The Double Life of Paul de Man

By Evelyn Barish

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On a visit to Europe in the 1960s, Alice Cook, a professor at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, met the former chief secretary of Belgium's socialist party. She mentioned that Paul de Man, her Cornell colleague, had told her he was the son of Henri de Man, a onetime socialist politician who had turned to fascism in the 1930s and '40s. "He is not," the man replied. "He's lied again. He tells everybody lies."

At the time, Paul de Man was emerging as a preeminent literary theorist and the co-founder (with Jacques Derrida) of "deconstruction," a philosophy that emphasizes the inherent ambiguities, inconsistencies and ironies in texts and the insurmountable epistemological challenge of communicating meaning through language. When he died of cancer in 1983, de Man was the Sterling professor of the humanities at Yale - and an iconic intellectual.

Five years later, Ortwin De Graef, a Belgian scholar, discovered that the young de Man had collaborated with the Nazis as a journalist and had written at least one anti-Semitic article. The revelations, which shook the academic world, appeared on the front page of the New York Times and the cover of Newsweek. Although the scandal raged for several years, Evelyn Barish, a professor at the City of New York Graduate Center, points out, no one examined de Man's formative experiences in Belgium to understand the factors that influenced him.

In "The Double Life of Paul de Man," Barish draws on archival material on two continents and interviews with more than 200 individuals to shine a light on the life he worked so hard to conceal. Devastated by his mother's suicide, she argues, de Man became secretive and opportunistic. A protege of his uncle, Henri de Man, Paul curried favor with the Nazi occupiers with the hope that he would be appointed to important positions in Belgium's collaborationist regime.

Convicted of fraud and embezzlement in the publishing house he created, he fled to the United States when the war ended, abandoned his wife and three children, made a bigamous second marriage, fabricated an undergraduate degree, completed a doctorate at Harvard - despite the misgivings of his supervising professors - and, without anyone knowing that he was a man without a country, began his rise as an academic rock star and public intellectual.

Barish does not write well - and the biography is, at times, repetitious. That said, "The Double Life of Paul de Man" provides a fascinating and fair-minded account of an elusive and enigmatic man. It is also filled with insights about our contemporary culture and politics.

Barish suggests, for example, that men and women on the intellectual left in the United States often felt as alienated from their roots as de Man. Many of them were drawn to refugees and European (especially existentialist) ideas. And they found in him, austere mask and all, an exemplary figure "who was wrestling with what it was to be human in a world defined by tragic limitations."

Most important, perhaps, to bolster what critics have heretofore intuited, Barish provides concrete evidence to connect de Man's life experiences with the theories he developed. Deconstruction, she demonstrates, was born "not only out of a desire to penetrate and disturb false notions about the sufficiency of discourse, but also to allow himself the ability to deny - to himself above all - the stability not just of words but the stains of character, of history, and of personal responsibility."

A philosophy of "living forward," skepticism toward all narrative, especially biography, and toward the notion of a stable self, she emphasizes, allowed him to turn away from past misdeeds by declaring them irrelevant. In taking this approach, the private guilt he may have felt became "human guilt, universal, and it would go unnamed."
Barish reminds us to take seriously "the manner in which a man lies, and what he lies about." "We are magicians," de Man told a candidate for a position at Yale. "When you get here we will all disappear." Paul de Man has, indeed, disappeared, though you have to wonder about Barish's conclusion that "faith, not modernist doubt and skepticism," are now "the order of the day."

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