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Impasse? What Impasse? Berlant, de Man, and the Intolerable Present

WHAT DO WE mean when we say that certain social or political conditions are intolerable? The term has long been attractive to radicals, beginning with Marx and Engels, who, in *The German Ideology*, take for granted that alienation will "become an 'intolerable' power [*eine 'unerträgliche' Macht*], that is, a power against which men make a revolution," in the historical movement that inevitably "abolishes the present state of affairs" (121). Once conditions become utterly intolerable, collective action will happen, it must happen. Radical action is essentially "*necessary*, both for the actor and for the environment in which it is performed," says the early Herbert Marcuse, because it "transforms necessity—transforms something that had become utterly intolerable [*unerträglich*]—and posits in its place precisely the necessity that alone can sublate the intolerable [*die Unerträglichkeit*]" (*Heideggerian* 5; translation modified). An intolerable situation is one that demands action, and so designating conditions as intolerable should compel a struggle against them. Hence Michel Foucault and the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP) organized their praxes and publications around the concept of *l'intolérable*: their goal was to make the intolerable conditions of prisons and of society in fact appear intolerable so as to foster an intolerance of these conditions and "make it an active intolerance" (1044; my translation). For if the intolerable is, by definition, that which cannot be tolerated, then that which becomes seen as intolerable will effectively become intolerable and will therefore be abolished.

Or so the thought goes. Yet, as the GIP's call not only for intolerance but for *active* intolerance indicates (and as the scare quotes that Marx and Engels place around *unerträglich* perhaps already hint), such thinkers have also always sensed the tenuousness of the intolerable as a political concept insofar as it refers to a breaking point or threshold that perpetually disappears over the horizon. What, after all, is really intolerable? At least according to psychoanalytic theory, the human psyche is generally successful in defending against what would otherwise be unbearable: neurotics and psychotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable, in whole or in part, and so bear it; even those who experience trauma confront not an

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intolerable threat but the impossibility of experiencing such a threat directly.[1] Much more often than not, people would seem to demonstrate a remarkable ability to endure breathtakingly awful conditions and circumstances.[2] Of course, when we say that something is intolerable, we usually use the term normatively: what we mean is that it should not be or should not have to be tolerated, not that it cannot be borne. When, for example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stated in a recent 2019 interview that "we've been tolerating the intolerable" (Morris), her point was that left-leaning folks in the United States have been tolerating what should not be tolerated. Nevertheless, as is evident in her formulation as well as in the GIP's strategic blurring of the *is* and the *ought*, the concept of the intolerable would lose its critical significance if it were not also inevitably descriptive, that is, if it did not still make claims on reality and posit the existence of a breaking point—even if that point can only be located beyond the horizon of possible experience.[3] Perhaps what we mean when we say that certain conditions are intolerable is not just that we don't like these conditions and that we fear we cannot bear them; it's that we don't like how we continue to tolerate them all the same and that we dream of a point at which we would stop doing so.

Theorists of impasse respond to this dream more or less obliquely and more or less critically. That will be my first thesis. Like the idea of a breaking point, the idea of impasse often holds a sense of possibility and the potential for change, though it does not hold the promise of revolution. Within a schema of temporal or historical movement, an impasse marks a point at which the unceasing reproduction of the status quo is brought to a halt, enabling one to sense both the contingency and the brutality of the conditions in which they dwell; it opens the possibility, though not the inevitability, of something else. So, at least, suggests Lauren Berlant, who, in *Cruel Optimism*, develops the notion of "the impasse of the present" in order to examine what happens when the destructive attachments that nevertheless make many people's lives bearable begin to loosen and break. For Berlant, the concept of impasse is not only a tool with which to calibrate the threshold model of political change, particularly in light of the fact that conditions of suffering and oppression do not always or even usually lead subjects to radical action; it is also an instrument with which to take stock of the horizonlessness of the historical present. As an underlying condition that, in theory, becomes legible when one's temporal projections of hope are put on pause, the impasse of the present, like the intolerable, figures something akin to a real that one encounters, senses, or grasps. Unlike the limit concept of the intolerable, however, the concept of impasse doesn't seem to

[1] For a definition of traumatic experience as that which is not experienced directly, see Caruth's canonical account in *Unclaimed Experience*.

[2] Marcuse acknowledges all of this when, in his later work, he turns his critical attention to the concept of tolerance and to "the passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident" ("Repressive" 85). For a more recent critique of the concept of tolerance, see Borradori, particularly her interview with Derrida (85–136).

[3] See, too, the end of Foucault's 1971 interview (with G. Armleder), where, in the context of a discussion about prisons and the GIP, Foucault defines the intolerable as the unacceptable: "Simplement, je perçois l'intolérable. La fadeur de la soupe ou le froid de l'hiver sont relativement supportables. En revanche, emprisonner un individu uniquement parce qu'il est en affaire avec la justice, ce n'est pas acceptable!" (1073; Simply put, I perceive the intolerable. The blandness of soup or the cold of winter is relatively bearable. By contrast, to imprison an individual only because they are involved with the justice system—that is unacceptable!).

founder immediately on paradox: in theory, an experience of impasse would seem quite possible and wouldn't seem to be necessarily overwhelming or even negative; indeed, according to Berlant, "it may be that, for many now, living in an impasse would be an aspiration" (5). And yet, as I'll show, Berlant ends up demonstrating that the project of registering the impasse of the present is no more possible and no less tenuous than the parallel project of registering the intolerable. If, as she writes, "life is at the best imaginable of impasses" (32), then impasses may be, at best, figments of our political imagination. Like the idea of a breaking point, the idea of impasse may be a fantasy that manifests the desire for the end of things as they are, or at least for their momentary cessation. Put somewhat differently, an impasse may be an essential and yet surprisingly thin theoretical construct that is best grasped in terms of its impossibility.

Such, in turn, is the suggestion of Paul de Man, who, from *Allegories of Reading*, develops a complementary theory of the impasse of the present that grows out of his theory of reading. In what follows, I first situate Berlant's project in relation to Gilles Deleuze's reflections on the intolerable and examine how she illustrates a certain difficulty in making legible the impasse of the present, much like Deleuze does in his attempt to grasp the intolerable. After exploring this issue of legibility through a reading of KC Green's webcomic "On Fire" (best known as the source text of the viral "This is Fine" meme), I then turn to the work of de Man, who helps frame the difficulty that each thinker highlights as a consequence of the radical figurality of language. As a theorist whose work is often associated with aporias and dead ends, de Man would seem to be intensely invested in locating impasses in every text and textual moment on which he comments. I argue that de Man is indeed preoccupied with the idea of impasse, but that this preoccupation is due to his insight that impasse is, in fact, an impossibility. What's more, this preoccupation, I show, generates in de Man's writings an ancillary project, correspondent to Berlant's, in which he nevertheless attempts to recuperate the impossible experience of impasse, utilizing an affect-based rhetoric of threat and defense in order to make such an experience legible in the mode of impossibility. In conclusion, I offer a brief reading of Green's follow-up comic "This is Not Fine" in which I reflect on the broader implications of the possible impossibility of impasse, of people's seemingly infinite capacity to tolerate what should be intolerable, and of the dream of a revolutionary breaking point.

