *other*, possessing a virtue which he does not possess, but lacking in *his* specific virtue.” (113) The most difficult achievement is the “turning round”—the *Umkehr*--from a culture’s “main tendency” or “chief striving” [“Haupttendenz”] back toward the capability which is native to it.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the moderns, that striving, that yearning, is for what, as moderns, we ascribe to the ancient Greeks--unity with nature. On the part of the Greeks, according to de Man’s reading of Hölderlin, the yearning is for self-knowledge, self-consciousness. Never was there the self-solidary, unified, naïve condition of being that a traditional and Schillerian concept of Western art envisions as an ideal to be emulated (or elegiacally mourned for). “We must imagine,” writes de Man, “to use Schiller’s vocabulary, within the

<sup>4</sup> I have quoted from the translation in AW.... pp 28-29

<sup>5</sup> The second paragraph of section 3 of the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonä* refers to “the Greek representations’ [...] chief tendency [Haupttendenz] [and] weakness” (versus the “chief tendency” of “the mode of representation of our time”).

naïve Greek a sentimental longing for consciousness as strong as the modern ‘sentimental’ longing for nature.’<sup>6</sup> In bringing to bear on his interpretation of the figure of Rousseau in “Der Rhein” an account of the “Umkehr” based on his reading of the Letter to Böhlendorff and the “Remarks on Antigone,” de Man differentiates his own conception of figurative language from the binary structuring of a whole system of relationships within which the romantic tradition’s model of the “image” or figure belongs. Binarisms such as the relation between the moderns and the ancients, the “sentimental” and the “naïve,” art and nature, and self-consciousness and unselfconsciousness, are replaced, in de Man’s conceptualization of literature, by a dialectical and chiasmatic structuring of the relationship between two types of poetic language.

“For Hölderlin,” de Man had written in 1956 in his article in *Monde Nouveau*, “the ultimate truth of poetry resides neither in the eternal nor in the temporal, but in the turning back through which a poetry of the sensuous tears itself away from its need to become self-consciousness, or a poetry of process tears itself away from its desire to get back to the object. The power of this vision has its source in the renunciation that is at its center....” (PP 72). “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition” invokes an example of such a renunciation: Antigone’s “choice for the destiny of Niobe” (115). ” It signifies and instantiates the renunciation of the Greeks’ yearning toward that which they lack—self-knowledge, self-consciousness. (Quote): “Antigone’s supreme act, through which she accomplishes her true nature, [is] the act by which she accepts, in her death, a metamorphosis into stone.” (Unquote.) Antigone’s choice for the destiny of turning to rock is reminiscent, for a reader of Hölderlin’s “Brot und Wein” and de Man’s “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” (1960), of the intentional structure whereby--as according to the beautiful metaphor for metaphor in “Bread and Wine”--“Now must words originate like flowers.” But one of the implications of the radical disparity and discontinuity between the Greeks and the moderns Hölderlin’s Letter to Böhlendorff insists on, is that we Romantics and moderns’ would-be transmutation of our words, their origination like things with the substantiality of stones or the beauty of flowers, is

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<sup>6</sup> “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, p. 134.

precisely not a renunciatory reversal, but a monumentalization of the aesthetic. For the moderns, the romantics, the Hesperians, consciousness' identification with a sensuous object—whether a stone or a flower—is not a renunciation, but a going with the flow, maintenance of the delusion ascribing ontological priority to the natural object.

The wording and emphasis of de Man's pivotal formulation in "Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition" should hold our attention. Quote: "The superiority of the Greeks over us does not reside in the fact that they are capable of experiencing pantheistic unity which, for us, is bound to remain unreachable and ideal; they can do so only because they lack the consciousness of self which we possess in a high degree. Their superiority [...] is that they have dared, *like Antigone daring to become Niobe*, to be totally what they are instead of trying to become what they are not."

