

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

The Idiosyncrasy of the Literary Text

Before I begin my introduction proper, let me say how much I have learned from Ranjan Ghosh's part of this book, for example, his introductory essay above. His goal is much different from my own. He wants, if I understand him correctly, to develop, more or less, a unified, universal, and transnational theory of literature. He will then potentially use that theory to account for literary works of all sorts. This happens, in different chapters by him in this book, for Wordsworth's "Daffodils" and Frost's "Birches." He calls his theory and methodology of studying literature "(in)fusion." That word names the amalgamation of the elements that go into it, as tea is an infusion of tea leaves in boiling water. Though many of Ghosh's impressively learned and diverse citations in support of his (in)fusion theory come from Hindi or Sanskrit sources, many are from Western sources, as in his citations from Jean-Luc Nancy or Gilles Deleuze in his part of our introduction or in the abundant etymological notations there, as for the word *Asia*. Ghosh's work in this book, both in his introduction and in his chapters, is an impressive example of "thinking (across) continents," to borrow his name for what he does.

My own procedures in literary study are quite different from Ranjan Ghosh's, as my introductory remarks here demonstrate. I most often start from a literary work or some text, including, but not exclusively, theoretical and philosophical ones. My goal is to account inductively, as best I can, for what some text says and how it says it. Those differences between us generate the dialogical aspects of this book, in our comments along the way about one another's chapters.

I Am Not a Deconstructionist

I am not a deconstructionist. Let me repeat that once more: I am not a deconstructionist. Why do I begin this part of my introduction to this book with this sentence? To clear the ground to start with, so there will be no

misunderstanding. I say I am not a deconstructionist for two related reasons: because my work does not fit the widely accepted misunderstandings by academics and by the media of the work of Jacques Derrida (who coined the term *deconstruction* as a critique of Heidegger's term *Destruktion*), or the work of Paul de Man, or my own work, such as it is, and because I have discovered, to my sorrow, that the erroneous understanding of deconstruction, promulgated by the mass media and by many academics, as I have said, is almost impossible to correct, however carefully, patiently, and circumstantially, with many citations, you explain its wrongness. The word in its mistaken understanding is now used in all sorts of areas to name not destroying something totally but taking it apart, as in "first we deconstructed the building." The problem begins when this meaning of the word is applied to a procedure of interpretation.

The almost universally believed, mistaken conception of so-called deconstruction as a reading method is a spectacular example of a deeply rooted ideological distortion. As Marx (in *The German Ideology*), Louis Althusser (in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"), and Paul de Man (in "The Resistance to Theory") have in slightly different ways asserted, just being circumstantially and persuasively shown that you are mystified by an ideological mistake by no means cures you of your mystification.¹ Climate-change deniers go right on denying humanly caused climate change in the face of rising waters, fires, floods, droughts, and unprecedented storms.

I have a lot to say in my essays in this book about the uses of rhetorical reading to unmask ideological distortions. Therefore, I need not anticipate those demonstrations in this introduction. Let me stress again here, however, that I do not claim in this book or elsewhere that this unmasking will cure those under the spell of an ideological mistake. The mistake about deconstruction as a reading procedure is a splendid example of this. I give two examples out of innumerable possible ones in both the media and in academic writing.

A recent short essay in *Scientific American* by Michael Shermer is entitled "Scientia Humanitatis," with a subtitle as follows: "Reason, empiricism and skepticism are not virtues of science alone."² Here is a scan of the essay as it appeared in the print version of *Scientific American*:

This essay is one in an ongoing series by Shermer identified, as you can see, at the top left-hand corner of the page as "Skeptic by Michael Shermer; Viewing the world with a rational eye." Shermer's one-page, two-column essay praises a recent book by Rens Bod.³ Bod advocates a return



Figure 1.1 A scan of the essay *Scientia Humanitatis* as it appeared in *Scientific American*, June 2015.

to empirical methods in the humanities, for example, the use of lexical and grammatical methods to date documents, as Lorenzo Valla did in 1440 to show that the famous *Donation of Constantine* was a fake and could not have been written in the fourth century A.D. because it uses Latin words and constructions not around in the fourth century A.D. I'm all for the use of such methods. They are indispensable. They have their limits, however, as in the quite correct omission of rhetoric, in the sense both of the knowledge of persuasion and the knowledge of figurative language, from Shermer's phrase "lexical and grammatical." These words name two members, if you take *lexical* as involving logical argumentation, of the

basic medieval *trivium*, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, but conspicuously leave out rhetoric.