One of the basic presuppositions of this essay is that de Man's project of rhetorical reading has just as much to say about patterns of political desire as Berlant's affect-oriented cultural theory. If this claim seems implausible, then recall that something similar has long been assumed by scholars who have criticized the politics of de Manian deconstruction, even those who did so well before the discovery of de Man's wartime journalism. Frank Lentricchia, for example, claims in his 1983 *Criticism and Social Change* to reveal a "tacit political agenda" in de Man's writings "that can only embarrass deconstruction, particularly its younger proponents," and therefore puts forth a "wager" that, at some later date, de Man "will be rediscovered as the most brilliant hero of traditionalism, the theorist who elaborated the cagiest argument for the political defusion of writing and the intellectual life" (39, 40). Lentricchia's reasons for placing this bet are fairly easy to summarize: they all stem from his conviction that de Man's focus on impasse and aporia not only leads to "the paralysis of praxis itself" (40) but also forecloses on the imaginative

work necessary for any transformational politics. "In his theory of history," charges Lentricchia, "there is no future, no temporal vista really open, no possibility not always already snuffed by epistemic failure" (42). As a proponent of de Manian deconstruction who is writing more than three and a half decades after Lentricchia's prognostication, I would suggest that one of the reasons we might be interested in de Man's work today is precisely because it draws our attention away from some future "possibility" and directs it toward the impasse of the present. We might rediscover de Man, in other words, precisely as a thinker of impasse—or, better yet, as a thinker of the impossibility of impasse and of the implications that follow from this impossibility.

But first, a few more words about the intolerable.

In Deleuze's political and cinematic writings, as well as in his work with the GIP, seeing the intolerable is essential to any potential resistance or transformative change. When, for example, he describes the event of May 1968, he stresses that "what counts is what amounted to a visionary phenomenon, as if a society suddenly saw what was intolerable in it and also saw the possibility for something else" ("May" 234). Facing the intolerable is thus positioned as a condition for the possibility of something else: in order for things to be otherwise, Deleuze suggests, it's not enough just to see such a possibility, which, in any case, "does not pre-exist" the event; there must first be widespread recognition that present conditions are unbearable, otherwise the "something else" in which a society invests its optimism might turn out to be more of the same. Put somewhat differently, in order to stop the perpetuation of things as they are, the cognitive and perceptual processes with which people tolerate the intolerable must first be brought to a halt. And with May '68, Deleuze suggests, it was "as if" society suddenly stopped and said *enough*.

Cinema 2 aims to detail the mechanics of such an impasse by approaching literally the question of what it means to see the intolerable, which, according to Deleuze, occurs when our sensory-motor "schemata for turning away when it is too unpleasant"—particularly our metaphors and clichés—"jam or break" and "a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty" (20). Whether found in limit situations or in the everyday, such an image (which, for Deleuze, emerges in post–World War II cinema and organizes what he terms the time-image) is posited as that which brings the sensory-motor function (which organizes the movement-image of pre-war cinema) to an impasse. Accordingly, the characters in the Italian neorealist films he studies are described as in a sort of paralysis in which they can neither respond nor react to the situations in which they're placed, only see and record them (much like the viewer of cinema). Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli*, for example, "presents a foreign woman [Ingrid Bergman's Karin] whose revelation of the island will be all the more profound because she cannot react in a way that softens or compensates for the violence of what she sees" (2). Thus, revealing the intolerable, the new character of neorealist cinema indexes the historical crisis in action that Deleuze associates with the postwar period, one that he attributes to many different factors including the war and its consequences and "the unsteadiness of the 'American Dream' in all its aspects" (*Cinema 1* 206).

But intolerable for whom? The term invariably refers to something experienced, and yet the very idea of "grasping the intolerable or the unbearable" (*Cinema 2* 18) is something of a contradiction in terms, since the intolerable is that which cannot be, well, tolerated, even as the concept only gains traction with regard to conditions that are at least borne by some. Deleuze acknowledges this contradiction when, in "May '68," he figures the experience of the intolerable on the near side of what would be intolerable, as "a collective phenomenon in the form of 'Give me the possible, or else I'll suffocate'" (234). (Likewise, in *Cinema 2*, when "Man . . . experiences the intolerable," he "feels himself trapped" and immediately raises the question of the "way out" [170].) As a result, however, this phenomenon now looks more like an escape from, or a defense against, the intolerable, and the experience of the intolerable—or the closest one can get to it—is left indistinguishable from all those "schemata for turning away when it is too unpleasant." Deleuze's way to attenuate this problem in *Cinema 2* is to assert that an encounter with the intolerable is necessarily "visionary," "as from a third eye" (18). Hence those characters who reveal the intolerable, such as Karin in *Stromboli*, are construed not only as immobilized at a sensory-motor impasse but as "seers" who are in principle distanced from its ramifications, "unconcerned, even by what happens to them," since "what happens to them does not belong to them and only half concerns them" (19).[4] But this construal simply displaces the question of whom the intolerable really concerns and how it therefore appears. One could argue that Deleuze softens the situation of a character like Karin (who, after all, does react by attempting to escape the island), but the point to be made is even simpler: the intolerable can only appear through reactions that render it at least minimally tolerable and thus potentially imperceptible. Indeed, even the stoic, visionary lack of concern Deleuze ascribes to the figure of the seer seems like a potential defense and is difficult to distinguish from "a pragmatic visual function that 'tolerates' or 'puts up with' practically anything, from the moment it becomes involved in a system of actions and reactions" (*Cinema 2* 19). If the intolerable can only be witnessed, as Deleuze suggests, then it only becomes legible through reactions and turns that at the same time compromise its legibility.[5]

[4] When Deleuze discusses Foucault in the context of the GIP, he describes him similarly as a "seer" who was capable of seeing the intolerable ("Foucault" 274–75).

[5] In "Looking at the Stars Forever," Rei Terada observes how *Cinema 2* fails to imagine a way of looking to replace the sensory-motor one and, instead, largely "taxonomizes reactions to sensory-motor enervation that seem more like defenses than alternatives" (285). Indeed, as she notes, Deleuze himself more or less acknowledges the fate of his project when, at the beginning of the third chapter of *Cinema 2*, he states that the time-image "makes us grasp, *is supposed to make us grasp*, something intolerable and unbearable" (18; emphasis mine). For Terada, Deleuze's "failure" is what's most interesting about this project, since it substantiates the historical crisis in action that he posits and that she traces back to the post-Waterloo period, when, she argues, the possibility of distinguishing between revolution and restoration collapsed and ushered in the formation of realist liberalism. In Terada's account, late Romantic writers such as Keats respond to this collapse by constructing impasses in order "to create space for a world in which futility can no longer be a reason for not doing something" (280); rather than accepting the totalization of political space or looking to new temporal vistas, they point up the horizonlessness of a period that may well extend to our own historical present. From this perspective, Deleuze may register the same absence of horizon as Keats, but his attempts to escape from the historical crisis that he diagnoses look positively regressive. After all, writes Terada, "the whole point is that what's required to find 'the way out' is missing" (Terada 295).

