

Squaring “The rhetoric of temporality”: Greimassian semiotics and de Manian deconstruction

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Abstract: A careful study of the writings of Algirdas Julien Greimas refutes many of Paul de Man’s influential criticisms of semiotics. Greimassian narratology neither reduces rhetoric to grammar nor simply conflates grammar with logic. Instead of forming “a closed totality”, the Greimas square is an open-ended analytical device; it is not the semiotic equivalent of the Schillerian chiasmus. Despite de Man’s claims for the disruptive agency of rhetoric, the elementary structure of signification organizes the possibilities of de Man’s own rhetoric. His essay “The rhetoric of temporality” is a narrative whose four major actants are symbol, allegory, irony, and mimesis. Though the discursive level of de Man’s essay represses mimesis, it is active in what Greimas would call the argument’s surface grammar, which constrains, without completely determining, the narrative transformations the argument undergoes. While de Man’s analysis regards symbol as epistemologically inferior to allegory and irony, the persistence of symbol helps make “The rhetoric of temporality” a fascinating literary text in its own right.

Keywords: Algirdas Julien Greimas; Paul de Man; allegory; symbol; irony; mimesis; elementary structure of signification

De Man’s critique of semiotics

De Man argues that the bracketing of reference caused semioticians to idealize literary language as a realm of free play. One of the foremost experts on de Man’s writing describes it as a persistent “critique of ‘aesthetic ideology’ and the notion of literature as ‘play’ or the ‘liberation of the signifier’” (Warminski 1989: 395). De Man (1979: 207–8) praises “Rousseau’s linguistics” at the expense of “contemporary semiology”, since the latter’s bracketing of reference permits a dubious aestheticism, “the mere play of a free signifier”. Yet, while a semiotician like Barthes might at times be guilty of idealizing play, this is not something that

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Greimas is prone to do. There is not even an entry for 'play' in his dictionary (Greimas, Courtés 1982).

De Man bristles at semioticians' efforts to understand literature scientifically.² In reading literary texts, semioticians naïvely rely on a metalanguage, "a generalized and ideal model of a discourse", whose applicability to literature is doubtful (de Man 1983: 107). Confidently tabulating the qualities of literature, semioticians presuppose that they are working with a stable category: "The structuralist goal of a science of literary forms assumes this stability and treats literature as if the fluctuating movement of aborted self-definition were not a constitutive part of its language" (de Man 1983: 164). But Greimas acknowledges literature's instability. He and his collaborator Joseph Courtés point out the following:

Since any content, whatever its nature, can be taken over as "literary" content, literary discourse can only base such specificity it might have upon the syntactic forms which it manifests. Yet, the variety of forms is so broad that literary semiotics appears mainly as a vast repertory of discursive forms and not as a syntactic structure which could be defined. While there are "many" literary discourses one cannot speak of "the" literary discourse. (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 84)

Greimas and Courtés (1982: 286) would agree with de Man that metalanguages are problematic: every science "may be considered metalinguistic in nature", yet "[t]he boundary between what is linguistic and metalinguistic is nearly impossible to draw".

De Man (1979: 6–7) criticizes "literary semiology" for both privileging grammar over rhetoric and denying the conflicts between them; as a result, "Barthes, Genette, Todorov, Greimas, and their disciples all simplify and regress from Jakobson [...]". The best work this group has produced amounts to "assimilations of rhetorical transformations or combinations to syntactical, grammatical patterns". According to de Man (1979: 270), texts produce rhetorical as well as grammatical systems, so

[w]e call *text* any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective: as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and as a figural

² Paul J. Perron (1987: xxxi) suggests that clarifying the relationship of semiotics to the natural sciences would dispel some objections: "Greimas has always claimed, and rightly so, that semiotics was not a science but rather a scientific project, still incomplete, and that what he had attempted to do was to establish theoretical principles that needed to be completed and transformed." While de Man seems allergic to the idea of science as a doctrinal system, Greimassian semiotics, properly understood, encourages "abandoning the idea that science is a system and adopting the notion that it is a process" (Perron 1987: xl).

system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence. The “definition” of the text also states the impossibility of its existence and prefigures the allegorical narratives of this impossibility.³

However, merely considering an object from different perspectives does not render the object impossible, nor does it eliminate the heuristic benefit of adopting a particular perspective. A parallax does not annul its star. Yet de Man’s complaints helped establish the idea that, as Philip E. Wegner (2014: 81) puts it, “Greimas’s work and the tools he elaborates represent the quintessence of a structuralist drive to abstraction, marked by totalizing/totalitarian tendencies and a rejection of indeterminacy, historicity, and the diachronic.” Wegner thinks we can correct this misinterpretation if we read Greimas alongside Lacan, but I would suggest that a careful reading of Greimas would suffice.

De Man (1986: 14) also faults semioticians, especially Greimas, for confusing grammar with logic:

It is clear that, for Greimas as for the entire tradition to which he belongs, the grammatical and the logical functions of language are co-extensive. Grammar is an isotope of logic. It follows that, as long as it remains grounded in grammar, any theory of language, including a literary one, does not threaten what we hold to be the underlying principle of all cognitive and aesthetic linguistic systems. Grammar stands in the service of logic which, in turn, allows for the passage to the knowledge of the world.

A threat to this “tradition” emerges “when it is no longer possible to ignore the epistemological thrust of the rhetorical dimension of discourse” (de Man 1986: 14). However, in the passage cited by de Man, Greimas never claims that texts are completely reducible to grammar, only that if there is to be any grammar, it must be applicable to more than one text. De Man’s theory of the resistance to theory resists Greimassian theory. Though de Man is justly renowned as an astute close reader of other critics and theorists, he only quotes one short passage from Greimas and pays no attention to its context.

Hastily read, some of Greimas’ references to logic lay his work open to such misinterpretations. He proposes, for example, that the contents of narratives “are

³ De Man’s rigid distinction between rhetoric and grammar perhaps underestimates the complexity of grammar. One could argue that while de Man arbitrarily purifies grammar by excluding referentiality, Greimas’ theory of modalities incorporates it within grammar, since adverbs are grammatical categories but also perform a metalinguistic referential function (Schleifer 1987: 202).

organized in linear sequences of canonical utterances that are connected, like the links of a single chain, by a series of logical implications" (Greimas 1987: 82–83). Still, at various points in his work, Greimas is careful to distinguish semiotics from logic.⁴ Bernard S. Jackson underscores the difference in the ways logic and semiotics approach a binary opposition: "[T]he starting point for semiotics, unlike logic, is not an a priori axiom, but rather a large number of analyses of the organisation of actual discourse, wherein it is shown that this particular opposition plays a signifying role" (Jackson 1985: 102; see also Greimas, Courtés 1982: 194). Semiotic analyses reveal surface narrative structures. Although they are coordinated by the "conceptual" relationships of the elementary structure (Greimas 1987: 70), the surface narrative structures are not themselves necessarily logical. In other words, the application of Greimas' elementary structure reveals not the logic, but the pseudo-logic of discourses.

