

# From de Man to Gans: The Return of the Referent

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Today Paul de Man's name is not heard as often as before in academic discourse. Although he has not fallen into oblivion—there was, for example, a biography of him published several years ago—his popularity has waned significantly, partly, as some say, because the important insights of deconstruction have been absorbed into everyday practices of literary criticism, partly because of his prohibitively abstruse style of writing, and partly, no doubt, due to the discovery of his wartime writings. I think, however, we need to revisit his theory, because its implications and anthropological intuitions have not been properly appreciated. In this paper, I will remind the readers of de Man's deconstructive method and show how closely his ideas came to those of Generative Anthropology. I will also point out how the concept of scenicity would have made his astute account of eventfulness as a passage from the cognitive to performative modes of language more complete. Finally, I will briefly sketch out my own view of eventfulness as informed by Generative Anthropology.

I will preface my discussion by saying that I cannot be sure whether de Man was the first person who extrapolated J.L. Austin's discussion of performativity from the philosophy of language to literature, but he was certainly one of the most important thinkers to have grasped its importance to the enterprise of understanding the meaning of meaning. Austin's definition of a performative is that of a specific kind of utterance that can do things in the world in some real sense, that is to say, effect a real change, as he explains in his seminal mid-20<sup>th</sup> century work, *How to Do Things with Words*. Instead of being purely descriptive, or "constative," these utterances are "operative," that is to say they declare, promise, name, impose punishment, or affirm a contractual obligation, and so on, such as the phrase "I take this man/woman for my lawful wedded spouse" when pronounced by a person in front of a priest or "I sentence you to 5 years in prison" when pronounced by a judge or "I promise to repay this debt before the first of January" when recorded in a legally-binding promissory note. In other words, to be effective, these utterances need to satisfy the conditions of what he calls "felicity," i.e., satisfy the agreed-upon conventions of usage.

De Man looks at the phenomenon of performativity from a higher perspective, connecting it to the power of language, all language, not just special language, to effect changes. To begin with, the operation of language is one-directional: what is read cannot be unread, what is understood cannot be un-understood in the normal functioning of the brain/mind. De Man stresses that reading is irreversible; we can call it entropic in that it follows an arrow of time. This in itself connects to eventfulness insofar as a moment that triggers an

irreversible change is what can be properly called an occurrence or happening. But what is subtle about de Man's reasoning is that it is not the act of understanding itself that is eventful, not the "Aha, I see it now!" moment, but that eventfulness lies somewhere in the interaction between the two (incongruent, in some sense) features or compartments of language, its referential and cognitive registers. The former is completely distinct from the latter; you cannot bring them into the same conceptual space. What his deconstructive method consists in is close-reading a passage and then demonstrating that its "performative rhetoric and cognitive rhetoric, the rhetoric of tropes, fail to converge" (AR 300).

The reason he uses "the rhetoric of tropes" interchangeably with "cognitive rhetoric" is because, according to him, the process of cognition is nothing more than an endless chain of metaphorical recombinations. Metaphors create necessary cognitive links that multiply and propagate themselves through the momentum of exchanges and substitutions, contributing to the expansion of cognitive webs of meanings. But the next moment in de Man's deconstructive reading occurs when he observes that this infinitely generative system of exchanges and substitutions cannot close itself off on its own, and can only be brought to a stop by some underhanded and illegitimate means.

De Man gives numerous examples of this. One, an especially lucid one, comes from his essay on irony in the *Aesthetic Ideology* collection. In his exposition of Schlegel's reading of Fichte's dialectics, he clarifies the meanings of synthetic and analytical judgments. In synthetic judgments you notice that one thing is like another. But in order to do this, you must also notice that it is unlike it in some respects. Symmetrically, in analytical judgments, you notice that one thing is different from another. But in order for you to do this, you must also observe some similarities. His examples are 1) making a synthetic judgment that a bird is a kind of animal, which implies that there are distinctions between animals that allow me to make this kind of comparison; and 2) making an analytic judgment that a plant is not an animal, which involves uncovering a common principle of organization that allows me to make this distinction (174). These two kinds of judgments form a system in which every synthetic judgment implies and presupposes an analytical judgment based on the structure whereby individual properties circulate between different entities and are easily exchangeable. This circulatory structure that underlies the act of judgment is "the structure of metaphor, the structure of tropes. This very movement ... is the circulation of properties, the circulation of trope, within a system of knowledge" (174). Thus "The structure of the system [of knowledge] is tropological" (176).