As a thinker similarly interested in the horizonlessness of the postwar period, Berlant picks up in *Cruel Optimism* where Deleuze leaves off. Rather than working down to a vision of the intolerable, however, she begins with the remarkable capacity many people have to tolerate toxic conditions and asks how and why so many in the United States and Europe continue to invest emotionally in fantasies that so clearly impede their flourishing. "Why," in other words, "do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (2). Although this question reformulates what Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as "the fundamental problem of political philosophy" (31), it resonates less pejoratively in the hands of Berlant, who approaches the problem through the double-bind of what she calls cruel optimism: a condition of maintaining an affective attachment to an object that blocks the very aim or cluster of aims (say, "the good life") that brought you to it in the first place, even as it continues to hold out the promise that "*this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2).[6] At once vitalizing and debilitating, relations of cruel optimism operate essentially as "fantasy bribes" (179).[7] No matter how toxic the object or content of such an attachment may be, we hold to this object dearly, Berlant suggests—and this is what makes it especially cruel—because the formal continuity of the attachment is sustaining and anchors our capacity to hope for anything at all: its loss, therefore, may well make living intolerable. Indeed, in many cases, Berlant notes, "the loss of what's not working is more unbearable than the having of it" (27), and in others the threat of this loss feels like a threat to life itself, even if an image of a better life in which to invest one's optimism is readily available. Little surprise, then, that most people "do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to" (28), for even when cruel, optimism is what "makes life bearable" (14). Yet, given that the social-democratic promise of the postwar period is now so evidently not working for the vast majority of people living in the United States and Europe—given that the historical present is defined by a widespread precarity that is nevertheless distributed unevenly and experienced differently across social situations defined in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship—what happens when people's good-life fantasies *do* start to fray and the waves of their cruelly optimistic attachments *do* begin to break?

The answer is rarely "revolution," according to Berlant. *Cruel Optimism* occupies the same theoretical space as the classical threshold model of political change, but it takes its cue from the perception that "people are not Bartleby" (28), much less

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[6] As *Anti-Oedipus* (following Wilhelm Reich) has it: "'Why do men fight *for* their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?' How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: 'More taxes! Less bread!'? . . . After centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they *actually want* humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves?" (31). Deleuze and Guattari answer in terms of "desiring-production" and "*the coextension of the social field and desire*" (32).

[7] Berlant borrows this term from Fredric Jameson, for whom "works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated" (144).

Katniss Everdeen. Nor is the answer to this question any one thing: one of the many strengths of Berlant's project is that she tracks diverse modes of reaction and adjustment to the interruption of those normative fantasies that both wear people out and make their lives bearable. What does emerge in all her case studies, however—and what allows Berlant to gather them together within a paradigm of historical movement—is an impasse.

As a central term in Berlant's project, *impasse* both names the historical condition of the contemporary moment—what she calls "the impasse of the present"—and designates a temporal framework for those moments in which "futurity splinters as a prop for getting through life" (19) and one comes to sense affectively the condition of impasse in which they dwell, even though they don't know this condition as such. Indeed, one's knowledge of impasse is, in a sense, always *nachträglich*: a central claim of *Cruel Optimism* is that the present is first perceived affectively before it is sensed or understood in any other way.[8] Accordingly, Berlant indexes the impasse of the present through attending to how various literary and filmic characters and speakers encounter, react, and respond, not to an impasse per se, but to "a space of time lived without a narrative genre." Impasse is, in other words, the genre through which she tracks and frames experiences that break with familiar genres.

Impasse is also the concept with which Berlant negotiates the difficulties that come with utilizing the intolerable as a political concept.[9] Like seeing the intolerable, sensing the impasse is, for Berlant, essential for any potential social or political change. An impasse "suspends ordinary time" and "displaces and dissolves ordinary life," disrupting our sense of historical continuity in a way that "can change, potentially, how we can understand what being historical means" (36). An impasse brings things to a halt, however momentarily; it "marks a delay that demands activity" (199), and such activity may well generate new impacts and events with uncertain outcomes, though it doesn't function as a revolutionary pivot. As the etiolated version of seeing the intolerable, sensing the impasse is, for Berlant, what makes it possible to imagine things otherwise even as it guarantees absolutely nothing. Indeed, as she suggests, it may well be the case that "life is at the best imaginable of impasses" (32). Unlike the concept of the intolerable, however, the concept of impasse does not come with built-in instructions regarding what its experience might hypothetically entail or preclude. When Berlant notes that "the concept of

[8] Significantly, however, Berlant argues for moving away from the discourse of trauma with which this term is most closely associated: "A traumatic event," she writes, "is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated" (10). The issue, then, is that trauma theory is a strong theory that only provides one explanation for how subjects respond to impasse. For "even when some *thing* has happened, even in those cases where there's a consensually organized event, there is no a priori consequence, habit, or style of resonance that intensifies the ordinary in a particular way. . . . When encountered, the event called traumatic turns out mainly to be one genre of explanation for the situation of being without genre" (80). As will become clear, I'm interested in how and why, in Berlant's account, certain consequences nevertheless do seem to intensify the ordinary more than others.

[9] These difficulties seem relatively less pressing in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, where Berlant and Edelman discuss and debate issues of interpersonal intimacy and relationality. Still, it's fairly evident there that Edelman is more enamored of the concept of the unbearable than Berlant, whose emphasis tends to fall on (in Berlant's words) "bearing the unbearable" rather than on (in Edelman's words) "what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are" (68, 121).

the present as impasse opens up different ways that the interruption of norms of the reproduction of life can be adapted to, felt out, and lived" (199), what she primarily means is that impasse opens up certain possibilities for the theorist. Her conception of impasse is designed to make legible all sorts of "gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation" (199), whereas the limit concept of the intolerable would only seem to enable gestures that cancel it out at one and the same time. Accordingly, in her detailed readings of diverse texts, some individuals who sense the impasse of the present are aligned with feelings of relief and possibility, such as the speaker of a 2004 John Ashbery poem (titled "Ignorance of the Law is No Excuse"); others, meanwhile, are aligned with defensive reactions such as denial and disavowal, such as the protagonists of Charles Johnson's 1981 short story "Exchange Value" and of Geoff Ryman's 1992 novel *Was*, both of which are juxtaposed with the Ashbery example in the opening chapter. For, in principle, one's "postoptimistic response" (200) can take any figure or form: positive, negative, or neutral.

