On Jacques Derrida’s “Paul de Man’s War”

I

On Paul de Man’s War

Jean-Marie Apostolidès

In 1982–83, I was preparing my volume on the Belgian cartoonist Hergé. During the Second World War, Hergé’s comic strips appeared daily in the newspaper Le Soir. Since I wanted to analyze the influence of the rightist thought on Hergé and Tintin, I borrowed most of the copies of Le Soir available in this country through interlibrary loan. Examining the newspaper, I came across Paul de Man’s articles, which were sometimes on the same page as the comic strips. I showed these articles to some colleagues related to or teaching at Harvard University. I specifically recall an afternoon with a colleague from Boston University whose specialty is the hunting of presumed French fascist intellectuals; we discussed together the possible bridges between de Man’s contemporary thought (he was still alive at that time) and his former intellectual engagement during the Second World War.

That is to say that, as far as I know, several people at Harvard and in the Boston area (where deconstruction and feminism were and continue to be a recurrent theme) were aware of de Man’s former affiliation with rightist circles. One can ask why it took five more years for the “scandal” to appear: why this “sudden” revelation after several years of silence and dissimulation? Compared to the fact that Hergé had constantly been confronted with his political past, one can wonder how strongly Paul de Man’s “secret” was kept.


Critical Inquiry 15 (Summer 1989)
© 1989 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/89/1504-0001$01.00. All rights reserved.
Contrary to Jacques Derrida, who uses it as an argument to exculpate Paul de Man, I did not see his “distance” from the dominant ideology of the period. Quite the contrary. This apparent independence is to be understood as a total conformity of taste, values, and judgment of a brilliant young man in the wake of l’anarchisme de droite. One thing nevertheless should have been emphasized more strongly in Derrida’s apology: in the case of Paul de Man, as in the similar case of Hergé, it is less their conformist opinions that are shocking now than the context of the general publication; when you read these articles (or comic strips) in their original context, it is difficult to excuse a clear affiliation with the anti-Semitic collaborators who took over Le Soir at this period.

In the case of Hergé, whose work was banned in Belgium until 1947, he spent the rest of his life (he died in 1983) rewriting the first adventures of Tintin in order to dissimulate his previous political mistakes. In the case of Paul de Man, who was still remembered in Belgium as a former rightist intellectual, ignorance was preferred in the American academic world—ignorance not only among his friends and disciples but also in theory. What is indeed striking in deconstruction is that it escapes confrontation with historical development. That does not imply that it is linked to rightist thought (its technique can be used either for “fascist” or “liberal” purposes), but it implies that this method rarely confronts historicity. Because history reveals the “decidable,” which sometimes means guilt.

Jean-Marie Apostolidès is professor of French at Stanford University. He is currently writing an essay on the anthropological reading of literature. His article “Molière and the Sociology of Exchange” appeared in the Spring 1988 issue of Critical Inquiry.