"Like Antigone daring to become Niobe"—a strange way indeed, one might reflect, to describe Antigone's defiance of the tyrant Creon's decree and to carry out the burial rites for her brother Polyneices. What de Man has done—and what Hölderlin did in the *Anmerkungen*-- is to take up Hölderlin's Antigone's own language for describing her fate; and to name it—her fate and her language—as her *choice* and her own dared *deed*. Creon has said, "Lead her away at once and with the crypt, with darkness/ Overshadow her, as said. Let her rest there/ Lonely alone and die if she must die/ Or wither living under such a roof." Antigone, speaking to the Chorus, says—I quote from David Constantine's 2001 translation-- "And now he leads me, handling me, away,/ Me without bed and wedding, not the marriage part/ Have I received nor nourishing a child/ But lonely so from loved ones sad in soul/ Living into the desert of the dead/ I am descending [...]"<sup>7</sup> This is not the moment pinpointed by Hölderlin in his *Anmerkungen* and de Man in his lecture. Those texts pinpoint, rather, the moment in which Antigone identifies her fate with Niobe's. Hölderlin calls Niobe "a particularly apt image of early [of Greek] genius." De Man follows Hölderlin in singling out Antigone's haunting lines comparing her fate to Niobe's, in Act II, scene 3. Hölderlin's *Remarks* quote the first line, "Ich habe gehört, eine Wüste gleich sei worden"--"I have heard like a desert became" (Niobe).

<sup>7</sup> Constantine translation, p. 98-99. Act 3 scene 3.

Hölderlin writes beneath that line: “Presumably Antigone’s highest trait.” Is “Antigone’s highest trait” the becoming like a desert or wasteland, or the speaking about that? De Man’s reading recapitulates the ambiguity of Hölderlin’s paratactic remark: he writes, “the highest moment in the destiny of Antigone ... is such a moment of Umkehr. It takes place at the beginning of the third act when Antigone’s fate has been sealed; all attempts to intervene for her have failed and she knows her choice to be one of death. At that moment, she likens herself to Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus who was changed into a stone by Artemis and Apollo.”

The choice Antigone “knows to be one of death” one usually thinks of as her decision to carry out the funeral rites for Polyneices in spite of Creon’s forbidding it. De Man’s key phrase “her choice for the destiny of Niobe” assimilates that choice to, or displaces it by, Antigone’s choice to utter the comparison between Niobe and herself. Crucial to Antigone’s “choice”--“one of death”-- is that she *makes* that comparison. De Man is following Hölderlin’s reading of his own translation at the point in the *Anmerkungen* citing the first line of Antigone’s utterance. It is a reading distinct from the reception of the myth of Niobe as a trope for grief, which psychologizes the myth and understands Niobe as turning to stone out of grief at the death of her children. De Man formulates the myth as Niobe’s being “changed into a stone by Apollo and Artemis”—a rendering that stresses the metamorphosis and elides the element of grief. De Man’s wording foregrounds Antigone’s production of rhetorical language, and the strange temporality of a “choice” and of the knowledge that one is committed to death. De Man’s word for Antigone’s identification of her fate with Niobe’s, “likens,” lays the stress on her agency in such a way as to almost identify the act of comparison with a metamorphosis, as if Antigone turns herself into Niobe by speaking about herself in this way. That indeed will be the way in which de Man reads the passage.

Here is the passage:

Ich habe gehört, der Wüste gleich sei worden  
 Die Lebensreiche, Phrygische,  
 Von Tantalos im Schosze gezogen, an Sipylos Gipfel;  
 Höckricht sei worden die und, wie eins Efeuketten

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Antut, in langsamen Fels  
 Zusammengezogen; und, immerhin bei ihr,  
 Wie Männer sagen, bleibt der Winter;  
 Und waschet den Hals ihr unter  
 Schneehellen Tränen der Wimpern. Recht der gleich  
 Bringt mich ein Geist zu Bette. -----Here's a more or less line by line  
 translation:

I have heard that like a desert became  
 The life-rich Phrygian,  
 From the lap of Tantalus born, on Sipylos' peak;  
 That rocky she became and, as chains of ivy  
 Are put on, into a slow rock [Fels, rock or cliff]  
 She was constricted; and, always, where she is,  
 People say, winter stays;  
 And there wash her neck  
 Snowbright tears from her eyelids. Like her exactly  
 A spirit brings me to bed.