Yet, if the concept of the impasse of the present is designed to make legible a wide variety of affective responses, not all responses would seem to make this impasse significantly legible. While those scenes in which subjects feel threatened and react defensively are described unproblematically as instantiations of the impasse of the present, Berlant's relatively enabling scenarios of impasse are constructed as exceptions that raise epistemological questions and remain haunted by the logic of cruel optimism against which they might seem to stage a blockade. Take, for example, the case of Ashbery's speaker. In the first half of Berlant's reading of the poem, the speaker would at least appear to sense the impasse of the present through an encounter that seems to interrupt the everyday banality of suburban existence and to open onto the possibility of something else:

> He came up to me.
> It was all as it had been,
> except for the weight of the present,
> that scuttled the pact we made with heaven.
> In truth there was no cause for rejoicing,
> nor need to turn around, either.
> We were lost just by standing,
> Listening to the hum of the wires overhead.
> (cited in Berlant 29)

"It might be kind of thrilling," writes Berlant, "to think about this poem as delineating a means of production of the impasse of the present that hasn't yet been absorbed in the bourgeois senses" (33). Yet she then notes that the apparent impasse Ashbery's speaker experiences here "does not seem to threaten him," and so concludes that its status remains unclear—not just to him but to us as readers of his situation: it "might or might not be a part of cruel optimism: we don't know" (34). In other words, because Ashbery's speaker is not a person who "feels threatened with the loss of the conditions that have undergirded his good-life fantasy" (19) (unlike, say, Loftis and Cooter in "Exchange Value" and Dorothy Gael in *Was*, or the protagonists in Laurent Cantet's films who "live the impasse of the present between a quivering lip and a death mask" [222]), we can't be sure of whether we're really dealing with an impasse after all. "It is impossible," writes Berlant, "to say how deep the break is" (34).

Why? For Berlant, impasse is a formal concept with which to track how people sense the present, not an empirical category. Although interested in different ways of knowing that appear in the texts she studies, she is not particularly concerned with or encumbered by epistemological questions. Nevertheless, as the Ashbery example demonstrates, the project of "tak[ing] the measure of the impasse of the present" (263) invariably raises the questions of how we can know when this impasse is being sensed and of which particular affective responses most clearly index it. My question here is why a subject's not feeling threatened would make it more difficult to answer them.

Berlant gives the impression that the uncertainty of the case of Ashbery's speaker has to do with his relative privilege: we know that he doesn't feel threatened because he is "a confident person," one who "finds possibility in a moment of suspension" and "can hold a nonspace without being meaningful" (34). Yet we can only reach this conclusion because of *how* the speaker holds that nonspace, that is, "just by standing" with "no . . . need to turn around." In the context of a possible impasse, it would seem, the speaker's privilege takes the form of his not needing to turn around or away from the encounter, from his ability to face the potential impasse upright and to lose himself within a space or nonspace that may well feel threatening to others. If he were to turn, Berlant implies, then the situation would seem to threaten him and thereby become legible as an impasse; since he does not, however, the legibility of the impasse of the present is itself threatened. An impasse, it would seem, requires a turn to become an impasse. The implication does not seem to be that only bourgeois subjects can find the suspension of their ordinary lives enabling.[10] Nor does it seem to be that the experience of impasse is inherently threatening: a threat may require a defensive turn, or trope, in order to register as threatening, but such defensive motions do not establish the existence of an objective threat, only the existence of something from which one turns. Rather, what Berlant's reading seems to suggest is that the rhetoric of threat is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem of figuration.

It doesn't seem fortuitous, for example, that what is perhaps the most viral representation in recent years of the impasse of the present suggests that the impossibility of facing impasse as such might just be the condition of its representation. I have in mind, of course, the "This is Fine" meme derived from KC Green's 2013 webcomic "On Fire" (see fig. 1), which depicts an anthropomorphic dog calmly sipping coffee or tea and espousing a complacent optimism about things as they are, all while becoming quickly engulfed in flames: "This is fine. I'm okay with

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[10] Lisa Henderson picks up on this potential implication when, in commenting on an earlier article version of Berlant's first chapter, she considers the construal of Ashbery's speaker as confident and unthreatened:

> Does confidence belong, then, only to the bourgeois denizens of the *New Yorker*? In her pressing on from Ashbery to Johnson to the tale of Dorothy Gael in Ryman's *Was*, there is a Left critic's drive to bleakness in recognizing the cruelest of optimisms—the least hope for detachment and thriving—outside the bourgeois precincts of decaffeinated life. . . . Dorothy Gael . . . is neither confident nor bourgeois, and neither were Cooter and Loftis. Does that leave her, or them, or other nonbourgeois subjects ineligible for a transformative experience of impasse? Are they doomed by the loss of familiar conditions, no matter how diminishing? (153)

Henderson answers "no" by way of an alternative example, the 2001 queer buddy-film *By Hook or By Crook*.

Figure 1. KC Green, "On Fire" (2013)

the events that are unfolding currently. . . . Things are going to be okay." Clearly, the comic functions because the dog figuratively turns away. If the dog were instead to react with urgency to the threat that surrounds them, then the work's figural resonance would wane: the fire might then be just a fire, a localized and likely random disaster that would eventually run its course, rather than a structural situation with no discernible end. Much like the black-and-white landscape of rubble and industry on the cover of the 1975 Supertramp album *Crisis? What Crisis?* only becomes a figure of crisis when juxtaposed with a foregrounded sunbather who is literally turned around and away, his gaze doubly averted by sunglasses (as well as when superimposed with the album's diacopic title), the fire in Green's comic only becomes a figure of systemic impasse when juxtaposed with a figure who claims to be tolerating what so obviously should be intolerable. If, as Berlant suggests, the impasse of the present is most legibly registered through its apparent denial and disavowal, then perhaps this is because such defensive motions uniquely posit the existence of *something* against which one defends. Impasse? What impasse?

Of course, one thing that's unnerving about "On Fire" is that there are many people for whom this *is* fine, people who stoke the fire and derive more or less benefit from the destruction it wreaks, even when it engulfs them too. What appears here to be a case of denial not only proves futile as a survival mechanism; it also shades close to a case of acceptance and even embrace, suggesting that these two responses might amount to the same thing—or that we tend to think they do and feel guilty as a result of our feeling complicit. With the Supertramp album cover, one might surmise that the conspicuously white male basking in faux luxury is accepting the crisis with an ironic smirk, or at least that his cluelessness indicates that he will not suffer terribly from its fallout. The image does not, in any case, prompt an identification with its subject; if anything, it invites disavowal. By contrast, in using a dog instead of an evidently gendered and racialized human, Green's comic obscures the question of privilege (who does and does not have the ability to be in denial?) and universalizes its subject in a way that allows for both identification and disavowal.[11] At some level, the comic suggests, we are all that dog, all in denial as we continue to tolerate what should be intolerable—and perhaps also continue to deny that we're that dog and that we're personally in denial about anything.[12]

But what's perhaps most unnerving about "On Fire" is that, however you read the dog's reaction, there is no point at which the events that unfold actually become intolerable. No breaking point or threshold is reached, and the suggestion seems to be that no such threshold exists. Similarly, there is no actual point of impasse—the dog is never interrupted; they never stop or pause or feel blocked or halted—the impasse of the present only appears through the denial of its very existence.

