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Paul de Man on Truth in Literature: The Reception of Benjamin and Adorno in American Deconstruction

Presentation Proposal: Paul de Man: Rhetorical Reading and Frankfurt School Reading

From 1967, the reception of Benjamin and Adorno's thought plays an essential role in Paul de Man's development of a method of rhetorical reading, a method developed to incorporate – and interrogate the legitimacy of – the study of the linguistic sign in literature.

By reassessing the latter half of de Man's career as the reception of and struggle with insights of Benjamin and Adorno, the reception of divergent French and German traditions within literary theory in the USA may lose some of its inherent contingency.

Presentation Frame: Post-Structuralism and the Frankfurt School in American Literary Theory

French semiotics and the Frankfurt School found their reception in the USA roughly within the same generation. The first volume of Walter Benjamin's selected writings, *Illuminations*, was published in translation in 1969, Theodor Adorno's *Prisms* in 1967; both in the wake of the Johns Hopkins University conference on structuralism of 1966, *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*.

The reasons for this twin reception of a “continental thought” are much more complicated than these dates can evoke. To this day, it remains difficult to relate the philosophy of language found in Benjamin and Adorno to the inertially-dominant conception of structural linguistics. From the perspective of linguistics, the philosophers' accounts of language and concept, word and thing, might be seen to fall within a naive resemblance theory of signs. The problem is twofold: the shorthand version of structural linguistics still used in academic humanities misconstrues the very notion of the “arbitrariness of the sign”, and when brief citations from the philosophy of language of Benjamin and Adorno circulate, its dialectical presentation is set aside. Neither is the sign in linguistics as arbitrary as academic common sense assumes, nor are the traces of a resemblance theory in Benjamin and Adorno mimetic in the way that Anglo-American and French literary studies tend to understand mimesis.