That block of German, of late Hölderlin, thwarts the ear's capture of meaning, obstructs the eye's movement over the page. Incorporating the strangeness and opacity of the language of Hölderlin's "translation" of Sophocles alters the density of de Man's text. There is a sudden switch from diegesis to dramatic voice, as de Man speaks Hölderlin's Antigone's lines.<sup>8</sup> He then speaks, as it were, his own. In combination with what comes next—de Man's focusing in on "Western" Rousseau and on "measured language"—the following assertions are far-reachingly significant. "Niobe is, according to Hölderlin, the true image of the Hellenic genius and thus *Antigone's decision to be like Niobe* is the return upon herself by means of which she

<sup>8</sup> Translated by David Constantine, the passage reads, "I have heard she turned to a wasteland/That Phrygian so full of life/Whom Tantalus dangled, on Sipylos' peaks/She is crouched and shrunk/To a slow stone [Fels: cliff], they put her in chains/Of ivy and winter is with her/Always people say, and washes her throat/With snow-bright tears/From under her lids. Like her exactly/A ghost brings me to bed." *Hölderlin's Sophocles. Oedipus and Antigone*. Highgreen, Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2001.

assumes the true, national Greek status. The most specifically Greek of all acts is that one by which a human being chooses to become the object it can reach, becomes earth or rock, the most solidly plastic of all substances. [...] The human figure daring to be stone, such is the supreme Greek achievement; it is natural, therefore, that Greek permanence should be sealed forever in the marble statues left by their sculptors, more still than in their poetry. Contrary to Greece, the West has not yet dared to make this return upon itself.”<sup>9</sup>

To capture the implications of de Man’s rugged language here one has both to compare it with Hölderlin’s and to fit it into de Man’s extended argument. Hölderlin’s commentary describes Antigone’s comparison of her fate to Niobe’s as a rhetorical utterance and an apotropoeic gesture. Such sublime mockery ... in so far as holy madness is the highest human manifestation and is at this moment more soul than speech, outdoes all her other utterances, and it is moreover necessary to speak of beauty thus in the superlative because the demeanour itself rests upon, among other things, a superlative of human spirit and heroic virtuosity.” Hölderlin goes on, “It is a great resource of the secretly working soul that at the highest state of consciousness it evades consciousness and that, before the present god actually seizes it, the soul confronts him with bold, frequently even blasphemous word and thus maintains the sacred living potential of the spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Such is Antigone’s comparison of her destiny with that of Niobe, grand-daughter of Zeus. “In a state of high consciousness,” Hölderlin continues, [the soul] “compares itself always to objects that have no consciousness, but that in their fate have taken on the form of consciousness.” Niobe took the form of a Fels, and the condition of a desert or “wasteland” (“Wüste”). Hölderlin’s commentary continues, “Such is a land that has become a wasteland through having in its original abundant fruitfulness too greatly increased the effect of the sun’s light, and so become arid. Niobe’s fate in Phrygia.”<sup>11</sup> That elaboration introduces a further image needing interpretation and reorients the comparison so that it describes the transformation not only of a consciousness but of material things. Without ado, Hölderlin gives as an instance of an object that “in its fate has taken on

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<sup>9</sup> “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” p. 115

<sup>10</sup> Constantine translation, modified; then Pfau translation, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> (Constantine, 115).

the form of consciousness” “a land that has become a wasteland.” (One ought to bring to mind this passage of de Man’s source text the “Remarks on Antigone” when one finds him evoking passages of Wordsworth, or Yeats’s in “A Prayer for My Daughter” “one bare hill,” characterized by their barrenness, their deprivation or desolation.) Hölderlin’s elaboration about a “wasteland” is adducing the transformation of “objects that have taken on the form of consciousness.” Thus stones may take on the form of human beings. So it is with the Greeks. They do. De Man’s reading of Antigone’s lines speaks, precisely, of statues: of “Greek permanence [...] sealed forever in the marble statues left by their sculptors, more still than in their poetry.”

The word for “stone” *Stein* actually occurs neither in the lines Antigone speaks nor in Hölderlin’s commentary on them, which dwells on the word “Wüste,” wasteland or desert. Yet Antigone’s self-comparison with *Niobe turning to stone* is a crux in de Man’s argument. For de Man, Hölderlin conceives a Rousseau who is “as Western” as precisely *that* “Antigone is Greek.”

The “Rousseau as Western as Antigone is Greek” is none other than the one who emerges in “Der Rhein” in stanza 11 with the unmistakable allusion to Rousseau’s *Reveries* and the Cinquieme Promenade. It is the Rousseau writing of “the state in which I often found myself at the ile St-Pierre” (hear “the isle of saint stone), “in my solitary reveries, whether lying down in my boat that I allowed to move about as the water took it, or sitting on the banks of the stormy lake, or elsewhere, “au bord d’une belle riviere ou d’un ruisseau (hear the “Rousseau”) murmurant sur le gravier,” “at the edge of a beautiful river or of a stream murmuring along the gravel.” At such moments, Rousseau, de Man writes, “is not contemplating his own reflection; he is staring at the sky, where all has lost the density of earth and matter and acquired the total mobility of consciousness.”