Before beginning his praise of Bod and *scientia humanitatis*, however, Shermer opens his essay by saying: “In the late 20th century the humanities took a turn toward post-modern deconstruction and the belief that there is no objective reality to be discovered. To believe in such quaint notions as scientific progress was to be guilty of ‘scientism,’ properly said with a snarl.” This is a blatantly ignorant, robotic repetition of an ideological mistake, with no evidence of skepticism about received opinion. I’ll bet, however, that no one could convince Shermer he is ignorant and wrong.

Let me look a little at the rhetoric of Shermer’s byline, title, and opening sentences. Shermer calls himself a skeptic, but “viewing the world with a rational eye” is not at all the same thing as “viewing it with a skeptical eye.” A rational eye presumably knows what reason is and says, “What I see is a hummingbird. Any rational person can see that.” A skeptical eye would say, “That looks like a hummingbird, but I could be mistaken. Perhaps my eyes are deceiving me.” In any case, the phrase “view the world with a rational eye” is a figure of speech. It is a figure so commonplace that its figurative quality likely passes most readers by unnoticed. But of course it is not the eye that is reasonable or skeptical, but rather the mind behind that eye, or perhaps one should rather say “the brain behind the eye,” with its training, its neurological structures, its memories, its language set, and its presuppositions about how to interpret the perceptual world. The little bird is behaving like a hummingbird and is feeding at the hummingbird feeder, and therefore it is most likely actually a hummingbird. Seeing that it is or is not a hummingbird is not at all the same as reading in a rhetorical way, that is, with attention to the implication of the figurative language used to assert the results of perception, such as the words “viewing the world with a rational eye.” My use of the cliché “my eyes could be deceiving me,” by the way, is another figure, this time a personification of the eyes as like a deceitful person.

Between those series-title words in small type in the upper left-hand corner of the page and the title proper (“*Scientia Humanitatis*”) comes an illustration of a nuclear family (father, mother, and small son) looking in a museum at a large and at first inscrutable, medieval-looking painting. As the title under the painting in the museum (*Donatio Constantini*) and as Shermer’s essay later indicates, it is a (changed) painting of the forged *Donation of Constantine*, “by which,” says Wikipedia, “the emperor Con-



Figure 1.2 "Sylvester I and Constantine," by unknown medieval artist in Rome.

stantine the Great supposedly transferred authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to the Pope."⁴ Sure enough, Shermer or the artist who devised the illustration in *Scientific American*, Izhar Cohen, most likely also used Wikipedia, since the *Scientific American* page reproduces, with significant amusing changes, the same painting as the one in the Wikipedia entry. Here is the original painting:

This is a thirteenth-century fresco in Santi Quattro Coronati, Rome, of Sylvester and Constantine, showing the purported donation. In the version cleverly presented as part of Shermer's essay the theme of anachronism detected by Valla's rational analysis of lexical and grammatical features of the *Donation of Constantine* is brilliantly represented by the airplane flying overhead that is being looked at (unless my eyes deceive me) through a telescope by one of the men on the horse. The art editors of *Scientific American* or Izhar Cohen himself probably designed the picture. As Paul de Man says, we must learn "to read pictures" rather than "to imagine meaning," in this case by comparing the original fresco and the satirical parody of it.⁵

I have not yet done with my reading of the opening of Shermer's essay, however. To call it with a Latin name, *Scientia Humanitatis*, is a slightly pretentious way to claim to be a learned person, as is Shermer's use later in his essay of the grand German word for the human sciences,