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[11] My thanks to Sumita Chakraborty for drawing my attention to what kinds of questions Green's use of a dog both enables and precludes, as well as for bringing to my attention years ago the Supertramp album cover.

[12] Hence, while the "This is Fine" meme has primarily been used on social media to make light of one's own defense mechanisms in various situations, the GOP tweeted the first two panels of "On Fire" during the 2016 Democratic National Convention along with the text, "Well ¯_(ツ)_/¯ #DemsInPhilly #EnoughClinton." In response, the political cartoon website *The Nib* immediately commissioned Green who created an image of a GOP-styled elephant on fire stating, "This is Fine." Green was also inspired to create a second comic titled "This is Not Fine," which I discuss later.

And, after all, if one can turn away from an impasse, then it's difficult to say that it ever was an impasse in the first place. Impasse? What impasse?

Pursued rigorously, the concept of impasse, like the concept of the intolerable, seems to recede and to find its point outside the realm of possible experience. Deleuze positions the intolerable in opposition to our "schemata for turning away," which he aligns explicitly with the figurative dimension of language, and yet he nevertheless implies that the intolerable can only be grasped in and through such turns. Berlant develops the notion of the impasse of the present in order to enable and make legible all sorts of postoptimistic responses, and yet, taken together, her case studies indicate that the need to turn away from this impasse is what provides its most robust index. The importance placed in both cases on "turning away" suggests that the issue of legibility involves the tropological dimension of language and its inexorable movement. Put in de Manian terms, these moments in Deleuze's and Berlant's theoretical texts could be read as allegories of trope and of the deviation between literal and figurative meaning. Accordingly, we might hypothesize that the impossibility of grasping the impasse of the present is a function of *reading*, the term through which de Man condenses and construes the limits and exigencies of all our cognitive and perceptual processes. If such is the case, however, then what would this entail for the theoretical text of de Man, who has long been seen as principally concerned, even obsessed, with nothing but impasse? Might de Man's project in fact account for and allegorize the impossibility of impasse? And, if so, how might it also be read as a project that nevertheless takes the measure of the impasse of the intolerable present?

"De Man makes aporia the necessary end of all rigorous literary study," according to one reviewer of *Allegories of Reading* (Sabin 69), and it would seem difficult to argue otherwise: among theorists in the poststructuralist tradition, surely none is as preoccupied with tracking predicaments and points of impasse and undecidability.[13] While de Man's rhetorical readings tend invariably toward moments in texts at which two coherent and yet entirely incompatible readings place "an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding," such moments, in turn, illustrate fundamental aporias between grammar and rhetoric, performance and cognition, phenomenality and materiality—all of which are, in principle, operative at all times in any text, which de Man defines generally as "any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective" (*Allegories* 131, 270).[14] Thus, for de Man, as for Berlant, impasse is, in theory, always present in subtle ways, even if it

[13] Although *aporia* and *impasse* are different words with different histories, de Man construes the former in terms of the latter. See, for an explicit example, the 1980 interview (first published in 1984) with Robert Moynihan, who suggests that, in at least one source, *aporia* is related to preterition and is defined as a rhetorical strategy, to which de Man responds: "I would see it, rather, as an impasse that cannot be resolved, domesticated, or assimilated by a trope. . . . In *aporia* you have a truly logical conflict, a true opposition which blocks" (*Notebooks* 155).

[14] As de Man then immediately notes, however, "the 'definition' of the text also states the impossibility of its existence and prefigures the allegorical narratives of this impossibility" (*Allegories* 270). See, too, his interview with Moynihan, where he clarifies that "the text is in many ways not an entity, not something that as such can be hypostatized" (*Notebooks* 153). Although I take *Allegories* as the starting point of de Man's project of rhetorical reading, his broader interest in tracking coherent and yet entirely

only gets registered at specific points in a given reading of a given text. The theoretical plot that de Man develops in the second part of *Allegories of Reading* unfolds progressively across various textual levels of increasing complexity—from figurative language (mis)taken as literal, to tropological narratives about the necessary aberrance of reference, to allegorical narratives that tell the story of the unreadability of this tropological narrative and that lapse into the figure they deconstruct.[15] But these registers are neither hierarchical nor even different in kind; in fact, they all reiterate the fundamental undecidability of figure and, "far from closing off the tropological system"—as the book's final words have it—enforce "the repetition of its aberration" (301).[16] Put somewhat differently, the pattern of de Man's own theoretical narrative is "'allegorical,' i.e., repetitive of a potential confusion between figural and referential statement," rather than "'historical,' i.e., revelatory of a teleological meaning" (116). Hence de Man's long-standing interest in Friedrich Schlegel's definition of irony as a "permanent parabasis."[17] While Schlegel packages irony as a limit figure for what, in the end, ensures the undoing of any allegory of figure (and so of any teleological closure or tropological cognition whatsoever), de Man is just as drawn to this paradoxical definition—"parabasis not just at one point but at all points . . . everywhere . . . at all times" (*Aesthetic* 179)—because it finally captures the permanence of the impasse that the radical figurality of language quietly presents, in theory, from the first. After all, as de Man writes, "reading" is a "process in which the grammatical cognition is undone, *at all times*, by its rhetorical displacement" (*Resistance* 17; emphasis mine).[18] And yet, for de Man—and here's the crux of these summary remarks—what brings this fundamental condition of impasse into theory, what he carefully calls "mere reading . . . prior to any theory" (*Resistance* 24), is also what spells its impossibility.[19]

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incompatible readings also defines many of the essays collected in *Blindness and Insight*. See White for a discussion of impasse as a political structure in "Literary History and Literary Modernity."

[15] See Jacobs for a careful consideration of the movement of de Man's critical narrative in the second part of *Allegories*.

[16] As de Man writes in what is probably the most compendious passage in *Allegories*:

> The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree *allegories*. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives, such as the *Second Discourse*, tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference of degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genitive "of" has itself to be "read" as a metaphor. (205)

[17] De Man's explicit discussion of Schlegel's notion of *permanente Parekbase* begins in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and then returns briefly in the final four sentences of *Allegories*, before continuing, at length, in the 1977 lecture "The Concept of Irony," which was collected in the posthumous volume titled *Aesthetic Ideology*. See, too, the extended discussion of irony in the interview with Moynhihan (*Notebooks* 147–54).

[18] For de Man's most sustained discussions of the incompatibility between grammar and rhetoric, see "Semiology and Rhetoric" and "Promises (Social Contract)" in *Allegories* (3–19; 246–77).

[19] For an extended take on how the phrase "mere reading" might encapsulate de Man's project, see Gasché (114–48).