The distinction between logic and pseudo-logic is latent in Greimas' best-known essay, co-authored with François Rastier, "The interaction of semiotic constraints" (Greimas 1987). Greimas and Rastier analyse the contrary relationship between 'prescribed' (C_1) sexual relations and 'prohibited' (C_2) sexual relations. Negating this contrary results in the contradictories 'not prohibited' ($\text{non-}C_2$) and 'not prescribed' ($\text{non-}C_1$). Greimas and Rastier argue that "in traditional French society", the elementary structure begets an opposition between 'conjugal love' (C_1) and 'incest, homosexuality' (C_2), an opposition that yields the contradictories 'adultery by man' ($\text{non-}C_2$) and 'adultery by woman' ($\text{non-}C_1$) (Greimas 1987: 54). Conjugal love is not the logical antithesis of incest or homosexuality: homosexual marriage is now legal in many places; some cultures have condoned and even encouraged incestual marriages. Nonetheless, a particular culture may treat certain behaviours as though they were a logical contrary, and from the pseudo-logical contrary so posited, pseudo-logical entailments would proceed. It is not logical to conclude that male adultery is more legitimate than female adultery. Yet this is what "traditional French society", opposing "matrimonial" and "abnormal" sex to each other, implies (Greimas 1987: 54). The Greimas square accounts for the asymmetry in this culture between two

⁴ Greimas (1987: 19) observes: "Recent progress in linguistics has followed that of logic"; nonetheless, "they soon parted ways because of their differing aims". He points to "a difference in treatment between *logic* (which is phrastic in nature and functions only by means of substitutions) and *discursive semiotics* (whose utterances have, in addition, a *positional* signification)" (Greimas 1987: 123). Likewise, in their understanding of causality, semioticians attach more importance to "temporality" than to the "interpropositional relations" favoured by logicians (Greimas 1987: 176). Semiotics and logic also differ in how they handle modalities (Greimas 1987: 143–44).

forms of adultery. Of course, Greimas and Rastier might be wrong about French culture; if so, the error would lie in their insufficient command of historical and sociological facts, not in their illicit reduction of culture to logic. One can, and should, examine how different cultures, positing different contraries, generate different Greimas' squares. The logicity of the square depends on the initially posited contrary, whose logic or illogic is not something for which the semiotician is responsible. Perhaps Greimas did not adequately explain the process of constituting discourses, the positing of contraries. While Greimas seems to take preexisting discourses for granted as so much data, de Man is much more interested in the arbitrariness of positing.

In "The resistance to theory", de Man draws attention to the element of language "irreducible to grammar" (de Man 1986: 18):

[...] no grammatical decoding, however refined, could claim to reach the determining figural dimensions of a text. There are elements in all texts that are by no means ungrammatical, but whose semantic function is not grammatically definable, neither in themselves nor in context. (de Man 1986: 15–16)

After discussing an example of the resistance to grammatical decoding, de Man (1986: 17) proposes:

This undoing of theory, this disturbance of the stable cognitive field that extends from grammar to logic to a general science of man and of the phenomenal world, can in its turn be made into a theoretical project of rhetorical analysis that will reveal the inadequacy of grammatical models of non-reading. Rhetoric, by its actively negative relationship to grammar and to logic, certainly undoes the claims of the *trivium* (and by extension, of language) to be an epistemologically stable construct.⁵

Yet even were it true that grammatical models cannot "reach the determining figural dimensions of a text", that would not necessarily discredit those models. Arguably, a theoretical discourse like de Man's that presents rhetoric as an "actively negative relationship to grammar and logic" will, if the discourse is intelligible at all, expose itself to "grammatical decoding". That is to say, no rhetoric can be infinitely disruptive (would that it could!). The activity of negation, like everything else in the material world, is finite. An exaggerated estimate of rhetoric's negative agency produces "non-reading" just as well as grammatical totalization does. While rhetoric resists grammatical systems, grammar moulds the contours of

⁵ According to Rodolphe Gasché (1998: 289–90), de Man's account of the *trivium*, with which he associates Greimas, is a "truly shocking" oversimplification of the history of the liberal arts.

rhetoric's resistance: there is a push-and-pull between grammar and rhetoric that challenges the one-sided view offered in "The resistance to theory" of discourse as rhetoric's "determining" disturbance of inert grammatical systems. An analysis of "The rhetoric of temporality" will show how grammar constrains, without completely determining, the options of de Man's thrillingly aberrant rhetoric.

Greimas and de Man have much in common,⁶ especially in their treatment of quadratic structures. The visual representation of the Greimas square calls to mind the chiasmus, since reading the former from left to right, one finds that the sequence of the contradictories (non-S₂, non-S₁)⁷ inverts the sequence of the contraries (Fig. 1).

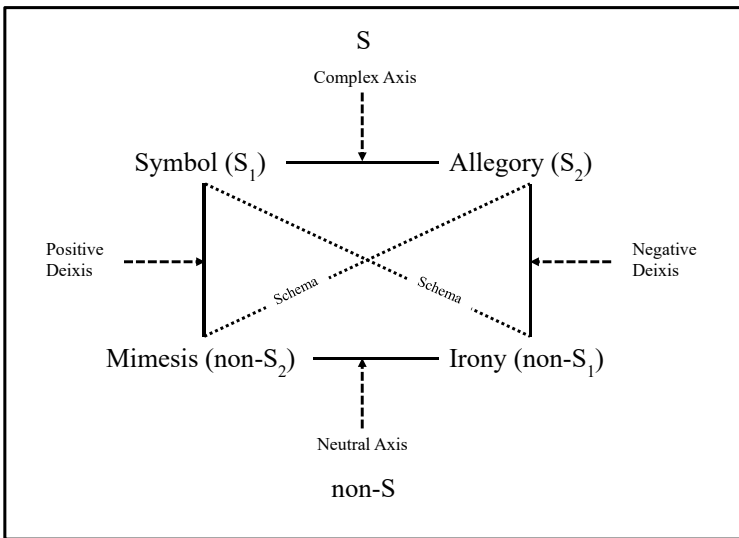


Figure 1. The initial fourfold.

⁶ De Man (1979: 249) explains how "nature turns out to be a self-deconstructive term". Likewise, the distinction between "explicit" and "implicit semioticity" enables Greimassian semiotics to show how discourses create a misleading "sense of naturalness" (Sedda 2017: 22–23).

⁷ Ronald Schleifer's superb monograph on Greimas redefines the contradictories: non-S₁ means "both s and non s", while non-S₂ means "neither s nor non s" (Schleifer 1987: 25). Greimas' understanding of these terms is simpler: non-S₁ is just the negation of S₁; non-S₂, the negation of S₂. For example, "nonmatrimonial relations" is the contradictory of "matrimonial relations" (Greimas 1987: 54). Though the reading of some texts might benefit from the use of Schleifer's modified semiotic square, the present essay will follow the standard Greimassian account of the contradictories.

Chiasmus is a recurring topic in de Man's writings. He usually regards it as an ideologically suspect device. While he concedes its poetic effectiveness in Rilke (de Man 1979: 43), when it appears in discursive prose, it is often a sign of intellectual mediocrity: Schiller's heavy reliance on chiasmus is a symptom of his regression from the philosophical rigour of Kant and of his inability to sustain a proper dialectic (de Man 1996: 135–37, 157–58). De Man (1979: 40) is wary of this figure of speech because it gives the false impression that “incompatible” things are “complementary” and because it generates “a closed totality”. Yet in one of his last essays, de Man (1996: 67) argues that Pascal disables the figure's totalizing drive: some of the *Pensées* forestall the reconciliatory structure of chiasmus and create chiasmi that “explicitly refuse to fit this pattern”; the aphorism titled “Justice, force” involves a “crossing” of terms that “is no longer symmetrical”. While Schillerian chiasmi are ideologically soothing, a few of Pascal's result in “discomfort” (de Man 1996: 69) – a praiseworthy achievement, according to de Man. Though he does not comment on the Greimas square, de Man's skepticism about chiasmi echoes his reservations about Greimas' use of semiotics to demarcate a “stable cognitive field”, a field whose stability rhetoric disrupts. Juliet Flower MacCannell (1985: 58) argues that de Man “overcomes Greimas's square by moving to a chiasmus in the essay on Pascal”; she warns that “the paired oppositions of Greimas must be read against the catastrophe also of the chiasmus – as not as straightforward as the great semiotician would like them to be [...]” (MacCannell 1985: 73).