But dialectics is incomplete without a third kind of judgment, which Fichte calls "thetic," a self-reflexive statement of identity or properties, which is not reducible to synthesis or analysis, the elementary form of which is "I am." A thetic judgment is different in kind from the first two in that it cannot be inscribed into the system of exchanges and substitutions because it is grounded in the "ability of language to posit, the ability of language to *setzen*, in German. It is the catachresis, the ability of language catachretically to name anything, by

false usage, but to name and thus to posit anything language is willing to posit" (173). "False usage" occurs also in Schlegel's writing on authentic or primal or original language that rises to the surface in myth and humor. This language causes confusion because it is based on error and madness, and this, in turn, is because, such language is "a mere semiotic entity, open to the radical arbitrariness of any sign system" (181). Presumably primal language retains the frivolous power of random positing. De Man emphasizes that positing is "a purely empty, positional act" (173) that stems from the performative power of language because language is machine-like: it's a "text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness" (181).

Another example occurs in de Man's reading of the episode of the ribbon in Rousseau's *Confessions*. In his article "Excuses" included in *Allegories of Reading*, De Man deconstructs the ribbon story—Rousseau's confession of his theft of a ribbon in an aristocratic household where he worked as a young man. What was even worse, Rousseau falsely accused an innocent maid, Marion, for the deed. In this short paper, it will be impossible to follow the multi-step, intricate logic of de Man's close reading of this episode, and I will just summarize a few salient points. First of all, an act of confession, which is a performative act that Rousseau purports to carry out in his written narrative, merges with another performative act, that of an excuse, when the author says "But I would not fulfill the purpose of this book if I did not reveal my inner sentiments, as well, and if I did not fear to excuse myself by means of what conforms to the truth" (280). As de Man notes, this opens up a discrepancy between an internal state of feeling and external state of the world. A confession does not need to knowingly acknowledge what the confessor was thinking or feeling because you confess the act itself: only the fact of the act that has been committed is relevant. An excuse, on the other hand, needs to account for how the act was committed in order to clear the excuser and assuage his feelings of guilt and shame. Rousseau planned to give this ribbon to Marion because he liked her, and so, as he says, he accused Marion of having done what he wanted to do in the first place. The ribbon serves as a substitution for Marion because it is Marion he really wants to possess instead of the ribbon, while Marion herself is a substitution for Mme de Vercellis who had rejected him before he transferred his affections to Marion. In addition, the shame Rousseau experiences has a complex multi-level structure. He is ashamed of having slandered Marion, which substitutes for his shame of being exposed as a thief, which itself substitutes for the shame he felt in confessing his feelings for her on the scene of the accusation, which, he suggests, is so great that he would rather resort to slander. But de Man adds another layer to Rousseau's profound self-insight by making an additional, Freudian, point that Rousseau's shame is at bottom exhibitionistic: what he really wants is "neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure" (285). What is also interesting, and perhaps surprising, is de Man's claim that the very act of Rousseau's excusing himself is only superficially performative but not so in real fact since it is, in turn, subsumed by the complex cognitive scheme of substitutions produced by desire. Once we understand that Rousseau was motivated by desire, his hiding and revealing, preening and embarrassment, self-exposure and defensiveness become

understandable. And his gestures of confessing and making excuses “become comprehensible enough to be incorporated within a general economy of human affectivity, in a theory of desire, repression, and self-analyzing discourse in which excuse and knowledge converge” (287).