Illustrations of the impossibility of impasse can be found throughout de Man's essays. Perhaps the most exemplary of these is in "The Resistance to Theory," where de Man reads *The Fall of Hyperion*—not Keats's poem, that is, but its title. Detailing, first, how the word *fall* might be read literally (as referring to an actual process of falling) as well as figuratively (as referring to the defeat of an older by a newer power), so that the title might be read not only as "Hyperion's Fall" but also as "Hyperion Falling," de Man unspools the undecidability of this genitive construction, even suggesting that Keats's inability to complete either of the Hyperion poems "manifests the impossibility, for him as for us, of reading his own title" (16). For, once we notice that this title can also be read as referring to an actual process of falling, the proper name *Hyperion* might be read as referring not only to the mythological character of Hyperion but also to the character of Apollo, whom the later poem's falling speaker more closely resembles (and so perhaps to Keats himself as well, whom Apollo often seems to resemble). And, in turn, once we notice such referential indeterminacy, *Hyperion* may well also be read figuratively or intertextually as referring not to any character or person but to Keats's earlier unfinished epic, *Hyperion*, in which case *fall* might be read figuratively (as referring to a failure), though such a "fall" befalls both poems and can't very well be attributed solely to the first by the second, or, for that matter, to both the first and the second, since the story of the fall in the first that is told in the second cannot be read as referring to the fall of *The Fall of Hyperion* as well. "The undecidability," de Man shows, "involves the figural or literal status of the proper name Hyperion as well as of the verb falling, and is thus a matter of figuration and not of grammar" (16). He thereby demonstrates how "the rhetorical dimension within which we dwell" (*Rhetoric* 246) presents a permanent impasse that is there from the start of any act of reading or cognition. Indeed, in theory, we should not even be able to move past the "insurmountable obstacle" that is the title page of *The Fall of Hyperion*.

But has anyone ever not continued on to the opening lines of Keats's poem just because of the undecidability of its title? The example seems rather designed to underscore that bypassing such a theoretical impasse is not only eminently possible but inevitable, and not just because of one's lack of deconstructive rigor. As de Man goes on to note, a reader of Keats's title is "faced with the ineluctable necessity to come to a decision" (*Resistance* 16). A decision is ineluctable; an impasse must be passed. Given that de Man has just presented the title as though it were thoroughly undecidable—given that he himself does not come to a decision to read it, finally, as either "Hyperion's Fall" or "Hyperion Falling"—this claim might seem baffling.[20] But that should tip us off that such a decision is not something at which one ever arrives after deliberating or oscillating more or less carefully between alternatives (nor, despite the implied prosopopeia, is it something that one can face or approach), for it has nothing to do with the determination or agency of a subject. Nor, *pace* Derrida, is it something that one makes in a moment of urgency or madness, as it were, in the absence of rules that are nevertheless taken fully into

[20] Perhaps this is why it's the only sentence that Gasché does not quote, paraphrase, or discuss in his otherwise comprehensive exposition of the paragraph from "The Resistance to Theory" in which de Man reads Keats's title (142–46).

account.[21] Rather, for de Man, a decision is always being made and remade in this very oscillation, and so is not even really a "decision" at all but a necessary consequence of reading, of the fact that "all discourse *has* to be referential but can never signify its actual referent" (*Allegories* 160).[22] As Marc Redfield explains, "the consequence of referential indetermination is insistent referentiality. . . . Language turns away from its own figurativeness to produce literal meanings always marked in advance by the process of figuration that has produced them" (*Politics* 102). Put somewhat differently, to read is to efface a structure of undecidability that becomes legible only through its effacement. In the case of Keats's title, "the difference between the two readings is itself structured like trope" (*Resistance* 16). Yet, in order to begin to consider either of these readings, let alone their difference, one has to have already passed the structural impasse that is their undecidability; one has to have already "decided" and turned away from the undecidability of figure, even as this structural impasse appears only through this turn and reasserts itself in turn.

All of which means that the impossibility of reading does not, or does not finally, involve the impossibility of deciding between a literal and a figurative meaning, but rather involves the impossibility of this theoretical impossibility—that it involves, in short, the impossibility of impasse. Since to read any meaning whatsoever entails taking this meaning in isolation from its rhetorical displacement, reading necessitates that we've always already bypassed the impasse that is the undecidability of figure, which, in turn, only comes into view in the wake of having been so passed. For de Man, the impasse of the present is thus constitutively left behind, in theory, in an ideal time akin to an "unreachable anteriority" ("Rhetoric" 222), even as it continues to be that which, in theory, is given to us to read—and to bypass again and again in its turn. A text's allegorical operations might appear to be repetitive of a point of impasse involving figural undecidability, but we might do better to see them as repetitive of the impossibility of this impasse. Indeed, we might even say that, for de Man, *allegory* names this impossibility, since his point, after all, is that there is no point at which things stop or come to a halt: "A narrative endlessly tells the story of its own denominational aberration and it can only repeat this aberration on various levels of rhetorical complexity" (*Allegories* 162). On this view, the point of impasse for de Man is first and foremost to register the vanishing point of impasse. The concern of a Lentricchia that de Manian deconstruction would paralyze all thought and action is thus quite off the mark: one of the purposes of de Man's project is to show how the impossibility of impasse is the condition of its being thought in the first place.

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[21] See "Force of Law," where Derrida implicitly distances himself from de Man and justifies his own interest in undecidability by organizing his thinking of justice around "the ordeal of the undecidable" (252) and the "madness" of the moment of decision as "a finite moment of urgency and precipitation" (255).

[22] Which is why de Man also says that "the necessity of making a decision cannot be avoided or the entire order of discourse would collapse" (*Allegories* 201). See Hamacher for a reading of *Allegories* that construes de Man's project as organized around an impossible and yet ineluctable referential imperative.

I've drawn out and amplified a particular structural situation in de Man's project because I want to underscore how impasse is, in a sense, its most tenuous construction. Rodolphe Gasché acknowledges as much when, after asserting that "undecidability for de Man permits no way out" and amounts to "cognitive paralysis," he observes that, actually, "such paralysis cannot even be shown to be the proper predicament of a finite conscious" and that the absence of such a predicament "turns language's undecidability, strangely, aloof." "It is difficult to see in what way," he remarks, "and on what level, it unsettles the subject's security" (182, 183). Gasché is not interested in considering the implications of this difficulty, which he only mentions in passing as though to register a subtle criticism of de Man's frequent recourse to a rhetoric of threats and predicaments, all of which would seem to imply a subject. These implications are a principal concern of de Man's, however, and we can understand his use of such rhetoric precisely as part of his sustained effort to make legible the impossible experience of impasse.