This judgement is premature. As a graph, the Greimas square visualizes a chiasmic inversion, but the square's neutral axis (consisting of non-S₂ and non-S₁) does not reconcile anything. Nor is the square “a closed totality” (it can be extended from either deixis or from the neutral axis to make new squares). The elementary structure no more prescribes the totality of signification than the fact that an atom consists of electrons orbiting a nucleus prescribes the totality of the physical universe (though it is an important fact about that universe). Unlike the “closed totality” de Man criticizes, the Greimas square is asymmetrical: while the terms of the complex axis (S₁ and S₂) presuppose each other, the contradictories (non-S₂ and non-S₁) do not (Greimas 1987: 66). As Fredric Jameson (2005: 180) explains, the neutral term (non-S) differs from the complex term (S) because the former “does not seek to hold two substantive features, two positivities, together in the mind at once, but rather attempts to retain two negative or privative ones, along with their mutual negation of each other”. Unlike Schillerian chiasmus, the Greimas square is not an emblem of spurious closure. Wegner (2014: 101) suggests that the neutral is “best understood as a hole in the whole of the Greimasian figure”. One way to fill the “hole” in the neutral axis is to create contraries out of

one or both of the contradictories.⁸ That operation, however, would produce a new square with a hole of its own – a process that compels narrative yet can never arrive at closure. We will see how the generative negativity of the square partially accounts for the narrative developments in "The rhetoric of temporality".

In his last phase of writing, de Man became increasingly attracted to non-oppositional forms of difference. He will assert that "The couple grammar/rhetoric" is "certainly not a binary opposition since they in no way exclude each other" (de Man 1979: 12). Just as Kant's mathematical and dynamic sublime are "not antithetical", so too "trope and performative are not antithetical to each other, they are [...] different, and that's it" (de Man 1996: 137). De Man (1979: 192) wants "to discover relationships which, in Wordsworth's terms, would have 'another and a finer connection than that of contrast'". One could argue that Greimas' semiotics is unable to accommodate the Wordsworthian difference de Man prizes – though the Greimas square's negative and positive deixes might constitute "finer" connections. Yet can de Man say anything intelligible about such difference? Stanley Corngold (1983: 107) notes: "De Man likes to claim that his unspecifically differentiated distinctions are no less rigorous for being nonbinary and nondyadic"; an example would be "the disjunction between purely aesthetic and rhetorically alert readings". Yet "[o]ne may wonder whether this omnipotent disjunction is itself dyadic or not"; if the answer is yes, then the disjunction is subject to de Man's critique of binary antitheses; if the disjunction is not dyadic, then it would perform a synthesis, invalidating itself as a disjunction (Corngold 1983: 107–8). De Man relapses into binarism – or we could say that he posits non-antithetical difference by antithetically opposing it to antithetical difference.⁹ Though grammar and rhetoric might not be antithetical, de Man's "Semiology and rhetoric" narrates their difference as though it were a binary opposition, and, as we have seen, "The resistance to theory" pits disruptive rhetoric against the totalizing alliance of grammar and logic. These theoretical texts are allegories whose narrative transformations evoke a difference theory cannot master.

"The rhetoric of temporality", however, is less uncomfortable with binary thinking, and the essay exhibits de Man's enduring set toward disjunction. Greimas (1987: 199) explains that "certain sociolinguistic categories can be *axiologized*; that is, they can take on a connotation of valorization polarized into positive and negative terms. Thus, for example, sacred language is often valorized and considered superior to profane language." While difference is just as fundamental

⁸ Wegner (2014: 106–7) brilliantly illustrates this way of extending the Greimas square.

⁹ Contrasting de Man with Derrida, Robert L. Caserio (1990: 198) observes: "It is very curious that de Man, whom we call a deconstructionist, should continually express himself via a rhetoric of antithetical binarisms."

to Greimassian semiotics as it is to de Manian deconstruction, de Man – unlike Greimas – axiomatizes distinctions between difference and similarity. De Man reverses the Romantic axiology of binary terms: positive terms – such as identity, unity, and reconciliation – become delusional while difference and disjunction become marks of austere wisdom. MacCannell (1985: 63) speculates that “any ‘value of values’” de Man may have had “lay exclusively in a principle of contradiction, non-ground of the lack of identity”. De Man’s earlier texts lend support to this idea. As a graduate student, he declared: “Whatever memory of unity we possess does not stem from actual experience, but from an imagined ideal; division and self-reflection existed in childhood as well, and have never ceased to exist” (de Man 2012: 50); indeed, for de Man (2012: 63), “Thought begins in the experience of separation [...]”.

Although this negative axiology perhaps compromises de Man’s analytical rigour, it contributes to the literary attractiveness of his work: his essays again and again enact the sublime spectacle of a critic Romantically striving to reverse the Romantic values governing his culture. Warminski reviews the key oppositions in de Man’s later writings, such as the opposition between symbol and allegory in “The rhetoric of temporality”. He notes that in each case “the latter term inevitably undoes, disrupts, dis-articulates, the mode of signification and the meaning produced by the former” (Warminski 1989: 391). Nevertheless, the disarticulation occurs not through the agency of the “latter term” (as though allegory had an innate power to disrupt symbol). It occurs, rather, through de Man’s negative axiology, his privileging of the latter term as a disruptive term. Greimas’ semiotics can account for both conjunction and disjunction (S_1 versus S_2 , but also S). De Man, by contrast, usually conceives of conjunctions as disjunctions in disguise or as facile attempts to overcome an ordinary disjunction.

Graphing the fourfold of “The rhetoric of temporality”

Stephen W. Melville (1986: 121) contends that “[i]f there is a single pivotal text in de Man’s bibliography it is almost certainly the 1969 essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality”.¹⁰ Unlike myths, short stories, novels, and films, essays rarely attract narratological analysis. But in his reading of a passage from Georges Dumézil’s *Naissance d’archanges*, Greimas (1983: 171–212) proves that academic writing can be the object as well as the vehicle of semiotics.¹¹ The following analysis of

¹⁰ Many other critics have assigned a “pivotal” role to this essay (Mizumura 1985: 81, 90; Miller 1989: 337).

¹¹ For a Greimassian reading of a text by Greimas, see Satkauskytė 2017: 133–34.

"The rhetoric of temporality" will not deny the essay's epistemological value, since "[t]o demonstrate the narrativity of philosophical thinking is not to discredit its conceptual or intellectual claims, if only because [...] that very deeper narrative structure can then itself in turn be rewritten as a new form of microthinking or of cognitive microphysics" (Jameson 1987: xiii). Yet a Greimassian reading of "The rhetoric" may illuminate de Man's veridictory idiosyncrasies.