Geisteswissenschaften. The words tell the reader Shermer is in the know, so to speak. A good deal of rhetoric, both in the sense of persuasive language and in the sense of figurative language, characterizes Shermer's first two sentences: "In the late 20th century the humanities took a turn toward post-modern deconstruction and the belief that there is no objective reality to be discovered. To believe in such quaint notions as scientific progress was to be guilty of 'scientism,' properly said with a snarl." The first sentence turns on the metaphor "took a turn," with its embedded notions of history as some kind of straight-line journey which in this case took a wrong turn. The ominous "his condition took a turn for the worse" is also echoed. No one is blamed for this bad turn. It just happened. The humanities took a turn. Suddenly people just believed "that there is no objective reality to be discovered." Nor is any evidence given from any scholar who represents this bad turn. Nor is anything said about the historical conditions that might have been a context for this bad turn. The sentence just hangs there in the air, uttered without evidence but with bland, apodictic certainty. The implication is that everyone knows this happened and that something so universally accepted as true no longer needs any proof or explanation. The bad turn happened, and everybody knows it. The second sentence is a bit more openly polemical. It mimes the absurdity of postmodern deconstructionists by saying they hold that belief in scientific progress is a "quaint notion," perhaps as quaint as believing walking under a ladder brings bad luck. Shermer's formulation imagines someone's dismissing scientism as, in a powerful personification, a nasty person's speaking "with a snarl." The next sentence brings in the famous Alan Sokal nonsense parody, published in a major humanities journal, "chockablock full of postmodern phrases and deconstructionist tropes interspersed with scientific jargon." The implication is that postmodernists and so-called deconstructionists all write that way. I discuss below the way the publication recently of immense numbers of fake and nonsensical scientific papers could be used, falsely, to discredit science generally. Sokal's paper is the only one I know of that parodies deconstruction, whereas the number of fake scientific papers is enormous.

So-called deconstruction never says there is no objective reality to be discovered, nor that science does not progress. The scholars Shermer attacks would hold, however, that science progresses to a considerable degree precisely through correcting earlier mistakes about "objective reality." Shermer could hardly disagree with that. Shermer gives no evidence whatsoever that he has ever read a word by Derrida, or de Man, or even

me. He is relying, it appears, only on second-hand mistaken accounts in the media or on distorted academic accounts.

Shermer goes on to say, “I subsequently gave up on the humanities.” This is as stupid and ignorant as if I were to say, “I gave up on science when I heard about the uncertainty principle, Gödel’s incompleteness or ‘undecidability’ theorems, physicists’ inability to identify what dark matter and dark energy are, and all those fake scientific papers published in reputable scientific journals.”⁶ Everyone would think, correctly, I was an idiot if I were to give up on science for those reasons.

Shermer’s error about deconstruction is a good example of a blithely believed ideological mistake repeated as a universally acknowledged fact needing no empirical evidence. Such mistakes are more or less impossible to root out, as Marx, Althusser, and de Man, among many others, assert. It is therefore, I conclude, best for me not to use the word *deconstruction* at all to name something I do, but to name it “rhetorical reading.”

I have just, dear reader, given an example of such a reading in my brief investigation of the rhetoric of Michael Shermer’s *Scientia Humanitatis*.

Another example of the resistance to the unmasking of ideological mistakes comes from China. *Ideology*, by the way, has, I long ago discovered on my first visit to China, in 1988, a quite different valence in China from what it has in the West. For us, the word names a prejudiced mistake, as in my usage in this introduction. For the Chinese, *ideology* tends to mean something good the authorities must persuade you to believe. That is, in my judgment, by the way, a profoundly un-Marxist use of the word. The Chinese appear, to echo Paul de Man’s phrasing, to be “very poor readers of Marx’s *German Ideology*.” I have visited China many times and have given over thirty lectures at conferences there, though I still consider myself an innocent when I am in China. I remain someone who is never quite sure what is going on, to a considerable degree because I do not know Chinese. Many of my essays and books, however, have been translated into Chinese and published in China. I have often been interviewed in China, have had a number of dissertations written there on my work, and keep close contact with many Chinese colleagues. For the most part, my work seems to have been correctly read and well understood in China. I greatly value that.