There is, however, another “properly” performative moment, which undermines the tropological chain of substitutions around the excuse. It is the very moment of Rousseau’s uttering Marion’s name. When he explains how it happened, he says: “I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself” (288)—an odd statement considering that it follows on the heels of his painstakingly constructed explanation where he confessed his feelings for Marion. How can she be “the first object that offered itself” given that he offers Marion’s name as a ruse to hide the real reason for his theft? Thus the referent, Marion’s name, as de Man explains, does not logically follow from the previous discourse. It is instead produced by the catachrestic logic of metonymy that negates the metaphoric logic of cognition. In another place, Rousseau returns to this episode, saying that his reply was the “automatic result [l’effet machinal]” of his embarrassment (294). De Man latches on to this phrase as emblematic of the random, machine-like ability of language to produce material effects through its referential function. “Without the scandal of random denunciation of Marion ... there would have been nothing to excuse since everything could have been explained away by the cognitive logic of understanding” (298), says de Man. Therefore, he concludes, “performative rhetoric and cognitive rhetoric, the rhetoric of tropes, fail to converge” (300).

Moreover, as de Man later develops his insight about the two incompatible domains of language, he would point out that they coexist in a specific temporal order such as the performative intrudes on the cognitive and interrupts the dynamics of exchanges and substitutions. He connects this interruption to his peculiar understanding of materiality as an act of reference. Such would be the originary designations of a primal language; such would also be Rousseau’s act of betrayal in naming Marion’s name (Marion was *set up*, bringing to mind a not-so-incidental pun on *setzen*, a formal act of positing). Elsewhere de Man assigns this sense of materiality to the notion of the sublime, which asserts the power of reason over imagination. This could be an aesthetic experience of the sublime, which cannot be subsumed by metaphor, or the mathematical sublime as a tangible manifestation of incommensurability between the finite and the infinite or discrete and continuous. As mentioned above, the moment of recognition of the material power of the referent arises for us as an irreversible moment: an event is taking place. In his “Kant and Schiller” lecture from *Aesthetic Ideology*, de Man insists on the irreversibility of this event as a crucial phenomenon through which we can understand the nature of language and representation:

When I speak of irreversibility, ... this is because in all these texts and those juxtapositions of texts, we have been aware of something which one could call a progression, ... a movement, from cognition, from acts of knowledge, from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the

materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs... [The] linguistic model for the process I am describing, ... which is irreversible, is the model of the *passage* from trope, which is a cognitive model, to the performative ... Not the performative in itself ... but the transition, the passage from a conception of language as a system, perhaps a closed system, of tropes, that totalizes itself as a series of transformations which can be reduced to topological systems, ... to *another* conception of language in which language is no longer cognitive but in which language is performative (132).

To summarize, he is not talking about Austin's performatives, such as "I pronounce you husband and wife," but of performativity as a referential function of language that possesses power and materiality, performativity in a broader sense of the word.

In *Material Events*, Andrzej Warminski, whose gloss on de Man I find very useful and whose wording helps me make my case, calls the act of naming in the ribbon episode a super-performative: "if one still wants to speak of "performative" at all in relation to the random utterance 'Marion,' then one would have to think of it as something of a 'super-performative'—that is, not one that functions within an established juridico-political system (within which it can come off or not), but rather one that itself is the inaugural act of positing that puts such a system into place in the first place" (26). A super-performative, or radicalized performative, is an event that marks the passage from the cognitive conception of language to its performative playing out. The text passes from trope to performative because the topological system of the text cannot close itself off. Another way of saying this is that the text cannot ground itself, not being able to account for its own production or "for the inaugural act that put it into place in the first place in its own terms" (24). And so the next step is a reading motion that empties out the tropes and carries the reading from cognition to another mode of language, to performance. What is performed is a reenactment of the inaugural act produced by the blind and mechanical referential power of language or, as de Man and Warminski refer to it, the power of material inscription. This irruption is what Warminski calls an event, cautioning his readers not to identify eventfulness with the performative per se but see it as "the point of 'transition' or the 'intersection' of two divergent systems, two divergent models, cognitive and performative" (25).