De Man’s lecture has read the words of Antigone and Rousseau in such a way that we understand them to be each other’s opposite and counterpart. Now he brings in “one word that recurs more and more often in the late poetry,” the word “Maas.” I quote: “In a Western world after the *Umkehr*, “measurement,” *Maas*, would no longer be of matter but of the substance of the mind, the logos. Measured language

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means poetry, and we can assume that the supreme form of Western art will be poetic, as the supreme form of Greek art had to be plastic. But the metrics of Western poetry will be different from the kind of metrics we know and which treat language still primarily as if it were a material substance, made of sound and measurable time. What strikes us as the most strange and alien in the extreme rhythmical complication of the late Hölderlin hymns may be a foreboding of this ‘architectonic of the heaven,’ as he called it, which it remains for Western poetry to invent.” (119) The combination of these passages of the recently rediscovered complete version of “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition” were zeroed in on by the critic and Hölderlin scholar Andrzej Warminski, in a e mail of 2011, as amazing for de Man to have written in 1959: the “sentences [...] on how Greek art had to be plastic whereas Western art will be poetic [...]”; for “they anticipate the critique of the category of the aesthetic as de Man reads it in ‘Sign and Symbol [in Hegel’s Aesthetics]’ and ‘Hegel on the Sublime’” [de Man essays of 1982-3]. That is, poetry as a ‘post-art,’ a no longer art, no longer the sensory appearance of the idea [...].”

In 1956, in “Le devenir, la poésie,” Paul de Man had turned to Hölderlin’s *Remarks on Antigone* to define the exemplary poetic choices of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and they had proven an extraordinary resource, providing him the terms for distinguishing the poetry of substance versus the poetry of process, the poetry of the sensuous versus the poetry of becoming. De Man notes: “[...] thanks to a letter to his editor, Wilmans, on September 20, 1803, we [...] know that Hölderlin wanted not only to translate Sophocles, but as he says quite frankly, to correct him by making him accessible to a modern readership” (72). In an exercise of what de Man later called “analytical reading”—and in exact explication of Hölderlin’s own analysis—de Man spells out what that “correction” of Sophocles would entail. Given the chiasmus that separates and links Greek and Western poetry, translation of the Greek tragedy into German requires a complex transposition: transposing the way that (quote) “Greek poetry [...] expresses what is foreign to Greek spirit (that is, consciousness and clarity)” into the way that “Western poetry [...] expresses what is foreign to Western spirit (that is, immediate pathos and sensuousness).” Hölderlin has done this in translating *Antigone*. Hölderlin’s “immediate pathos and sensuousness” comes out

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in all its the uncanny force as we hear or read his rendering of Antigone’s “choice for the destiny of Niobe.”

“We are powerless to imagine,” de Man says flatly in “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” “the characteristics of an art that would not be an expression of unity in nature, whether actual or ideal.” (119). It is at this point that de Man brings in the double-meaning word “Maass,” measure. Samuel Weber, writing in 2012, reflects on the tension between what is said about “Maas” or “measure” in “Der Rhein” and a very late text, “In lieblicher Bläue.” In the latter text is written, “Giebt es auf Erden ein Maas?” Is there a measure on earth? And the answer comes, “Es giebt keines.” “There is none.” In stanza 14 of “Der Rhein,” on the other hand, we read, “Nur hat ein Jeder sein Maas.” “Only, each one has his measure.” “But the contradiction is only apparent,” writes Weber: “for what has ‘its measure’ on earth is ‘ein jeder’: each one, every singular being has its measure. But that measure is different for each and everyone. And since it is radically singular, it cannot be ‘grasped’ or even touched but only encountered in and as what Hölderlin, *In Lieblicher Bläue*, calls the ‘Gestalt.’ It can be encountered in an appearing that at the same time is also its disappearing. To try to name it properly, to identify it, would be to try to repeat the singular as the same, to force the like to be equal [...] instead of accepting it as merely the ‘like.’”<sup>12</sup>