Nevertheless, a recent interchange of e-mail letters indicates that a quite highly placed Chinese academic holds stubbornly to something like Shermer’s ideological mistake. “In the mentality of Chinese scholars,” asserts my Chinese correspondent, “deconstruction is a powerful trend of

thoughts which rejects reason, doubting about truth and trying to subvert order. Its manifestation in literary criticism is denying all the previous criticism, advocating decentralization and anti-essentialism, and deconstructing the fixed meaning, structure and language of a given text, or to use your own words, it's 'something that could be separated into fragments or parts, suggesting the image of a child's dismantling his father's watch into parts that cannot be reassembled.'" My Chinese correspondent does not mention which or how many Chinese scholars share this mentality. This is Shermer's mentality too, spelled out in much more detail in my email from China. As anyone knows who has read with care any work by Derrida or de Man, this is at every point a caricature of so-called deconstruction. In particular, that passage about a child's dismantling his father's watch is used to make me say the exact opposite of what I actually said, so powerful in this case is the force of ideological (in the Marxist sense) misconceptions.

Here are the two sentences in their entirety in my original text: "The word 'deconstruction' suggests that such criticism is an activity turning something unified back to detached fragments or parts. It suggests the image of a child taking apart his father's watch, reducing it back to useless parts, beyond any reconstitution."⁷ The passage, when returned to its context in my essay, by no means says deconstruction really is like a child's taking his father's watch apart, in an act of rebellion against the father, or against a paternalistic tradition. It says, on the contrary, that the word *deconstruction* misleadingly and falsely suggests such an image. The sentence is ironically contrary to fact. When I tried to explain this to my Chinese correspondent, he replied, in the translation another scholar supplied, since he does not know English, just as I, to my shame, don't know Chinese: "On receiving your letter, I re-examined your original sentence in its context and found that if the sentence was read by itself separately, there could be misunderstanding. After this sentence, you immediately explain that deconstruction is for construction. [Not really quite what I said. I said the two prefixes *de* and *con* must both be taken into account when parsing the word.] This once again proves that our dialogue will promote a more accurate understanding of your academic positions." He doesn't say that there is misunderstanding, but that there could be misunderstanding. Nor does he by any means say that the "mentality of Chinese scholars" is an ideological mistake, similar to the one American scholars such as Michael Shermer make.

I therefore conclude that it is best not to use the word at all any more, since it has such a distorted meaning in the mentality of even highly educated people in both China and the West. As a result I say, "I am not a deconstructionist." Whether or not Chinese textbooks, as my correspondent says, actually have so-called deconstruction so categorically wrong could only be ascertained by looking at them, which my ignorance prevents me from doing. Nor do I know why it is that so many of my Chinese academic acquaintances seem to have escaped being bewildered by such mistakes about deconstruction. Nor do I know what the relation is between what the "Chinese mentality" is said to believe about deconstruction and the Chinese campaign by Minister of Education Yuan Guiren, enunciated on January 29, 2015, and reported on January 30, 2015, in Western media, to ban in China all university textbooks that promote "Western values." Is their parody of so-called deconstruction taken by them as a Western value? These possible connections would be well worth investigation by someone who is more learned than I in matters Chinese, not to speak of having the indispensable knowledge of the Chinese language.

He who would make a pun would pick a pocket, as the proverbial saying goes. It is now attributed to John Dennis. Now that I have, I hope, cleared the air a little about so-called deconstruction, though I am not dumb enough to assume that I have cleared the fog completely, I turn to a brief introductory account of my presuppositions in the chapters by me in this book.

As opposed to Ghosh's apparent desire, if I read him right, to affirm a universal system of literary theory and then turn to read actual literary works, my deeply rooted procedure is to go the other way, that is, from specific literary works through their detailed reading to whatever tentative generalizations I can make on that basis about literature in general. The generalizations are only as good as is the empirical evidence acquired from trying to read individual works. Citations from others' theories are only useful to me as ways of helping me formulate what I have found in whatever particular work I am trying to read.