In giving this brief summary of de Man's views, I have been careful to include or quote the wording that will likely trigger some associations with Generative Anthropology and allow the reader to appreciate how closely some of de Man's ideas come to the conceptual framework of GA. But his theoretical conclusion about the underlying incompatibility, or divergence, or disarticulation between the two modes of language lacks specifics. In what ways do they diverge? How and why are they incompatible? I propose that the event of the origin of language as described in GA suggests some satisfying answers.

De Man's mentioning of the word "scene" in his analysis of excuses adumbrates a more radical and precise approach of GA to the question of performativity. The titles of Eric

Gans's recent works that summarize, refine and elaborate on the originary hypothesis, *A New Way of Thinking* and *The Scenic Imagination*, capture the point I want to make. Generative Anthropology proposes a new way of thinking about language and representation, and this new way of thinking consists of conceptualizing what was previously thought of as a space of representation as a scene instead. The implications of scenicity are very profound. Without a scene we cannot properly understand performativity because a performative must be performed, and for something to be performed, you need a stage or a scene. What does it mean to happen on a scene? It means to happen now, this moment. "Nowness" cannot be projected onto a conceptual space or explained as a structure. We need a new kind of thinking, new thought categories imbued with temporality that lend themselves to talking about eventfulness, something that GA makes possible.

Thus what in deManian deconstruction is called an inaugural act that put the tropological system into place, GA describes as the originary event that gave birth to language and symbolic thinking. This event occurs on the scene of representation. The scene comes into existence simultaneously with the event. This new way of thinking suggests that we should re-conceive of cultural, linguistic, and philosophical categories as scenic and eventful. To quote Gans: "human experience . . . is uniquely characterized by *scenic events* recalled both collectively and individually through representation, the most fundamental of which are the signs of language" (SI 1).

To recapitulate what Gans calls the minimal heuristic hypothesis, we are to imagine a group of pre-linguistic almost-humans poised in mimetic tension around an appetitive object. All of them are making an appropriative gesture toward the object, and in doing so are threatening to upset the established hierarchy that gives precedence to the alpha member of the group. The instinctual, rank-based order of distribution is put in jeopardy as a conflict seems to be nascent. There is a moment of hesitation. This is not yet a scene. This is not yet an event. And then the suspended moment of hesitation resolves itself when one member of the group understands the threat of violence and aborts his gesture of appropriation. Other members of the group understand his understanding and abort their gestures of appropriation, as well. The aborted gesture becomes the first sign, and the appetitive object becomes the significant object of designation that is inaccessible to collective desire on the scene that comes into being with this event.

The moment in which the scene is born on which the sacred is born is inherently paradoxical: the real, physical object is in front of us; and yet it is inaccessible according to the law of symbolic interdiction. As Gans writes in his article, "Paradox and the Sacred," this is "the fundamental paradox of signification, [namely that] the sign confers signification on its referent as *already* significant" (8-9). It is not yet significant and it is already significant at the same time. What do we call it if not a kind of time warp experienced as an oscillation between two opposing aspects of the sacred, which both repels and attracts, is inaccessible and desirable, at the same time. As a taboo, it embodies the threat of violence

and tells the participants of the scene to stay away. But it is also infinitely desirable, inspiring in the participants the fantasy of its possession. The appetitive referent of the sacred is never fully forgotten. Its materiality “lurks underneath,” as it were, and threatens the symbolic economy of the sacred.

In his recent chronicle on “The Originary Performative,” Gans addresses performativity in a way that is compatible with de Man’s theory of the performative but also adds an important scenic element to it. His point that the meaning of performativity is “the transformative effect of language in creating meaning, and thereby a cultural reality, where none previously existed” (2) bears important similarities to de Man’s insight about performativity as material power. But there is also a crucial difference that has to do with factoring in the human scene. Deconstruction does not have a concept equivalent to the scene and therefore lacks the ability to theorize context, and as a result, it is a tragic view of language as an infinite regress of meaning that makes communication theoretically impossible. The inaugural act of designation in de Man is bound to be a case of false usage, error, and madness given that it comes into being through the sheer arbitrariness of the mechanical language-machine with its “random-meaning-generator” algorithm. This is why in his linguistic model, the performative can only catachrestically disrupt the infinite churning out of tropological substitutions, but the result of this disruption can take one no further than a contemplation of the abyssal nature of signification. In the scenic view of language, on the other hand, the sign is subtended by the communal recognition of the significant. As Gans puts it, “inherent in the sign [is] that God/the human community guarantees the meaning of its signs” (3)—and this is why we can have trust in meanings that we generate through language. “Primal” meanings are produced on the human scene that underwrites and allows us to recognize a well-made sign.