Jameson's analysis of Hayden White's *Metahistory* suggests how we could begin to read "The rhetoric". Having discovered that White's text is "already organized around a fourfold set of categories: the four tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony", Jameson (1987: xvii) assigns the tropes to the four vertices of a Greimas square. De Man's essay divides into two sections: the first "Allegory and symbol"; the second, "Irony". The governing structure would seem to be a threefold, not a fourfold, but de Man does mention a fourth term. At the beginning of the essay, he discusses recent critical studies "in which the terms 'mimesis,' 'metaphor,' 'allegory,' or 'irony' play a prominent part" (de Man 1983: 188). Irony and allegory are certainly prominent in de Man's essay. Symbol usually takes the form of metaphor, and allegory can also be understood as a kind of metaphor. In this essay, however, de Man says little about mimesis, which explicitly returns only near the end, where he argues that "[t]he dialectical play between" allegory and irony "as well as their common interplay with mystified forms of language (such as symbolic or mimetic representation), which it is not in their power to eradicate, make up what is called literary history" (de Man 1983: 226). Here de Man groups symbol and mimesis together and opposes them to irony and allegory. De Man devotes the first section of the essay to examining the contrary relationship between symbol and allegory in Romantic culture.¹² Unbeknownst to de Man, Greimas' elementary structure of signification organizes the four tropes of "The rhetoric": symbol (S_1), allegory (S_2), irony (non- S_1), and the neglected term mimesis (non- S_2). By the time de Man wrote "The rhetoric", long scholarly and literary traditions had imparted multiple meanings to these terms. Nonetheless, we can think of them as Greimassian contraries and contradictories. Supported by evidence from Romantic literature, de Man attaches the following properties to symbol: totality (de Man 1983: 188); unity (de Man 1983: 189); life, organicism, synecdoche (de Man 1983: 191); simultaneity and

¹² Jameson (2012: 111) considers "de Man's thematic opposition between symbol (or representation) and allegory" to be "something a good deal more complex than a mere static binary opposition". Yet the complexity arises through the essay's narrative, in which symbol and allegory, an initially posited binary opposition, undergo a series of transformations; it is this narrative "microthinking" that prevents the contrary symbol/allegory from remaining "static".

identity (de Man 1983: 207). He contrasts these properties with those of allegory: exhaustibility (de Man 1983: 188); disunity, difference, dryness (de Man 1983: 189); the “mechanical”, the “mythological”, the abstract (de Man 1983: 191); “*repetition*”, “pure anteriority”, and “distance” (de Man 1983: 207). Irony appears on the negative deixis with allegory, but irony is best understood as a negation of symbol’s properties: irony stands for non-totality, non-identity and non-simultaneity, for the non-empirical and the non-organic. Notice, for example, that the non-organic, which is a contradiction of symbol’s organicism, differs from the mechanical (a contrary property de Man, following Coleridge, links to allegory). Although the discursive level of “The rhetoric” bypasses mimesis, the square allows us to infer its characteristics, which are negations of allegory’s: non-anteriority, non-exhaustibility, non-repetition, the non-mythological, and the non-mechanical.

The first section of “The rhetoric” brings together many ideas about symbol found in de Man’s earlier writings. Symbol results from the attempt “to make the semantic and the sensory properties of language coincide” (de Man 1983: 73–74). Allegory would be the attempt to keep the semantic and the sensory apart. William Butler Yeats, one of the topics of de Man’s doctoral dissertation, prompted much of his thinking about symbol and allegory. Some of Yeats’ early writings exalt “the power of symbolic language, which is able to cross the gap between subject and object without apparent effort, and to unite them within the single unit of the natural image. Behind such imagery stands the conception of fundamental unity of mind and matter.” (de Man 1984: 153) Allegory, by contrast, asserts a fundamental disjunction, and irony befalls particular symbols, negating their claims to unity without asserting a disjunctive foundation. De Man’s study of the contrast between Yeats’ symbols and emblems anticipates the symbol–allegory opposition of “The rhetoric”. While Yeats links symbol to nature, emblem (or allegory) involves “the kind of wisdom that lies hidden away in books”, and de Man (1983: 171) stresses “[t]he tension between these two modes of language”. In Romanticism, which still dominates critical value judgments, “[a]llegory is equated with a thematic assertion of finitude, defeat, and mortality of which symbol is the aesthetic sublimation and redemption” (de Man 1993: 183). Allegory is symbol’s contrary. Irony, as a contradictory, is not an assertion of something negative, but a negation of something positive.

Greimas briefly discusses the opposition between symbol and allegory – though he uses the word ‘parable’ to describe what de Man calls ‘allegory’ and uses ‘allegory’ to describe de Man’s ‘symbol’. Greimas (1987: 178) finds that each of the New Testament parables

[...] almost imperceptibly changes the underlying theme so that, starting with disphoric or euphoric meaning effects linked to the loss of money, we end up with the Christian theology of repentance and salvation. This is undeniably a case of *discursive progress*, a mode of figurative reasoning that, to a large extent, depends on the fact that there is no term-on-term homologation of the actants or functions of the different isotopies. From this point of view parabolic discourse is different from allegorical discourse, which is characterized by correspondence – resemblance or even identity – between the discrete elements of parallel isotopies.

While, in de Man's sense of the terms, symbol involves similarity, if not identity, allegory emphasizes difference.¹³ Greimas' 'parable' matches de Man's 'allegory': both require a shift between different isotopies – usually between something phenomenal, accessible to the senses (like 'money') and something abstract (like 'repentance and salvation'). Political totems offer instructive non-literary examples of de Manian allegories. Consider the donkey, totem of the U.S. Democratic Party, and the elephant, totem of the Republican Party. There is nothing intrinsically donkey-like about the Democratic Party, or elephant-like about the Republican Party; even if there was some motivation for these signs when they originated in the 19th century, the policies and demographics of the parties have changed so much that any initial motivation has disappeared. Warminski (2013: 26) puts it best: "[...] the link between the phenomenal aspect of the allegorical sign and its meaning remains an external, arbitrary yoking performed by an act of the mind."

The structure of the "The rhetoric" positions mimesis as the contradictory of allegory, and literary experience confirms this schema. *Semiotics and Language* defines 'contradiction' as "the relation which is established, as a result of the cognitive act of negation, between two terms of which the previously-positing first one is made absent by this operation while the second term becomes present. [...] the presence of one term presupposes the absence of the other [...]" (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 60–61) Mimesis negates a previously posited allegorical meaning. Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, often considered the first major achievement of novelistic mimesis, provides many examples of this operation. The protagonist reads phenomena allegorically: they always mean something else, usually something derived from a book, a chivalric romance long preexisting the phenomena. Mimesis, however, is the novel's dominant mode: the narrative insists that a windmill does *not* signify a giant; it is nothing but a windmill. Allegory asks you to interpret an image as meaning something antecedent; mimesis asks you to accept

¹³ Juri Lotman (1990: 111) also thinks of symbol in terms of similarity: "The symbol is distinguished from a conventional sign by the presence of an iconic element, some likeness between expression level and content level." Presumably, both Greimas and Lotman inherit this idea from Saussure (Semenenko 2012: 119).

an image without interpreting it, to negate the allegorical impulse. But mimesis differs from symbol because the former need not suggest totality, organicism, or identity. *Don Quixote*, like much of the realist tradition deriving from it, surveys the profuse banality of contemporary life and is unlikely to encourage the enthusiasm typically promoted by the Romantic symbol (even if the protagonist is construed as a Romantic hero *avant la lettre*). Mimesis shares the same deixis with symbol. One similarity between them is similarity itself, though in mimesis the similarity could take the form of external verisimilitude or mere plausibility, as in the following description of a wedding: “Trina and McTeague knelt. The dentist’s knees thudded on the floor and he presented to view the soles of his shoes, painfully new and unworn, the leather still yellow, the brass nail heads still glittering.” (Norris 1994: 164) Such an image, however true to life, is unlikely to trigger “aesthetic sublimation and redemption”.