My fascination with literature began when I was five years old and taught myself to read so I could read Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* for myself, rather than having to depend on my mother to read it to me. Two things absorbed me about the Alice books: first, their ability to transport me into an imaginary world, as if I had gone down a rabbit hole or through a looking-glass. Even the most "realistic" novel, such as any one of Anthony Trollope's novels, does that. It is a basic feature of any literary work, for

example of Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, which absorbed me in the same way as *Alice in Wonderland*, though a few years later on in my childhood. Second, the wonderful puns and wordplay in the Alice books, which I found, and still find, hilarious. The puns in *Alice* were my introduction to the figurative dimension of language in one of its most powerful forms.⁸ Many other kinds of wordplay besides the pun are represented in the Alice books, but all in one way or another depend on figurative displacements. The rhetorical reading I have practiced as an adult stems directly from what I learned about language from Lewis Carroll. Growing up, for Alice, means learning to understand that a single word or word sound may have wildly different meanings. Both of these features of Alice's experience with language are named by her with the word *curious*. What she experiences is said to be "curiouser and curiouser!"⁹ That word is Alice's version of what I have called the "strangeness" of literature.

I give just one example. Alice has been listening to the mouse's tale, but she imagines it as having the shape of the mouse's tail. The book shows graphically what the mouse says as curving back and forth down the page like a tail.

"Mine is a long and sad tale!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice and sighing.

"It is a long tail, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail; "but why do you call it sad?" And she kept on puzzling about it while the Mouse was speaking, so that her idea of the tale was something like this:

"You are not attending!" said the Mouse to Alice, severely. "What are you thinking of?"

"I beg your pardon," said Alice very humbly: "You had got to the fifth bend, I think?"

"I had *not!*" cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily.

"A knot!" said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her. "Oh, do let me help to undo it!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort," said the Mouse, getting up and walking away. "'You insult me by talking such nonsense!"

"I didn't mean it!" pleaded poor Alice. "But you're so easily offended, you know!"

The Mouse only growled in reply.¹⁰

In my considered judgment, anyone who does not find this extremely funny as well as disquieting does not have much talent for literature. I learned also from such passages, without at all being able to articulate

—“Fury said to
 a mouse, That
 he met
 in the
 house,
 ‘Let us
 both go
 to law:
 I will
 prosecute
 you.--
 Come, I’ll
 take no
 denial:
 We must
 have a
 trial;
 For
 really
 this
 morning
 I’ve
 nothing
 to do.’
 Said the
 mouse to
 the cur,
 ‘Such a
 trial,
 dear sir,
 With no
 jury or
 judge,
 would be
 wasting
 our breath.’
 ‘I’ll be
 judge,
 I’ll be
 jury.’
 Said
 cunning
 old Fury;
 ‘I’ll try
 the whole
 cause,
 and
 condemn
 you
 to
 death.’”

Figure 1.3 A scan from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

what I had learned, how important irony, that trope that is not a trope, is in literature. The irony arises in this case, as is usual in literature, from the discrepancies among what the characters know and understand, and what the narrator, the author, and the reader may understand. Readers in this case can see that Alice is not yet grown up enough to understand wordplay, but the mouse is no better. He is only made more and more angry by what Alice says, while Alice does not understand the linguistic mistakes she has made, just as I surely missed some when I first read the Alice books. Alice can only plead, “I didn’t mean it,” when she offends the mouse, in anticipation of Stanley Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say?* That issue comes up explicitly later in *Alice in Wonderland* and may be Cavell’s source for his formulation.¹¹ Only the narrator, author, and reader, in different ways and degrees, can be presumed to “understand irony” (if we can indeed speak of understanding it, a dangerous assumption), and to get the joke.