The impossible experience of impasse is probably not a phrase with which you associate de Man, though it may be one with which you associate Derrida, whose longstanding interest in what he terms "the experience of the aporia" is first articulated in *Memoires for Paul de Man*. Attempting to counter the perception that de Man was only interested in what he would elsewhere call "the sterile negativity of the impasse" (*Aporias* 32), Derrida suggests that de Man "deciphers" this experience not as "a paralysis before road-blocks," but as that which "provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible" (132). Such a thinking would, of course, come to have a central place in Derrida's own thought. Five years later, in the talk that would become the first part of "Force of Law," he elaborates how he understands the importance of the impossible experience of aporia, essentially placing it at the center of his definition of deconstruction. But whereas Derrida formalizes the impossibility of this experience in terms of a conceptual incompatibility between *experience* (as a traversal that finds a passage) and *aporia* (as a nonpath that doesn't allow passage), and then coordinates its possibility with his conceptualization of justice ("there is no justice," he writes, "without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia" [244]), de Man does something different and much more bizarre: he figures such an experience through a rhetoric of threat and defense in order to make it legible in the mode of impossibility.

Such figurations of the impossible experience of impasse are hidden in plain sight throughout de Man's essays, especially where he addresses this impossibility explicitly. In "Autobiography as De-facement," for example, de Man quotes approvingly Gerard Genette's suggestion that a reader of Proust should remain within the "whirligig" that is the undecidable difference between fiction and autobiography, only to put into question the possibility of doing so:

> But is it possible to remain, as Genette would have it, *within* an undecidable situation? As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous. (*Rhetoric* 70)

Different versions of the "not successive but simultaneous" formulation can be found throughout de Man's essays at moments when he turns a text's allegorical operations back to the structural impasse that set them in motion in the first

place. Here, the whirligig anecdote allegorizes, in miniature, the "turning motion of tropes" and the undecidable difference between figuration and reference, which, as de Man writes, "is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history" (70), and so is not really a situation at all, at least not one that can be experienced as such. The reasons for this are worth reformulating: since the act of reading unfolds the simultaneity of any undecidable "situation" into a succession or sequence, undecidability cannot itself be read, even though it's what, in theory, animates reading all the way down the line, "at all points." One must turn, or revolve, or vacillate, or oscillate, or pass, or bypass—whichever figurative motion is used to figure the movement of language as figure, the point is that the impasse of the present cannot be read or experienced simultaneously, even as experience and reading are, in theory, permanently riven by an aporia that is not successive or even temporal (and so not really simultaneous, either).

But de Man doesn't say any of this here. Instead, he explains the impossibility of remaining within a situation of undecidability by way of figuring such an impossible experience and explaining how it would feel—and, as we learn, it would feel not like paralysis but like motion to the extreme: it would feel like being caught in a door or on a wheel that revolves simultaneously, is capable of infinite acceleration, and is "*certainly most uncomfortable.*" I'm not sure whether the oddity of this particular passage has ever been noted. If you were to experience infinite acceleration simultaneously, what would you make of it?[23] Do you know how it would feel? Personally, I think it sounds rather exhilarating, but I really can't say. De Man can, however, and he is certain that this impossible experience is most uncomfortable, much like (although clearly not at all like) being caught in a revolving door. As a result, the passage suggests that our inability to dwell within an impasse is due, not to any structural condition of impossibility, but to the intolerable feeling of impasse—which, in turn, assumes the form of an a priori condition of sorts. Undecidability, it would seem, is necessarily threatening because it allows for an experience of the impasse of the present to be imagined and to be imagined, more precisely, as intolerable.

Elsewhere, de Man posits the intolerability of impasse as though it were self-evident. Take, for example, his discussion in *Allegories of Reading* of the Second Preface to Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, specifically the debate between characters N. (positioned as reader and critic) and R. (positioned as author or editor) concerning the text's authorship and whether R. invented the letters himself or merely copied or quoted them from some previous document. After noting that N. "could accommodate himself to both possibilities," de Man reframes the scenario in terms of a hypothetical experience of undecidability: "What he could not tolerate, however, is the impossibility of distinguishing between the alternatives. This would leave him dangling in an intolerable semantic irresolution. It would be

[23] Derrida, though, has noted and discussed briefly the general motif of "acceleration" in de Man's writings, which, as he sees it, does

> not designate a particular rhythm, a measurable or comparable speed, but a movement which attempts through an infinite acceleration to win time, to win over time, to deny it, one might say, but in a non-dialectical fashion, since it is the form of the instant that is charged with the absolute discontinuity of this rhythm without rhythm. This acceleration is incommensurable, and thus infinite and null at the same time; it touches the sublime. (*Memoires* 62)

worse than madness" (202). In other words, the impasse *would* be intolerable, that is, if it *were* experienced. But since it's not—since N. isn't in fact left dangling in semantic irresolution; since the "predicament" is one "that his imagination cannot even begin to grasp" (203)—we're left with what amounts to an explanation of why we're incapable of experiencing the impasse of the present: namely, because it would be intolerable. At the same time, this hyperbolic lesson functions like a prohibition that creates curiosity for the very thing it proscribes as out of bounds. Intolerable how? Why *worse* than madness?[24]

And it does get worse. One finds some of de Man's most "lurid figures" (as Neil Hertz has termed them) in the last chapter of *Allegories*, where de Man claims that the threat of the same undecidable question of authorship raised in the Second Preface of *Julie* "can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (296). As Hertz puts it rather mildly, "one would like to hear him develop more fully the implications of that 'can only'" ("More" 9). A number of readers, including Hertz, have commented on what sort of necessity de Man could possibly be describing here.[25] I would simply add that if undecidability "can *only* be experienced" in such a fashion, then one implication is that it cannot be experienced, even though it *can* be made legible when figured as a threat against which we must defend. Hence de Man's extensive use throughout his writings of a psychoanalytic vocabulary of defense, even as he argues against the primacy of psychoanalytic theories of desire and motivation. By figuring understanding itself both as a "defensive motion" and as a "coercive 'forgetting'" (*Rhetoric* 261, 122), he effectively generates "remembrance," not only of the nonphenomenal aspects of language (its unintelligibility, materiality, and positing power), but also of the impasse of the present in all its impossibility. From this perspective, the dynamic of "structural mourning" that Eric Santner identified and criticized in de Man's writings is indeed a constitutive element of rhetorical reading, yet such mourning is emphatically not "for the referent, for beauty, for meaning, for home, for stable terms of orientation," as Santner has it (29, 15), but rather for the impasse that never was. Impasse? What impasse?[26]

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[24] De Man's invocation of madness here is in reference to R.'s comments in the Second Preface (which allude to *Don Quixote*) regarding how novels, by seducing readers into believing they are in a different state than they are, can therefore drive them mad. Nevertheless, his reference to a hypothetical experience of undecidability that "would be worse than madness" also seems to up the ante on Derrida's slogan-phrase "the instant of decision is madness," which Derrida first used in his 1963 lecture "Cogito et histoire de la folie." See Bennington for an account of the long and strange history of Derrida's use of this phrase.

[25] See, for example, Derrida ("Typewriter" 158–59), Hertz ("Lurid" 100; "More" 9, 11), and Redfield (*Politics* 117).