As Erich Auerbach’s (2003) classic study of the subject demonstrates, mimesis has taken a wide variety of forms from Homer and the Jewish Bible onward. Not all of these forms directly negate allegory; consider, for example, Auerbach’s (2003: 174–202) reading of Dante. The mimesis implied by “The rhetoric of temporality” is a secular or Enlightenment manifestation of the trope, inaugurated (if you like) by Cervantes.¹⁴ Nonetheless, this historically delimited mimesis exhibits a diversity rivalled only by irony. Symbol and allegory, however, are much less heterogeneous. The Greimas square can account for this imbalance: since mimesis and irony are sub-contraries on the neutral axis (non- S_2 and non- S_1), they are unmarked, and their semantic range is less determined than that of the contraries they negate.¹⁵ The neutral terms imply the contraries with which they share a deixis (S_1 , S_2), but since those contraries are bundles of distinct meanings, the implications can manifest themselves in many different ways.

De Man deems “mimetic representation” a “mystified” discourse (see p. 547 above). He is not wrong to do so: we could say that all natural languages are essentially allegorical, made up of signifiers that arbitrarily mean something different from themselves. Because mimetic texts negate allegory, they deny their own linguistic status, which no doubt contributes to the illusion of transparency or immediacy often associated with mimetic artifacts. Still, as *Don Quixote* shows, allegory engenders its own mystifications, which mimesis can negate. “The rhetoric” examines the contrary relationship between symbol and allegory (the opening opposition of the Greimas square) and moves on to discuss the

¹⁴ I would like to thank one of this journal’s anonymous readers for drawing my attention to the historicity of mimesis.

¹⁵ As Greimas (1987: 13) explains, Jakobson’s “marked” term ‘a’, for example, “possesses an extra distinctive feature that non-a, an unmarked term, lacks”.

relationship between allegory and irony, but it passes over the relationship between irony and mimesis and that between mimesis and symbol. The neglect of mimesis, as we will see, explains many of the argumentative twists of the essay's "Irony" section. Although de Man shortchanges mimesis, it informs the whole essay, which endeavours to represent the reality of texts and of literary history, a reality obscured by the clichéd allegorizing of traditional literary historians (the bulk of whom, ironically, have been prejudiced against allegory).¹⁶

In other essays, de Man disparages mimesis, which "can be said to imply a referential verification as well as to dodge it; the only thing that can be stated with certainty is that it allows for the confusion between the two choices" (de Man 1983: 285). The uncharacteristically moralistic verb 'dodge' is itself evasive. While de Man will bend over backward to present Rousseau's inconsistencies as demystifying rather than confused, he does not pause to ask whether a similar defense could be mounted for mimesis.¹⁷ Mimesis does not require a commitment to the ontological fullness motivating symbol. Though mimetic artefacts sometimes demand scrupulous verisimilitude, a kind of identity, this demand can subvert itself. Ray Brassier (2007: 45), commenting on Horkheimer and Adorno, argues that mimesis "marks a register of indifference or indistinction operating independently of any conceptual criterion for registering identity or difference. Consequently, mimetic phenomena threaten both social order and conceptual order, exchange and subsumption." This threat was well known to Plato. From a semiotic perspective, one could understand the threat as the actualization of the potential conflict between verisimilitude's epistemological and rhetorical functions: "the verisimilitudinous discourse is not only a 'correct' representation of sociocultural reality, but also a simulacrum set up *to cause to seem true*"; as a simulacrum, verisimilitude "belongs to the class of persuasive discourses" (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 370) – that is, to rhetoric.

However, the thinker who has gone farthest in exploring the disruptive potential of mimesis is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. John McKeane (2015: 49)

¹⁶ One might speculate that de Man's avoidance of mimesis in "The rhetoric" is a reaction against the errors of his youth. Werner Hamacher (1989: 450, 454) argues that a realist aesthetic influenced the political as well as the literary commitments of de Man's wartime journalism. Still, in his mature writings, de Man does not always shy away from mimesis. Discussing the trope in Rousseau, he conflates it with what he would later call 'symbol' (de Man 1983: 123–33). In an essay on the modern lyric, he warns readers not to ignore the persistence of mimesis even in a poet as recondit as Mallarmé (de Man 1983: 181–82).

¹⁷ Jameson (2009: 312) attributes "the greatness of Rousseau" to his capacity for "evoking the reality-principle within fantasy itself"; Rousseau's "peculiar rigor" leads to "the implacable undoing of his own fantasies in contradiction as such". Instead of calling mimesis "mystified", one could think of it as the realist kernel embedded in delusion (or fantasy).

notes that for Lacoue-Labarthe, “[t]o be mimetic is to be forced to speak indirectly, through imitation and dissemblance, rather than as a controlling or calculating subject”. According to de Man, allegory valorizes a non-phenomenal anterior meaning, and this orientation explains the prominence of allegory in religious texts, which often privilege the spiritual over the phenomenal, but allegory’s attachment to an originary source of meaning could elicit mimetic demystification. By emphasizing the incommensurability between phenomenal sign and conceptual meaning, allegory reposes faith in the separate identities of sign and meaning: what is proper to the phenomenon is not proper to the concept, and *vice versa*. Lacoue-Labarthe, however, thinks mimesis challenges any neat separation. He explains how mimesis courts “the danger of an originary absence of subjective ‘property’ or ‘propriety’”; indeed, “mimesis has no ‘proper’ to it, ever [...]” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998: 115–16). He argues:

Mimesis is always from like to same. For such is the law of representation – or of (re)presentation [...] there is “presented” in it what does not present itself and cannot present itself, that is, there is represented in it what has always already represented itself. This is why there is only one remedy against representation, infinitely precarious, dangerous, and unstable: representation itself. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998: 117)

According to Lacoue-Labarthe, mimesis never secures the same. Mimesis frustrates the repetition required by de Man’s allegory. The paradoxical “division between” such categories as

[...] the same and the other, or identity and difference [...] is the division that grounds (and that constantly unsteadies) mimesis. At whatever level one takes it – in the copy or the reproduction, the art of the actor, mimetism, disguise, dialogic writing – the rule is always the same: the more it resembles, the more it differs. The same, in its sameness, is the other itself, which in turn cannot be called “itself” and so on infinitely [...]. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998: 260)¹⁸

What de Man (1983: 285) calls a “confusion” between “referential verification” and dodging it becomes a mode of insight if one reads mimesis with the care de Man lavishes on irony and allegory.

¹⁸ The infinite process is the result of a failure, but the failure gives mimesis or realism a remarkable productivity. Jameson (2012: 123) appreciates the mimetic hunger “to annex what has not yet been represented, what has not yet ever been named [...]”.

The narrative transformation of the fourfold

The Greimas square enables us to find the repressed term, mimesis, and to coordinate it with symbol, allegory, and irony. It could be true, as de Man claims, that the interactions among these tropes "make up what is called literary history" – at least, that of Romantic and post-Romantic Europe. "The rhetoric" is not merely a witness to history, however. The essay is a literary text and owes much of its imaginative appeal to the dazzling series of transformations the initial fourfold undergoes in the "Irony" section. The four tropes are the actants of de Man's narrative. Symbol, allegory, irony, and mimesis – unlike the actors of typical stories – are not figurative, animated, or individualized.¹⁹ Greimas (1987: 91) defines "narrativity as consisting of one or more transformations that result in junctions, that is, either conjunctions or disjunctions between subjects and objects". The "Irony" section of "The rhetoric" performs such a disjunction by transforming irony (non- S_1) into a set of contraries: litotes (s_1) versus hyperbole (s_2).²⁰ De Man (1983: 215) claims that

[i]rony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute. Often starting as litotes or understatement, it contains within itself the power to become hyperbole.