I would further like to suggest that when de Man notices a fundamental disjunction between the cognitive and performative aspects of language, he refers to the same phenomenon that Generative Anthropology with greater precision calls the paradox of representation. What happens at this moment is the birth of detached representation that allows that first participant to anticipate the result of his action that will almost certainly result in violence. As a result, the act of appropriation is replaced by one of designation, but, as mentioned above, the appetitive referent remains on the private scene of representation, creating an experience of oscillation between the symbolic and appetitive meanings of the object. I locate the cognitive in this scheme in the attracting energy of the sacred, insofar as it is associated with the first moment of cognition. Each participant’s envisioning of appropriating the attractive appetitive object takes place in the domain of the imaginary; it belongs to the anticipatory movement of cognition. In contradistinction to this, the performative force of language is rooted in the suspension of desire and the origin of the symbolic configuration of the scene:

[the non-instinctive] act of ‘joint shared attention’ in the inception of a new, uniquely human

attitude toward the world, focused on an object to which it attributes for the first time a significance, not a simple appetitive attraction but the mediated product of one so great as to defer appetitive action. This is the origin of linguistic performativity, the demonstration of the power of a communal sign over the appetites of the human community, and of the originary identity of the sacred and the significant. (2)

We can summarize this by saying that while we appropriate in the imaginary domain of the cognitive, we are ourselves appropriated by language in the realm of the performative. And what we can further add to this is that this model of performativity, connected to the desire of appropriation, gives a more coherent explanation of why performatives compel us to respond to them. In suspending an appetitive desire, a performative keeps me in its temporary and unstable thrall on the scene, whose “now”-quality is, I think, the experiential epiphenomenon of this paradoxicality registered by us as the suspended moment of oscillation.

And finally, I would like to briefly discuss the constitution of narrative, which I call the narrateme, as an exemplary structure that captures the paradox of representation. My take on narrative is that it reenacts or decodes human scenic events and entangles two layers of narrative communication, the cognitive and performative. The traditional narratological distinction between the story and discourse reflects this split, although it doesn't account for the performativity of discourse. On the level of the story, we identify with the character embedded in his situation. What this means, I think is that we align with the character's desire to come to the position of centrality on the fictional scene of representation. Martin Heidegger's concept of subjectivity is relevant to modeling a character's narrative self-understanding on the level of the story, and I will outline some aspects of it briefly. The gerund form that Heidegger invents for its subject, Dasein or Being-in-the-World, is meant to emphasize the subject's practical and active entanglement with the world. As a practical subject embedded in the world, Dasein is oriented toward the future because it places various projects in front of itself and is in the process of carrying them out. To have a project means to be in the mode of planning and projecting towards its future possibilities.

But Dasein's past, which Heidegger calls its condition of thrownness, is equally important, because Dasein's opportunities are limited by its unique circumstances, such as the historical period it is born into, its family, geographical location, and so on. It is thus the past that can to a large extent determine Dasein's individual possibilities and choices. In Heidegger's schema of subjectivity, the past and the future are intimately interrelated to the point of inhering in each other, with the past being understood only from the future. What this means is that in Dasein projects itself into some future point, and from that future, it comes toward itself, as Heidegger puts it, but it does not come toward its present time but toward its understanding of itself as thrownness (I was meant to be so and so or do such and such in the future as attested by my past). In a very insightful choice of terminology, Heidegger calls this grasping of the future-past entanglement an event of appropriation or



en-ownment: in accepting its situation, the subject appropriates its authentic possibility of existence. For students of Generative Anthropology, the word *appropriation* immediately brings to mind the aborted gesture of appropriation on the originary scene. This gives an anthropological interpretation of the character's quest to appropriate its future possibilities: namely, the story line captures the character's desire to appropriate a position of significance on the imaginary fictional scene. I cast this schema of subjectivity in terms of a prospective-retrospective orientation of narrative interests. The past and the future can be seen as two entry points for consciousness that also serve as two anchoring points of a narrative unfolding; a character can understand his past from the vantage point of the future and contemplate the eventful nature of the future from the perspective of the past, where more than one scenario were open to it.