[26] I haven't discussed the celebrated notion of materiality that de Man developed in his late work because my specific focus is on figural undecidability, which, for de Man, defines the (impossible) impasse of the present. Nevertheless, I would suggest that his interest in materiality and, more broadly, in that which conditions, interrupts, and diverges from language as a tropological system (an interest that is already at work in *Allegories*, particularly in its final chapter) could be read as an extension of his desire to imagine the impasse of the present (e.g., by way of constructing a "pure ocular vision" [*Aesthetic* 83] akin to Deleuze's "pure optical image" in which no mind or tropological movement is involved)—and, just as importantly, of his commitment to explaining its impossibility (e.g., by way of showing that such a material vision is in no way literal and that the theoretical distinction between perception and cognition cannot be grounded or maintained).

After de Man, we tend to talk about undecidability as though it were inherently threatening, even traumatic.[27] But de Man's recourse to a rhetoric of threat and defense is the least self-evident and most wildly speculative component of his narrative. My suggestion is that this rhetoric is a function of his attempt to make legible a fundamental condition of reading that cannot itself be read, and that this attempt effectively crystallizes what Berlant terms and de Man understands as the impasse of the present. By figuring a structure of undecidability as an intolerable threat against which we must defend, de Man makes available the experience of impasse, not as experience (since such an experience is impossible) but as allegory: he thereby introduces a figurative distance that allows us to contemplate the intolerable present, a distance without which, he suggests, we would lose our minds ("it would be worse than madness"). At the same time, de Man insists that the "defensive motion" that takes us away from the impasse it makes legible is unavoidable and beyond any human desire or intention: he thereby implies that we needn't blame ourselves for our inability to experience the present as intolerable, though by the same token he acknowledges that we may well want to do so. Time after time, de Man's readings posit a point of "radical blockage" (*Rhetoric* 122) and pursue the path that its theoretically endless repetition carves throughout a text, but the lesson of all this is that there is no impasse, no point at which things ever cease or terminate, no threshold beyond which things finally break. "No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness," writes de Man, "for it is the madness of words" (*Rhetoric* 122). The implication isn't that "this is fine," but that this is the closest we get to the point of impasse.

This is not fine. In 2016, a week after the GOP had appropriated on Twitter the first two panels of "On Fire" to make fun of the Democratic National Convention, KC Green was compelled to create a sequel comic in which the dog does in fact react with urgency, defending themselves physically rather than psychologically from the threat that surrounds them (see fig. 2). According to Green, "This is Not Fine" was inspired not only by the GOP's tweet but by "ALL of 2016." "Every bit of insane news piece and the political climate made this follow up happen," he told *The Verge*. "Everyone's on EDGE. There's a breaking point, and I think we'll find it this year" (Plante). In its content as well as in its creation, the follow-up comic enacts a wish for the breaking point that was absent in "On Fire." Unlike in the former comic, the dog now faces the impasse of the present and realizes "*THIS IS NOT FINE*!!"; similar to Marcuse's revolutionary subject, they act out of a necessity that appears immanent to their situation, one that Green at least understands as historical.[28]

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[27] For a recent reflection on the rhetoric of threat in literary theory and de Man, see Pyle (83–85); for a recent study of how de Man came to personify "theory" as a threat to the humanities, see Redfield (*Theory* 19–61).

[28] In an interview with *Slate*, Green also describes his creation of the comic in terms of a breaking point and the necessity of action:

> We can't ignore it anymore. The more and more I see the news of the day, and the worse it gets, the more a person can't just stuff it down and ignore what's happening. It's really fucked out there. It's plain ridiculous. And it just starts to drive a person crazy. The same kind of person would originally ignore it at first, which I will admit I'd be that type of person. So a breaking

Figure 2. KC Green, "This is Not Fine" (2016)

Yet such action is not so transformative. Although the dog survives the fire, there is no other positive outcome: the house appears to have been largely destroyed, and one wonders if there were others who were not as fortunate. Indeed, given the bleakness of the final two panels, one wonders if anything has changed: the figure of the fire as impasse seems to have been simply replaced with the figure of its destruction. The flames might have been put out, but any way out still appears just as impossible to imagine.

What's more, this impossibility appears to be a source of self-blame. For what the follow-up comic depicts is not so much a positive response to the realization that everything is on fire as a scene of self-castigation for having previously thought that everything would be okay. "WHAT THE HELL IS MY PROBLEM"; "WHAT THE FUCK WAS I EVEN THINKING." Along with the fantasy of individual agency comes a feeling of grandiose culpability: by the time we reach the final panel, there's little doubt that the dog's double-facepalm registers their guilt for having "let it last this long and get this bad." If the light filtering through the destroyed edifice in the upper-right corner of the second-to-last panel seems to point faintly to an outside, as though figuring some minimal glimmer of hope or optimism, the final panel reveals its function to be rather that of a spotlight that points back down and illuminates the psychological outcome of the dog's drama. What, then, is the upshot of Green's sequence of comics? One could read the dog's facepalm as figuring a moment of reckoning and acknowledgment, as if they were finally saying, "*Now* I see." But seeing is precisely what the dog does not do in the end, and the fact that they cover their eyes suggests that this gesture is yet another defensive turn away from the intolerable impasse of the present. If "This is Not Fine" plays out the breaking point scenario that guides fantasies of change and collective action, it also blurs the difference between denial and acknowledgement and winds up back where "On Fire" began.

Taken together, Green's comics suggest that we blame ourselves for tolerating the intolerable and for denying the impasse of the present, even as we can't see any way to avoid doing so. But a denial isn't really a denial when it's recognized as such; it's a figure that enables us to read an impossibility that would otherwise be illegible. What would happen if this impossibility were simply recognized as impossible? So many ways of thinking about historical and political change rely on the idea of a turning point that is a breaking point, as though conditions will eventually get bad enough and then finally the gears will click into place. One may well find accelerationism foolish in all of its guises, but, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick demonstrated so compellingly, the "faith in exposure" (139) that guides many activist-minded literary scholars rests on a similar fantasy of a threshold: just make X visible enough as a problem, the belief goes, and things will change for the better, if not now then sometime in the not too distant future. The relatively modest idea of an impasse seems to run counter to such more or less obviously teleological ways of thinking about history and politics; in the context of cruel optimism, an impasse looks promising as a potential point of resistance or even as a place of refuge, as "a temporary housing" or "a holding station" (Berlant 5, 199). But both Berlant and de

point happens. It was very cathartic to draw those freaking out panels. I know it's not a lot, but it's something. (Wickman)

Man demonstrate that, however attenuated, the idea of a point at which things would *stop* is a fantasy that can be especially cruel when hypostatized as something for which to hope. Neither thinker brings us to an impasse that paralyzes praxis, nor does either offer a way out. In different ways, each attempts "to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment" (Berlant 49), and both bring us to the point at which we can begin to think about this impasse in all its impossibility.

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