The "power" and "inherent tendency" invested in irony by de Man more than make up for the actant's non-actorial status. In Greimassian terms, the essay's narrator here induces the "qualification" of the irony actant, establishing its "modal competence" (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 253).

De Man (1983: 215) does not develop litotes and hyperbole into a complete square since he omits discussion of their contradictories. The situation is too urgent. The becoming hyperbole of litotes is insane: "Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness." Indeed,

¹⁹ Greimas (1970: 255–56) distinguishes between actants, actors, and roles.

²⁰ A lowercase letter will designate a contrary nested within one of the major actants – symbol (S_1), allegory (S_2), irony (non- S_1), mimesis (non- S_2). Fig. 2 differs from normal Greimassian notation, since within the larger surface structure the figure includes the complex axis of an incomplete square (litotes/hyperbole). I have integrated the squares into one figure to save space and to show how any part of a square can generate new squares. Since we can analyse any S into contraries (S_1 and S_2), a sub-contrary (such as irony, non- S_1) can become the S of a new square, with its own contraries (litotes and hyperbole, according to de Man).

absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is ‘mad’ but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified. (de Man 1983: 216)

Madness, by paradoxically dissolving the difference between both contradictory and contrary terms (consciousness and non-consciousness, subject and object), reestablishes symbol – the subject’s self-sameness or unity, its absolute immanence (“reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself”). This reconciliatory madness undoes irony’s contradiction of symbol. But the conjunction of irony with symbol occurs when litotes (s_1 of non- S_1) becomes hyperbole (s_2 of non- S_1); both hyperbole and irony are on a negative deixis – hence, the dysphoric connotations that attend the loss of sanity (Fig. 2).

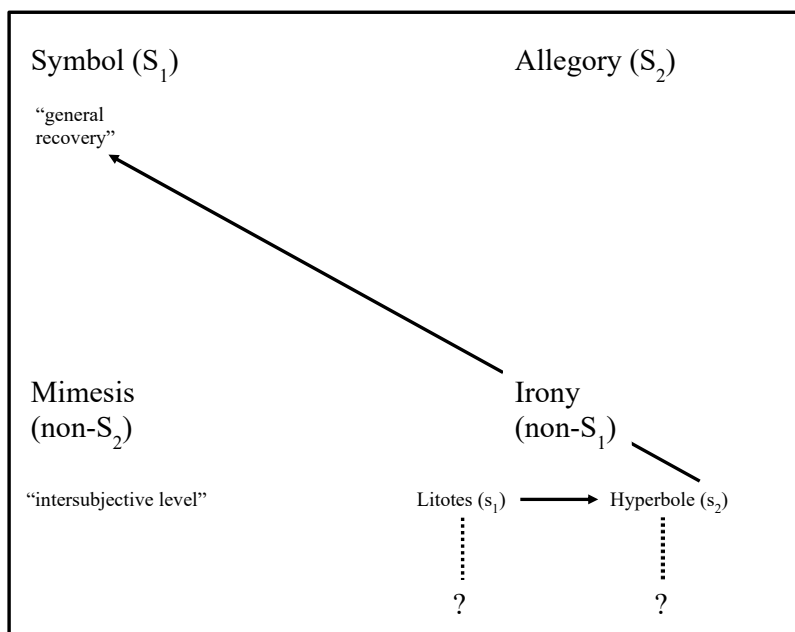


Figure 2. The progress of madness.

Madness may be a delusion, but so was symbol (according to de Man). Irony, at first the negation of symbol, rejoins symbol, but at a cost: symbol’s naïvety has

become deranged. Symbolic pathos also charges de Man's prose here. Andrea Mirabile (2012: 327) argues this "passage" is "the most contradictory one in de Man's text, for if the perpetual regressive movement of irony-allegory is precisely the negation of any 'authenticity' and originality [...] outside the spiraling realm of language, here de Man seems to believe in" madness as a mode of authentic transcendence. The contradiction is contradicted, and symbol takes its revenge on de Man's anti-symbolic axiology.

Could symbol reform symbolic madness into something more wholesome? De Man (1983: 217) quotes Jean Starobinski:

Nothing prevents the ironist from conferring an expansive value to the freedom he has conquered for himself: he is then led to dream of a reconciliation of the spirit and the world, all things being reunited in the realm of the spirit. Then the great, eternal Return can take place, the universal reparation of what evil had temporarily disrupted. This general recovery is accomplished through the mediation of art. More than any other romantic, Hoffmann longed for such a return to the world. The symbol of this return could be the "bourgeois" happiness that the young comedian couple finds at the end of the *Prinzessin Brambilla* [...].

In the context of de Man's argument, Starobinski's "general recovery" counteracts madness. Symbol in effect returns from the negative to the positive deixis. The Starobinski quotation provides an uplifting way to conclude the series of reversals that have led from irony through litotes and hyperbole to symbolic madness. Many other critics would have stopped the essay at this point.

Although de Man rejects Starobinski's solution, it marks a significant stage in the narrative of "The rhetoric".²¹ De Man (1983: 217) claims that

[...] the effect of irony seems to be the opposite of what Starobinski here proposes. Almost simultaneously with the first duplication of the self, by means of which a purely "linguistic" subject replaces the original self, a new disjunction has to take place. The temptation at once arises for the ironic subject to construe its function as one of assistance to the original self and to act as if it existed for the sake of this world-bound person. This results in an immediate degradation to an intersubjective level, away from the "*comique absolu*" into what Baudelaire calls "*comique significatif*," into a betrayal of the ironic mode. Instead, the ironic subject at once has to ironize its own predicament and observe in turn, with the detachment and disinterestedness that Baudelaire demands of this kind of spectator, the temptation to which it is about to succumb. It does so precisely by avoiding the return to the world mentioned by Starobinski, by reasserting the

²¹ The scholar's act of quoting another scholar and then disputing the quotation is a narrative process: conjunction → disjunction.

purely fictional nature of its own universe and by carefully maintaining the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality.

Starobinski's solution would allow symbol ("the great, eternal Return") to relax into a more prosaic mimesis ("the intersubjective level" of "world-bound" persons). De Man does not rigorously show that Starobinski is wrong: the conjunction between an individual experience of recovery and the larger "world" might be wise. What leads de Man to resist symbol and mimesis and reaffirm irony is not logic – let alone empirical evidence ("the effect of irony seems"). Rather, words like 'degradation' and 'betrayal' betray de Man's bias. The "general recovery" permits a movement down the positive deixis from symbol to mimesis (conjunction) or back down the schema to irony (disjunction). De Man, of course, favours the latter, so that is the direction his narrative follows. He will re-negate symbol ("general recovery") with a new form of irony, "irony of irony" (de Man 1983: 218), which, being "purely fictional", would seem to be immune to mimetic betrayal.

But first de Man (1983: 218) manages to find death in symbol's promise of healing as he comments on the end of Hoffmann's *Prinzessin Brambilla*:

Never have art and life been farther apart than at the moment they seem to be reconciled. Hoffmann has made the point clear enough throughout: at the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world, the source of its invention immediately runs dry. The instant it construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness.

But this "death" is de Man's metonymy for his own metaphors (imagination's running "dry", "the fall of the self"). By not ending with Starobinski's solution, de Man is able to keep his own argument going (that is, keep it alive). What energizes de Man's argument is not fidelity to Hoffmann's novella but the intoxicating effects of metaphor (Fig. 3).