The level of discourse, how the story is actually told, reflects the renouncement of the appetitive object and the group's re-configuring itself around the significant, which, in turn, reflects the outer frame of narrative communication, that of the narrator and narratee (although this connection is not usually made in Narratology). In taking place on the scene, the narrative-narratee communication reproduces the dynamics of the originary scene. As Gans writes in "New Thoughts on Originary Narrative," "Submission to the narrator is analogous to submission to the mimetic mediation of the first in the originary event, just as the desires we espouse under the narrator's influence are analogous to the desire aroused by the originary central object. Like the first user of the sign, the narrator and in general the esthetic subject must persuade his audience that the outcome of the operation will be the deferral of mimetic conflict" (3). The joint attention dynamics that entangles the narrator and (multiple) narratee(s) and that is happening in "real time" corresponds to the performative layer of the narrateme. What Narratology describes as suspense, which is an experiential or phenomenological aspect of a narrative, is the performative force that upholds the scene of joint attention and the deferral of mimetic conflict, as Peter Brooks reminds us in his analysis of the Sheherazade-Sultan interaction in *Reading for the Plot*.

We can see how this works in the Marion episode. Naming Marion as the culprit is one of the key events in *Confessions*. By telling a lie, Rousseau's narrator issues a performative (an assertive in Searle's classification of speech acts) in an ethically transgressive, infelicitous way. But it also happens to be an ostensive, which, according to Gans, is the first sign on the originary scene, the act of naming. This sign is now compromised, the originary configuration having been desecrated, which is registered as a significant occasion and processed as a narrative. Within the narrative form, paradox can be seen as a split, convoluted, and counter-directional structure. The split is that of consciousness into two disjoint conscious perspectives. When the first member of the group aborts the gesture of appropriation, a time warp is created, since in anticipating a violent outcome, his consciousness jumps ahead of itself into the future, and from the future appreciates his current situation. In reflecting this split, a narrative forms two entry points, the perspective of the source and that of the receiver.

But this counterpoint configuration is itself double. The outer frame is constituted by the performative act of story-telling with the narrator and narratee at opposite ends. The primary orientation of this narrative dynamics is toward the future, even if the story is not told in a strict chronological order. But its temporality is suspended in the present by the performative power of its reciprocal narrative desire, held up by the tension between the narrator, who feels compelled to tell his story, and the narratee, who is gripped by suspense. The inner frame is the dynamics of cognition, split between the prospective and retrospective points of understanding. The significance of telling a lie is appreciated by the narrator post factum and constructed retroactively as a narrative because the workings of cognition are always belated. The act of understanding aligns itself with the future and assumes a retrospective orientation, while the innocent position of consciousness is placed at the event and is future-oriented. While from the perspective of the event, nothing irreparable has yet happened and everything is still possible, it is the retrospective, postlapsarian position of consciousness that is the main orientation of cognition. Thus narrative, to return to de Man, can be seen as a way of “healing” the incompatibility of the performative and cognitive dimensions of language by resolving it into the seemingly coherent and integrated structure of the narratee that is, in “reality,” paradoxical and divided against itself. I would, however, disagree with de Man’s claim that confessing is not a proper performative. On the contrary, its performativity is stressed by de Man’s own shrewd observation that Rousseau’s narrator delights in the piquant predicament of public exposure, thus usurping the center as a transgressive big man of the early scene. While the act of understanding a story puts us in the domain of the symbolic, the act of narration inseparable from it, which makes the act of understanding possible in the first place, awakens us to the materiality of the referent. What a narrative tries to paper over is the temporal split of consciousness and its convoluted forward-backward orientation.

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