I resist the temptation to turn aside and continue my reading of the Alice books. I give, however, two more examples of wordplay that are not exactly puns but examples of the tropes buried in ordinary language that lead to absurdities if taken literally, like Shermer’s “took a turn.” In one, from *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice finds herself in a shop run by a knitting sheep, who asks her, “What is it you want to buy?” Alice answers politely, in perfectly idiomatic English, “I should like to look all round me first, if I might,” to which the Sheep replies, “You may look in front of you, and on both sides, if you like, . . . but you can’t look *all* round you—unless you’ve got eyes at the back of your head.” On the next page, Alice finds herself rowing a little boat with the Sheep as passenger. The sheep cries repeatedly, “Feather! Feather!” and “You’ll be catching a crab directly.” Neither Alice nor I, when I first read the Alice books, knew that “feathering” is the name (a catachresis, in fact, since it does not substitute for some more literal word) for turning your oars sideways when you take them out of the water so they don’t catch the wind. She also does not know, nor did I, that “catching a crab” is the name for getting your oar stuck in the water through digging it too deeply (another catachresis). But I could go on and on, and must resist temptation.

My experience with literature has taught me that literary works (and philosophical or theoretical works, too) are each *sui generis*, unlike all the others. Each therefore demands its own procedure of being read and accounted for. Moreover, each reading of a given work by a given reader will differ from all the others, as will different readings at different times by the same reader. As Heraclitus said, “You can’t step twice into the same

river, for other waters are continually flowing in." The pleasure, intellectual excitement, and benefit of reading literary works, really reading them, comes from these perpetual differences. These differences mean, among other things, that a given reader can always return to read once more a given work with the expectation of new pleasure, new intellectual excitement, and new benefit. My decades of literary study are, in short, empirical and inductive, not deductive from general presuppositions. I do take for granted that literary works are made of language, including figurative language, so that investigating a literary work is always an investigation of linguistic constructions. Language is the matter to be empirically investigated, not consciousness, or history, or society, or nature, or intersubjectivity, although these may be referred to in the language of this or that literary text.

The consequence of these assumptions, or, rather, of my ingrained experiences of trying to account for literary works, is that each of my five chapters is centered on the attempt to read some specific work, including in one case a philosophical or theoretical work: Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," for chapter 2; Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor," for chapter 4; Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (The birth of tragedy), for chapter 6; Yeats's "The Cold Heaven," in chapter 8; and Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage*, for chapter 10. These readings are not meant to support theoretical propositions I have initially put forward in a given chapter. They are what the chapters are centrally about, that is, the attempt to read this or that work, with a given topic in mind in each chapter. Chapter 2 focuses on why literature matters. Chapter 4 is about the lyric. Chapter 6 centers on the problems of world literature. Chapter 8 investigates the justification of literary study in today's world. Chapter 10 is about the ethical dimensions of literature. The works I read, one in each chapter, are chosen as exemplary from among the many works that I admire. Several chapters are fairly elaborate revisions of previous essays I have published or will publish. Others are newly written for this book. These are part of my current investigation of what actually happens when I read a poem or a novel. I claim that what happens is stranger than one might think. It is different for every reader or even different for different readings by the same reader. I have put my chapters explicitly in dialogue with Ranjan Ghosh's matching chapters and have made them fit better my current convictions about the topics of the five sections. My part of this book is a fairly elaborate rethinking of my positions on these topics.

A good bit of each of my chapters, however, is made up of contextual assertions that try to establish the circumstances within which literature is read, taught, and written about in the West today. These contexts somewhat dismayingly suggest that literary study faces some obstacles today, to say the least. I now identify the most conspicuous ones as a conclusion of this brief introduction. Each is in one place or another, or in several places, discussed in more detail in my chapters, especially in chapter 8. My claim is that the rhetorical reading I advocate and try to practice will help us at least to understand what is happening to us and what is making literary study more and more marginal for most people: The overwhelming threat of catastrophic climate change, along with its widespread denial by many people, threatens us, even now. The epochal shift from a print culture to a digital culture looms, as does the marginalization of the humanities in our universities as they are transformed more and more into trade schools teaching primarily STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to prepare students for work in a technologized, digitized, and commoditized society. An almost unheard of discrepancy in the wealth and income of the rich and poor accelerates dangerously, as between the 0.01 percent or 0.001 percent and the rest of us. The result is that elections, in the United States at least, are more and more bought by the rich, to a considerable degree through the manipulation of the mass media that are a result of new teletechnologies, as is the ubiquitous advertising that keeps us in thrall to commodity fetishism. And we are beset by globalization (brought about by new teletechnologies, such as the Internet), with a paradoxical increase in isolationisms and commercial as well as military conflicts among nations.