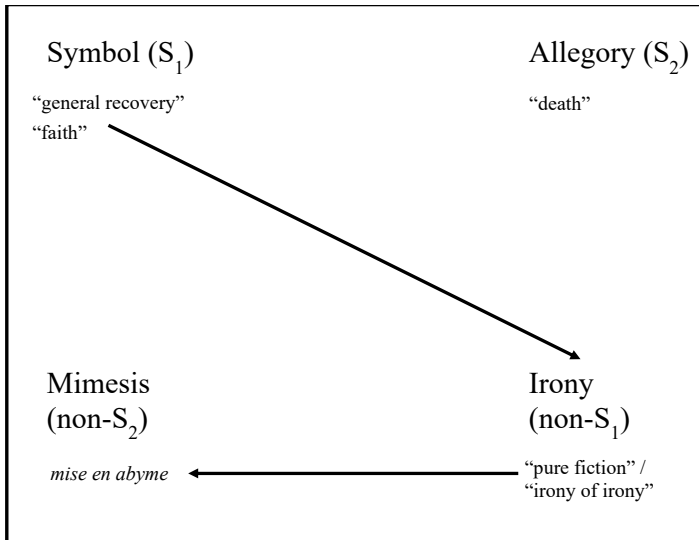


Figure 3. Re-negating symbol.

De Man's re-negation of symbol raises irony an exponent: "Far from being a return to the world, the irony to the second power or 'irony of irony' that all true irony at once has to engender asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world." (de Man 1983: 218) De Man's exponential presentation of irony ("to the second power") is a hyperbole; the Greimas square can help us to grasp "irony of irony" as the narrative re-negation of symbol (or the negation of a reasserted symbol). It is clear that de Man chooses 'pure fiction' over 'general recovery': the Schlegelian term 'irony of irony' is apt because 'pure fiction' (the negation of 'general recovery', an isotope, as it were, of symbol) occupies the position of non-S₁; this is the second time the narrative has reached this position, the square's irony vertex.²² 'Irony of irony' negates 'general recovery'. The contrary of 'general recovery' is 'death', and although de Man does not spell it out, 'death' would occupy the position of allegory (S₂) – which is also fitting, because de Man earlier associated allegory with dryness and since Romantic and post-Romantic culture often link allegory to death.²³

²² Likewise, one could call 'general recovery' 'symbol of symbol' (S₁ of S₁), a return to symbol after its negation.

²³ The young Maurice Blanchot, for example, "distinguished between 'allegory, the poison which condemns all symbolism to the most certain death' and symbol, 'the burning center of a dialectics that devours what it completes until it has brought forth from the enigma itself the light of clarity'" (Bident 2019: 498).

At this point, mimesis comes into play (though not under that repressed name). De Man (1983: 220) finds that “[t]he dialectic of the self-destruction and self-invention which [...] characterizes the ironic mind is an endless process that leads to no synthesis”. He then quotes Friedrich Schlegel’s comparison of irony to “*einer endlosen Reihe von Spiegeln* [an endless series of mirrors]”, and these mirrors transform irony into mimesis: *mise en abyme*. The symbolic “general recovery” threatened to degrade into a form of mimesis (intersubjective comedy, a “return to the world”). Yet now ‘irony of irony’ slips into different form of mimesis; de Man’s narrative performs a conjunction between the sub-contraries. The Schlegelian endless mirroring is not unlike Lacoue-Labarthe’s idea of mimesis as an infinite movement “from like to same”, though de Man’s anti-mimetic axiology prevents his essay from directly acknowledging the possible kinship between mimesis and irony. While earlier the hyperbolic self-reflection was performed by a mad subject who retained at least one symbolic property, life, at this stage of the argument, agency shifts to lifeless objects, the *Reihe von Spiegeln*. Though de Man is still concerned with “consciousness” (de Man 1983: 220), it has shed most of the pathetic or “worldly” trappings of an individual subject who might be mad or sane. Mirroring is not an organic process (de Man 1983: 222), and for that reason this purely specular mimesis has something in common with the non-organic trope irony. De Man (1983: 222–23) admits the bewildering state of his argument: “Schlegel’s rhetorical question ‘What gods will be able to rescue us from all these ironies?’ can also be taken quite literally. For the later Friedrich Schlegel, as for Kierkegaard, the solution could only be a leap out of language into faith.” The leap into faith would constitute a second return to symbol.

Had the essay ended here, it would have sketched a movement from mimesis (*mise en abyme*) to symbol (faith), thereby completing the circle of the square – so to speak. Instead, de Man reprises the topic of allegory (S₂). Should we, de Man (1983: 223) wonders, think of some Romantic works

[...] as being truly meta-ironical, as having transcended irony without falling into the myth of an organic totality or bypassing the temporality of all language? And, if we call these texts “allegorical,” would the language of allegory then be the overcoming of irony? Would some of the definitely non-ironic, but, in our sense of the term, allegorical, texts of the late Hölderlin, of Wordsworth, or of Baudelaire himself be this “pure poetry from which laughter is absent as from the soul of the Sage”? It would be very tempting to think so, but, since the implications are far-reaching, it might be better to approach the question in a less exalted mood, by making a brief comparison of the temporal structure of allegory and irony.

The "soul of the Sage" is potentially symbolic. De Man could have developed the positive deixis into a new square, whose contraries would be symbol and mimesis. But he does not do so. Instead, he turns the square back 90 degrees: the negative deixis of allegory and irony (S_2 and non- S_1) here transforms into what I will arbitrarily label the N axis of a new square (Fig. 4).

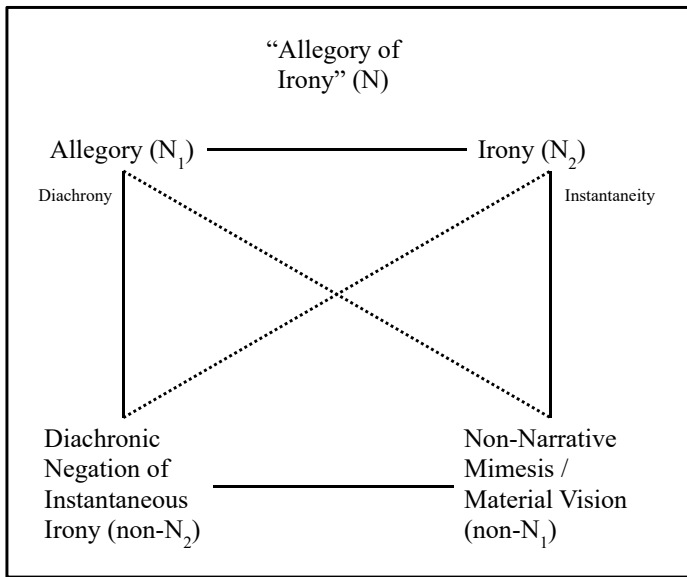


Figure 4. Turning the fourfold back.

De Man here imagines an alternative literary history, one whose starting point is allegory instead of symbol. "The rhetoric" goes on to discuss irony and allegory as contraries. Now allegory, N_1 , is on the positive deixis (associated with the greatest poets in the de Man canon: Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire), while irony still occupies the negative deixis, though in the position of N_2 . De Man (1983: 226) will eventually equate the values of allegory and irony, but his initial favouring of allegory is significant. Lee Edelman (2016)²⁴ connects the preference for allegory to de Man's role as an academic interpreter:

²⁴ Edelman, Lee 2016. Brief encounter: de Man on Wordsworth, or the irony of "The Rhetoric of Temporality". In: Clark, David L; Khalip, Jacques (eds.), *Minimal Romanticism, Romantic Circles*; available at <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/brevity/praxis.2016.brevity.edelman.html>.