Samuel Weber’s reading of this line in “Der Rhein” is consistent with de Man’s reading of “Der Rhein” in “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition.” One sees this at a key turn in his reading of the words “nicht Ungleiches dulden,” “not to suffer or tolerate inequality,” which de Man comes to in the course of explaining how the poem makes the transition in stanza 8 “from the river to the thinker,” from the Rhine to Rousseau. “At the end of stanza 8, [the poet] addresses the dreamer (*der Schwärmer*) who cannot endure inequality (*Ungleiches*).,” de Man writes. “[The word] ‘Ungleiches’... alludes to the title of [Rousseau’s] early work *De l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* which, more than any other of his writings has helped to prepare the French Revolution. Rousseau’s political ideal of equality appears as the most modern form of the pantheistic longing for unity with the natural object. His

<sup>12</sup> Weber, 19.

idyllic picture of primitive equality is a powerful pastoral myth, powerful enough to have determined the course of history ever since. It is equivalent to the drive of the Rhine eastward, equally necessary but equally dangerous [...]” (116). “The core of the poem,” de Man argues, is the image introducing the Rousseau which succeeds upon and displaces that one: the image of Herkules, quester for the apples of the Hesperides, “heaving the heaven on his shoulders”: an image for the Rousseau of the “sentiment de l’existence” “looking at the sky.” The Rousseau that de Man draws out of “Der Rhein” is the “ruisseau” of “measured language,” the essayist *On the Origin of Languages* that are always more than one. And—also—the historical figure: the autobiographer who tolerates and suffers unequalness—who tolerates, and suffers for, singularity. A Hesperian Rousseau whose “vaterländische Umkehr” is a match for, and the reversal from, Antigone’s turning into stone.

“Le devenir, la poésie,” in 1956, warns against taking Hölderlin’s comparison of Greeks and the West too literally. The essay refers—rather disconcertingly for an enthusiast like me of the recently rediscovered complete typescript of the 1959 lecture at Brandeis—to Hölderlin’s (quote unquote) “historical symbolism.” (“Hölderlin makes use, as Hegel often does,” de Man writes, of a historical symbolism to illustrate his thought” (71).) One is struck by the continuity with de Man’s later work of his construal here of Hölderlin’s chiasmus as “symbolic” of the disjunction between two poetics or rhetorical practices (exemplified by Baudelaire and Mallarmé”). In his 1959 and 1965 readings of “Der Rhein,” de Man construes Hölderlin’s dialectical, non-binary conceptualization of his modernity as indeed authentically historical, Hölderlin’s lucid intervention in the reception of Rousseau and the trajectory of European thought. His telling reference in 1956 to a “historical symbolism” is notably different, and might seem to be in some tension with the “Der Rhein” readings. But these two ways of construing Hölderlin’s unstable asymmetrical chiasmus between the moderns and the Greeks are not necessarily at odds. They could be held to remain implicitly active in de Man’s writing after 1970. Still in *Allegories of Reading*, in 1979, de Man is taking Rousseau in *both* of the ways he derived from Hölderlin’s “Remarks on Antigone.”

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“As far as the general question of romanticism is concerned,” de Man writes in the preface to his posthumously published book *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, “I must leave the task of its historical definition to others. I myself have taken refuge in more theoretical inquiries into the problems of figural language. Not that I believe that such a historical enterprise, in the case of romanticism, is doomed from the start.... But it certainly has become a far from easy task.” (viii-ix). In the final paragraph of the preface, he refers a last time to “[...] the poetry of Hölderlin, the obvious stumbling block,” de Man avers, “of my own enterprise.”

A stumbling block is a stone to stumble upon—and to push off against. So I will end by turning from de Man to Freud, another scholar with German versions of other literatures in his head. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, quoting, with Sophokles’ *Oedipus* well in mind, a poem entitled “Die Beiden Gulden”— a translation “by Rückert, of one of [the texts] of the Maquâmât of al-Hairiri” [Strachey]— Sigmund Freud, in acknowledging “the slow progress of scientific knowledge,” copies out these two lines: “What one cannot reach flying, one must reach limping./ Scripture (“Die Schrift,” “Writing”) says it is no sin *to limp*.” “Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken./ Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken.” Paul de Man’s writing deliberately “likens” itself to that ancient form of locomotion.

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