Reading, teaching, and writing about literary works today must be carried on, if at all, in these not entirely cheerful contexts. Most people these days, in the United States at least, let's face it, spend much time using iPhones, Facebook, or Twitter, watching Fox News, or playing video games, not reading Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* or Tennyson's poetry. That is the case even though Trollope's novel and Tennyson's poetry, like so much of the rest of old-fashioned print literature, are easily available in free Gutenberg e-text form to be read on any laptop, iPad, or iPhone with an Internet connection.

As Tom Cohen has demonstrated in a brilliant essay, "material inscription," in the de Manian sense, plays a crucial role in all five of my contextual situations, as well as in all the literary texts I try to read.¹² Just what is material inscription in the de Manian sense? Here is the crucial formulation

at the end of de Man's "Hypogram and Inscription: Michael Riffaterre's Poetics of Reading." De Man's target is Riffaterre's reading of a short poem by Victor Hugo:

Every detail as well as every general proposition in the text [Hugo's poem] is fantastic except for the assertion that it is *écrit*, written. That it was supposed to be written, like Swift's love poem to Stella, as words upon a window pane, is one more cliché to add to those Riffaterre has already collected. But that, like Hegel's text from the *Phenomenology*, it was written cannot be denied. The materiality (as distinct from the phenomenology) that is thus revealed, the unseen "cristal" whose existence becomes a certain *there* and a certain *then* which can become a *here* and a *now* in the reading "now" taking place, is not the materiality of the mind or of time or of the carillon [a topic in Hugo's poem]—none of which exists, except in the figure of prosopopeia—but the materiality of an inscription. Description [de Man means the naming of the things, events, and actions, such as the carillon, in Hugo's poem], it appears, was a device to conceal inscription. Inscription is neither a figure, nor a sign, nor a cognition, nor a desire, nor a hypogram, nor a matrix, yet no theory of poetry can achieve consistency if, like Riffaterre's, it responds to its [inscription's] powers only by a figural evasion which, in this case, takes the subtly effective form of evading the figural.¹³

Investigation of what happens to the materiality of inscription in the new digital media is approached indirectly here and there in my chapters of this book, but I claim, with Cohen, that the materiality of inscription, in various forms, operates as much in climate change, in the financial world, in the new media, in politics, and in globalization, as in printed poetry or fiction. Though in the citation I have just made de Man mostly tells the reader all the things the materiality of inscription is not, the figure of the invisible glass on which a poem might be scratched gives the reader a glimpse of why it is that the materiality of inscription is "unseen," non-phenomenal. In de Man's figure, borrowed from Hugo, we cannot see the materiality of the glass because the mind attends not to the invisible "cristal" but to what is scratched on it, something phenomenally visible and instantly read as interpretable language. It is a case of description's concealing the materiality of inscription. The reader must remember, however, that de Man's figure of the words upon the windowpane is another "figural evasion." By no means is it a direct confrontation of the materiality

of inscription. That materiality is not phenomenally visible. It cannot be confronted (another prosopopeia).

I must end here by encouraging you to read carefully de Man's "Hypogram and Inscription" and his "Anthropomorphism and the Lyric," the first in *The Resistance to Theory*, the second in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*.¹⁴ I also encourage you to read Cohen's wonderful essay, mentioned above. That essay is, among many other things, a long gloss or riff on de Manian materiality of inscription, as it might help us to understand where we are now, "in the twilight of the anthropocene idols."