

Passages from De Man

For the statement about language [by criticism]. That sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of knowledge free from the fallacy of unmediated expression. All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite. Yet the truth emerges in the foreknowledge we possess of the true nature of literature when we refer to it as *fiction*.

“Criticism and Crisis,” 1971

Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations, or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning, and of value prior to their establishment.

“Resistance to Theory,” 1986

Whenever [the] autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available.

“Ibid.”

In a genuine semiology as well as in other linguistically oriented theories, the referential function of language is not being denied—far from it; what is in question is its authority for natural or phenomenal cognition. . . . What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism.

“Ibid.”

The resistance to theory is the resistance to the use of language about language.

“Ibid.”

I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. . . . In a complicated way, I would hold to the statement that “the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive,” rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from outside the text.

Interview with Stefano Rosso, 1986