

**The Daily Dose of The Good (and Not So Good) Words:
A Sack of Skin Full of Wet Words Digging for A Pony
From Bishop Bishop**

Today, the (not yet) Daily Dose blazes a trail up a different hill while backtracking to our (camp) site, set up in the first Daily Dose, to pick up a trail mix of images of maps and trails and blazes, oh my. We need to have something to crunch in our teeth as we walk down this path. We look at the same valley as in the last (despite good intentions not coming out) Daily Dose, but from a different summit. We look “down in the valley, valley so low” and see things we saw from the other hill but at a different angle. We try to see the valley in a new light, but its shadows are shaped by our memories of how we saw the light last cast.

So which valley are we looking down at? We walk/look through the valley of the shadow of self. We both are on the hill looking down and in the valley trudging. The path we follow this time is marked out by Paul de Man.

“Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempts at differentiation and self-definition.” Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Temporality*.

It would be easy to follow one side of this forked subject. Judith Butler, a mapmaker who uses some of de Man trailheads in her cartography, says, “Consciousness is language.” The blame is not with Butler’s blazes, but with how we may get lost, if we do not pay close attention to where they lead or forget that there are obstacles on the path. We could twist our ankles; we could fall into a crevasse and starve to death.

To say that the self is like a sign, that consciousness is language, is a slippery slope into the hell of “I think I can,” a road paved with good intentions and the power of positive thinking. Or more tragically, it is a mudslide into nihilism. We are more than our thoughts. We are more than the language that shapes those thoughts.

We need to remember that the subject is not reduced to its sign like attempts at self-definition. The subject also is constituted by an empirical self, a walking sack of skin full of sloshing liquids and chemical reactions. The walking sack of skin full of viscous organs is affected by the shenanigans of the self that acts like a sign that is housed within a particular sack of skin. It is affected by the consciousness that is language. The walking sack of skin full of wet words also is affected by other walking sacks of skin as well as by a world of things not limited to our language.

Now you might accuse me of misunderstanding de Man, since he does say at the very beginning of the passage that it is within language that the doubly hermaphroditic subject is created. The empirical self and the sign like self penetrate each other, though somehow this is not quite as exciting as you might imagine, and there is no channel on Red Tube dedicated to this sort of fetish. Maybe his words only apply to the study of literature,

with possible forays into the visual arts. But I highlight another passage that I think shows my blazes have not gotten us completely lost.

“Irony comes closer to the pattern of factual existence and recaptures some of the factitiousness of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self.” Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Temporality*.

Paul de Man does think his study of allegory and irony has something to say about our lived experiences, and so I take his words seriously. I choose to look closely, to see if my encounter with this passage helps me understand my life- not just the life of my mind, but my life as divided self, which adds up to more than the two self-penetrating selves.

I take it seriously because I wonder what happens when the divided self walks through the valley of the shadow of death. Is there any comfort to be found from de Man’s rod and staff? If the self that acts like a sign, the consciousness that is language, decides to end the pain- which the sign like self experiences due to language twisted into seemingly irreversible, thorny crown (k)nots- by killing the sack of skin full of wet words- could that someone be saved by discovering or remembering that the subject is divided and not solely reducible to the pain that the self that acts as sign thinks it feels.

It gets down to the question of time. In some ways the suicidal self that acts like a sign, if we follow de Man, sees things more clearly than the non-suicidal sign like self. That self knows that our experience of time is imaginary. There is no moment before. There is no moment after. There is only the current isolated moment: “the actual now, which is that of the moment of death.”

To live, we have to pretend that there is time, that this moment leads to the next, that there is moment before, that there is a moment after, that there is somewhere else to get to. That is the only way to make a specific isolated moment that feels unbearably painful not end with an act of self-slaughter.

If I could compare Badiou’s *Ethics* to the *Book of Jonah* (which I think I can), then I would compare de Man’s *Rhetoric* with *Ecclesiastes*. Quoting de Man quoting Rousseau, “the nothingness of human matters” goes a long way to making my comparison tenable. Or in a more earthy way I could say that Alain Badiou, well aware that he digs for a non-existent pony, smiles as he shovels shit. Paul de Man shovels shit without any hope of enjoying the never to be found pretend pony.

I think I’ll dig with Badiou. It is the same room, full of the same shit, with no actual pony to find, but somehow Badiou seems more hopeful. I want to enjoy pretending there is a pony, pretending that there time, pretending that there is a way to escape this instant. I do not want to forget that it is pretend, but I still I will pretend. And my pretense, the valley of self, will echo with laughter.