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Uncertainty, Of Course:
The Error of Understanding Error

In his essay, “The Concept of Irony,” Paul de Man sets up the distinction between irony and epistemology by way of the opposition between *ieron*, “the smart guy,” and *alazon*, “the dumb guy.”¹ Insofar as de Man declares that “by necessity” the smart guy always ends up being trumped by the dumb one, his intention appears to be to elucidate the uncertainty inherent in this opposition. He concludes, “In this case the *alazon* (and I recognize that this makes me the real *alazon* of this discourse) is American criticism of irony, and the smart guy is going to be German criticism of irony, which I of course understand.”² Rather than the opposition of *ieron* and *alazon*, it is this last “of course,” my paper will argue, that radically underscores the uncertainty that is the figure of irony. If de Man were to simply describe the principles of this uncertainty, by which he ascertains himself as the dumb guy, he would simply repeat the error of the smart guy.

My paper will focus on the relation of this irreducible uncertainty to the critical reader's desire of conclusively turning every text—even de Man's—into a trope for meaning. Adducing Jacques Lacan's Seminar *On the Psychoses* in order to approach this “relation of understanding,” as Lacan terms it,³ I suggest that what “has to be understood is why there is something there given to be understood.”⁴ The “of course” inherent in formulating principles of uncertainty might take any reading radically off course.

¹ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 165.

² Ibid, p. 165.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*. Transl. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 6.

⁴ Ibid, p. 49.