Critical pedagogy demands an investment in allegorical temporality. Thus even when de Man refuses to see allegory or irony as “superior to the other” (226), he must champion allegory’s duration over irony’s vanishing-point of brevity in order to be able to “derive” such a knowledge in the first place.

The contrast between diachrony and synchrony becomes the basis for opposing allegory and irony (de Man 1983: 226). De Man (1983: 225) claims: “The structure of irony [...] is the reversed mirror-image of” the structure of allegory, since “irony appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single moment”, while allegory involves a transaction between at least two moments. For Greimas, a reversed mirror-image is a contrary, which (unlike a contradictory) is in a mutually presupposing relationship with its counterpart.

But the end of “The rhetoric” is surprisingly conjunctive. De Man celebrates the complex term N, which unites allegory (N₁) and irony (N₂). These contraries,

for all their profound distinctions in mood and structure, are the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time. One is tempted to play them off against each other and to attach value judgments to each, as if one were intrinsically superior to the other. [...] The knowledge derived from both modes is essentially the same. [...] Both modes are fully de-mystified when they remain within the realm of their respective languages but are totally vulnerable to renewed blindness as soon as they leave it for the empirical world. Both are determined by an authentic experience of temporality which, seen from the point of view of the self engaged in the world, is a negative one. (de Man 1983: 226)

The name de Man (1983: 228) gives for N is ‘allegory of irony’. He offers Stendhal’s *Chartreuse de Parme* as an example: the text combines “both the narrative duration of the diachronic allegory and the instantaneity of the narrative present” (de Man 1983: 226–27). After all the negations performed by de Man’s narrative, his essay comes to rest on a quasi-utopian, though “perverse” (de Man 1983: 226), reconciliation. But while “The rhetoric” ends up positing allegory and irony as contraries, it leaves their contradictories unexplored. If de Man now associates allegory (N₁) with narrative duration (de Man 1983: 225) and associates irony (N₂) with instantaneity, then the contradictories would be a negation of irony by means of narrative duration (non-N₂) and a non-diachronic negation of allegory (non-N₁). We could think of non-N₂ as what I have elsewhere somewhat awkwardly called ‘unromantic Romantic irony’, a narrative whose diachronic development comes to negate an instantaneous irony that arose at an earlier moment in the narrative; this diachronic negation of instantaneous irony is perhaps best exemplified by certain Jane Austen novels (Normandin 2021:

119–63). Non- N_1 would be a non-narrative form of mimesis, a language of sheer perception bereft of significance, what de Man (1996: 82) will later call a "*material vision*", an aspect of the material event, the topic of some of his last writings.

Though in the "Irony" section, 'allegory' and 'irony' tend to crowd out the word 'symbol', symbol perseveres. Carol Jacobs (1989: 117) notices it in the confidence of the essay's narrator, which projects "the voice of a self that has escaped its temporal predicament [...]. For it is in such a rhetoric that claims to dispense with the symbolic [...] that de Man's diction presents itself at its most 'symbolic'". However, symbol also accompanies the essay's narrative transformations. Though de Man's axiology disparages symbol, his narrative performs the "interplay" of tropes that, according to "The rhetoric", is what drives "literary history" (de Man 1983: 226): as a narrative, the essay becomes a symbolic synecdoche (part for whole) of the literary history whose rhetorical elements it attempts to isolate. If "The rhetoric" marked a turning point in de Man's career, it may be because he recognized its ironically symbolic power, which he would try to overcome in the more stringently allegorical texts of his last phase, which tell binary stories in search of an elusive non-binary difference.

The beginning of this essay touched upon one area of agreement between de Man and Greimas: they are both reluctant to treat 'literature' as a stable semiotic category. Still, a Greimassian reading of de Man suggests that post-Romantic European literature is more than "a vast repertory of discursive forms" (see p. 539 above). Symbol, allegory, irony, and mimesis compose an axiological matrix by means of which texts in various forms and genres have been able to claim distinction – to assert a cultural value that exceeds mundane referentiality. Since the matrix comprises negative relationships rather than positive terms, the cultural value it generates is diacritical. Hence, the matrix also organizes literary polemics, enabling writers and movements to exalt themselves at the expense of others (symbolists versus allegorists, allegorists versus symbolists, ironists versus realists, realists versus ironists – and so on). Post-Romantic European literature is not co-extensive with world literature, though colonialism and capitalism have broadly disseminated the matrix. While the matrix is not a universal structure, it has governed the production and reception of an enormous amount of recent literature. Historical understanding of this literature requires semiotic, as well as historicist, engagement.

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**« La rhétorique de la temporalité » au carré:
Sémiotique greimassienne et déconstruction de manienne**

Une étude minutieuse des écrits d'A. J. Greimas réfute bon nombre des critiques influentes de Paul de Man à l'égard de la sémiotique. La narratologie greimassienne ne réduit pas la rhétorique à la grammaire et ne confond pas non plus la grammaire et la logique. Au lieu de former « une totalité fermée », le carré de Greimas est un dispositif analytique ouvert ; il n'est pas l'équivalent sémiotique du chiasme schillérien. Malgré les affirmations de maniennes concernant l'action perturbatrice de la rhétorique, la structure élémentaire de la signification organise les possibilités de la rhétorique de de Man lui-même. Son essai « La rhétorique de la temporalité » est un récit dont les quatre actants principaux sont le symbole, l'allégorie, l'ironie et la mimesis. Bien que le niveau discursif de l'essai de de Man réprime la mimesis, celle-ci est active dans ce que Greimas appellerait la grammaire de surface de l'argument, qui contraint, sans les déterminer complètement, les transformations narratives que subit l'argument. Si l'analyse de de Man considère le symbole comme épistémologiquement inférieur à l'allégorie et à l'ironie, la persistance du symbole contribue à faire de « La rhétorique de la temporalité » un texte littéraire fascinant en soi.

**„Ajalisuse retoorika“ ruutuvõtmine:
greimaslik semiootika ning de-manilik dekonstruktsioon**

Algirdas Julien Greimase kirjutiste hoolikas vaatlemine lükkab ümber suure osa Paul de Mani mõjukast kriitikast semiootika aadressil. Greimaslik narratoloogia ei taanda retoorikat grammatikale ega põimi grammatikat lihtsalt ühte loogikaga. Selle asemel, et moodustada „suletud totaalsust“, on Greimase ruut avatud analüüsivahend; tegu ei ole Schilleri kiasmi semiootilise ekvivalendiga. Vaatamata de Mani väidetele, et retoorika toimib lõhestavalt, korrastab tähistamise elementaarstruktuur de Mani enese retoorika võimalusi. De Mani esse „Ajalisuse retoorika“ on narratiiv, mille neli peamist aktanti on sümbol, allegooria, ironia ja mimees. Kuigi diskursiivsel tasandil on mimees tema essees alla surutud, toimib see selles, mida Greimas nimetaks argumenti pindgrammatikaks, seades piiranguid narratiivsetele teisenemistele, mida argument läbi teeb, ilma neid siiski täielikult määramata. Kuigi de Mani analüüsis peetakse sümbolit allegooria ja ironiaga võrreldes epistemoloogiliselt madalamal asuvaks, aitab sümboli püsivus siiski teha „Ajalisuse retoorikast“ iseenesest kõitva kirjandusteksti.